

Atlas's Revenge · *Bridget Mazur*

THE DAY I TURNED the world on its ear, I was in the middle of a headache, sitting at a bar with a guy I had no interest in romantically, the kind of guy you'd call a friend, though our relationship was mostly all one way: he'd talk, and I would listen. Since Einstein and his theories came around and changed everybody's point of view, I guess you could say it was the day the world stayed just where it was and—for all of its inertia—turned me, but that's not how I saw it at the time. Like I said, it's all in point of reference. In any case, the headache that day was a bad one, the kind that came in waves, so there were highs and lows of pain although even the lows were pretty high. Elliott, the guy I was sitting with, was more a steady, droning hum.

"Maybe if I switched to contacts," Elliott was saying. "You think that would help?" Everyone's got problems, and Elliott's was not all that uncommon, especially among his fellow engineers: he couldn't get a girl to look him in the eye. This was not the first time I had heard about his difficulties, although it was the first time he'd pinned it on this specific body part. The eyes have it. You could count on engineers to make that sort of straightforward connection.

Elliott asked me things like this routinely—would wearing stripes make him look taller? should he shave off his beard?—because he thought I ought to know, being a girl. As if I were the resident librarian on things feminine. I shook my head in answer to the eyes question, partly saying no, and partly rejecting matronhood and inside knowledge of the Dewey Decimal system. You'd think a guy who'd studied thermo could figure out how in the real world, relationships were all basically non-linear. He could juggle data, change his clothes, get a different haircut every week and it wouldn't change a thing. But Elliott kept waiting for his input and his latest love's output to chink into miraculous proportion.

I was into chaos those days. Spent my days designing programs to describe the way smoke rose into the air—that kind of thing. The department wasn't sure what to do with me at first, the only woman in the whole damn program, but they got over that once they figured out I wasn't going to change things any on them. No vases of carnations in the nuclear accelerator or anything. That's not my style.

Plus, I *wanted* chaos, and back then, not everybody did. The mathematics didn't scare me, and I liked the thought of wrestling a system that was so unpredictable. Girl or not, I knew I could be good at this.

"You'll be uncomfortable," I told Elliott, thinking how if anyone would feminize these manly sciences, it would be him, not me at all. "They'll make you hold your lids up funny." He nodded like he did believe me. Since I aced Woo's thermo class last semester, all the guys from Engineering nod to me when I talk.

We were sitting in a bar across the street from Hochstetter, after Shames's fluids class, a bar called Atlas's Revenge. Half the class was in there tossing back tall cool ones by about four-thirty, and even Shames himself stopped in there now and then. It was a place you went to drink, no pick-up bullshit, no big ferns. A man's bar, I guess you'd call it, if you had to call it something, and I didn't.

Lately, I liked sitting next to Elliott because the thing that he was sad about, his lack of love, was not a hard issue for me. He could cry into his beer about his problems and I could feel sorry for him without having any parallel bad feelings of my own. As long as Gary Krupik was around—the tall guy shooting pool across the room, the one who moved like mercury in a thermometer—lack of love was not my problem.

Elliott was going on about the obscene message some girl left on his answering machine, and about this month's disaster date with someone named Coleen, a freshman he asked out because he liked her hair. Showed up at his house all wired—pills or something—and in tears about some guy from Sacramento who'd just dumped her. He was as stunned as Newton might have been if he'd met Einstein. This was not the way it was supposed to be.

Elliott picked his up his beer, and then stopped, his shoulders slumping like the curve of an umbrella. He really did let this stuff get him down. "Clothes. What if I wore different clothes?" I pictured him in three-piece suits, in togas, in English-major black, but somehow he was still the same old Elliott.

"You're concentrating too much on the solid things," I said, glancing over my left shoulder at the pool table, where Gary was teaching Tatu, the guy from Kenya, about eight ball. It was natural for engineers to think about the solid things considering that's what they thought about all day. "What girls want is a guy who listens to them."

I really did want Elliott to find a girl, but it was hard to know where to start to steer him right. What exactly do I say? Erase everything you know about women and start over? Last Saturday, when Gary and I drove him home after the Bears' game, he sat in the back seat practically growling with excitement, boosted by a bit of Southern Comfort. We weren't big football fans, just doing something different for a change. Gary'd met the punter in a math class the week before, and thought we ought to go. The we, of course, included Elliott. "One week," Elliott had said from the back seat, his voice unnaturally low. "You watch. Give me one week and I'll get myself a chick."

Incredible. Here it was 1985, and Elliott was still looking for a "chick." Gary kept on driving, listening or not, you couldn't tell. Sometimes I wondered if men listened to each other at all, or just bounced around like molecules: a friendly jostle here, an all out knee-to-the-balls pummeling there. They touched each other all the time and it meant nothing, or the thing it meant kept changing, which was the opposite of how it was with Gary. With Elliott, in Atlas's, I kept my hands to myself.

"Beebahrah," a voice said as a hand landed on my shoulder, long fingers pressing into the dark cotton of my sweatshirt. The blow upset the thumping in my temples, and I jumped, more in reaction than in surprise. "You will play eight ball?" Tatu was leaning on his cue stick, close enough to my left ear for me to hear his breathing. He didn't mean to be familiar, I knew from having known Tatu since last semester, when Gary had adopted him as his Newest Foreign Friend. Tatu talked to everybody that way: close in to the face. In Africa, it must be the convention.

"Sure, I'll play," I said, turning slowly toward him on my stool, consciously trying to hold my chin still and my head level. Nothing like a little diversion, I told myself. A watched headache always boils. "If you don't mind losing." It cracked me up how guys in bars all figured they could win in pool on pure testosterone: bone-cracking breaks, english on the ball that defied gravity, a hard-ass cigarette. It's all in how you slap the quarter on the table, they would figure, overlooking little details like my recent months of practice, the fact I was a whole lot stronger than I looked.

"You're a brave man," Elliott said. He gave me a gentle buddy-punch as I stood up, a strangely graceful motion no one else could see. "She's been known to wipe out better guys than you."

Tatu smiled at him, nodding. Although I hadn't noticed it before, I was

struck by the fact he was dressed like Gary, identical right down to the brand name: same burgundy pullover, same sneakers, same jeans. “We will be a team,” Tatu said into my ear, inadvertently pressing my small hoop earring against my neck, “you and me.” With one slender finger, he pointed across the pool table to Gary and a shorter guy I’d never seen before, a blond guy with a mangy scruff of beard, a guy wearing a black T-shirt that said in big red letters, *I Kick Ass*.

Adopting people was another one of Gary’s better qualities: people liked him, and he was always making friends. He’d brought home some interesting characters in the year we’d been together: a real Buddhist priest he ran into—literally—outside Sather Gate; a guy who claimed he was the drummer for The Doors back in the ’60s, though personally, I had my doubts. Maybe I was being too much of a scientist, but it took more than table-tapping and a snapshot of a dead guy to impress me. It certainly took more than clothes.

“We’ll kill ’em,” the blond guy said to Gary in a voice that sounded serious. He looked across the table at me, up and down, his eyes pressed into narrow slits. “You sure these teams is fair?”

Fair, I knew, was Gary Krupik’s middle name. He’d work up a sweat to keep things fair, though mostly what you noticed when you looked at him was just how cool he was. Unflappable. He’d shoot pool with anybody, team up with a total stranger. At the bar, I’d drink with Elliott and talk about how generous Gary was, how even-handed. He was not the kind of guy who made his buddies feel bad by hanging on his girlfriend all the time. We kept our distance, he kept his friends.

His partner’s name was Dudek, Tony Dudek, Gary told us, not mentioning exactly how he knew the guy or what redeeming qualities might lurk beneath the black T-shirt. A helpful hardware store employee? A bouncer from a Grateful Dead concert? I was sure he wasn’t someone Gary’d met at school. As a general rule, engineers did not kick ass at anything.

Dudek jammed a quarter in the table. “Shirts and skins,” he called, his eyes at logo-level on my Cal sweatshirt, and right away I knew what I was dealing with. It was a joke, I knew that, but I didn’t laugh. In retrospect, I think it was the headache that made me more serious than usual, made me feel apart from where they were, and different somehow. Of course, it’s not the kind of thing you talk about if you’re the only woman in the

place—the headache, I mean. Complaining draws the wrong kind of attention. Complaining is the thing that's got women into trouble now for years.

"Hey, B," Gary said, ignoring him and handing me the bar's only four-foot stick, the one he knew I liked. "You want to break?" He was not a hot-head, and most of the time, in a boyfriend, that was a very nice feature. Desperation was the thing that brought men to the point of wearing T-shirts like a threat, and if there was one thing that really turned me off in men, it was desperation. Gary didn't know the meaning of the word.

"Money breaks," I said, reminding him, a tiny twinge of something like annoyance flashing like a smoke detector in the corner of my eye.

Dudek racked the balls aggressively and fast, so fast I was sure he hadn't looked at numbers, hadn't even put the eight ball in the center, but he had. Every time I looked his eyes were on me, laughing at the things he thought he knew, like how I'd fall for him the minute I saw how he slammed a cue ball, how I'd look with my clothes off.

Gary's shot was gunshot loud. He dropped the three ball on a lucky spin but left himself jammed up in the far corner. "Whoops," he said, so levelly I knew straight off what he was up to. Nothing Gary did was not on purpose. Even breaks, which were in theory pretty random, behaved the way he planned them. He launched a little muff shot off the bumper, just enough to leave Tatu without a shot.

"Piece of pie," Tatu said leaning low over the table, closing one eye to simplify the problem. His only chance here was a bank shot, but I knew he'd never risk it: virgin pool players choose elastic collisions over inelastic ones every time. The cue ball skipped and rattled three low balls into a line against the far bumper.

"Little o-possum," I said, nudging him and winking, knowing Tatu would pretend to understand my tactics even if he didn't. I played possum all the time. It was a mental game that started up with Gary, a way of dealing mentally with players who might be better at the game, luckier maybe, or less drunk. It was a way of calling on the abstract plane when things down on the physical level were not cooperating. If you missed a shot, you *could* be doing it deliberately, and I was playing out that option.

Dudek scratched, which brought things round to me. Clear shot on the fourteen ball, long. Or, an easy drop into the left side pocket that just might nudge the eight into a block. I scrubbed chalk onto my cue, considering.

I was not the kind of girl who was (for any reason) going to miss. In games like these, with guys like Dudek, a miss meant you were leading the guy on, or meant you were afraid of him, which in some circles ended up as the same thing. I rapped the cue ball on the table once for emphasis, then set my shot: I banked the nine and set myself up perfectly. It took more than a black T-shirt to scare me. Besides, I was here with friends.

Across the table, I heard an exhale almost loud enough to fall into the category whistle. For about three seconds I weighed the benefits of missing one on purpose so Tatu could have a shot, but then I saw the Kick-Ass shirt again, the muscles twitching underneath, and I couldn't help myself: I ran the table.

Tatu pounded me appreciatively on the back, congratulating himself on his choice of a partner. "Losers buy, I guess," Gary said, moving toward the bar, still holding the cue stick he didn't get a chance to use. He was always calm, that Gary. Didn't have a stray nerve in his body. "Just remember," he called back over his shoulder, "I might be playing possum too."

Tony Dudek, who wouldn't know a possum if he got one free inside a cereal box, leered in my direction. "So," he said around a cigarette, the words from low inside his lungs. "She knows what to do with a cue stick."

I'd heard it all before, the ball puns, pocket jokes, the way guys talk about their sticks, and the last thing I wanted to do was stand there, so I didn't. The timing was all wrong. The tone was off. It's in the way he said it—stick—hard vowel sounds, a hiss that told me more about his salivary habits than I cared to know. Here's another one for Elliott, I thought to myself: girls do not like insinuations about themselves and pool cues.

I took my seat back at the bar, next to Elliott, who was drawing pictures on a napkin with a pencil. Squares and angles, little arrows showing where the forces were applied. Homework. Sometimes this guy was hopeless. "Hey," he said as I pulled the napkin out from under him. His hand slapped down on top of where his drawing was, but way too late.

"God, you're such an engineer." I shook my head, and felt the headache again, every twist a strain from temples down. Sometimes I felt for the poor girl who would end up with Elliott. All those Christmas parties where he'd stand around with calculator-driven men in polyester pants, dropping physical constants the way some people dropped names. Who knows what crucial elements of Elliott's substantial brain were sacrificed the day he memorized pi to the one hundredth decimal place?

Actually, I wasn't thinking this way about Elliott that day. Back then, we were friends and I was thinking other things, like how sad it was to have nothing but a rough sketch and some calculations on a napkin to console you. The secret was to keep things theoretical, to avoid those moments when the things you knew became the things you had to prove, but of course, I didn't say it.

"You are such a pool shark," Elliott said, more quick-witted than usual. "I ever tell you I found software for computer pool? You do it all by plugging in equations—it's really not a bad game. I'll copy it for you sometime."

Thanks but no thanks, I told him, rolling the napkin between my palms. Pool just wasn't pool without the slide of smooth wood on a knuckle, the rough kiss of green felt, the little squares of chalk I knew by smell. It was a romantic thing, like football or astronomy, although that wasn't what I said to Elliott because the word would jolt him out of listening, remind him he was talking to a girl.

"Nice game, honey," another voice said, coming from behind me. Dudek, I knew without looking. "You always such a ball buster, or what?"

"It's just a game," I said, not moving, knowing what deep meanings guys like him put to the simplest of gestures. Turning your back at the wrong speed, the wrong angle could get you into trouble. Everything was hanging in the balance, on my words, and what I thought right at that moment was: I was sitting pretty.

"Ten dollars," he whispered, slouching toward me. At first the numbers threw me off; I thought he was still talking about pool. "I'll bet you ten dollars I can show you something you never seen before."

Up close, the smell of sweat and motor oil pounded home the shirt's red-lettered boast. All his clothes were talking, that guy. Boots said, I'm from Texas. Toepoints. Skinny legs. Pants with grease spots laid out like places on a map. I knew this had to do with bodies, this thing he was so anxious to reveal. And from what I could see of him, pale bluish skin clotted here and there with remnants of teenage acne, bones that stuck out at the edges, I decided I would rather not get educated. I turned away and pushed an elbow lightly into Elliott to get back his attention.

"All you gotta do is give me this, your earring," Dudek said, pointing at the little silver hoop that touched my neck if I leaned sideways. It's all in

what you are expecting, I thought, leaning away, wondering why Tatu's touch was fine and this was not. All it was, I told myself, was substances in juxtaposition: skin on metal. Elliott's tense fingers wrapped around a pencil, Gary's one authoritative finger lightly in the air. Just downwind from me, Dudek's face was bent into a smile. "Ten dollars, and I'll put it through my nipple," he said. One finger slid like butter down his chest.

I looked down at my hands, shivering to think of it: wires pushed through nipples. The guy had serious kinks. But down was wrong. The looking down was wrong. Next thing, he'd think I was being coy. The time had come to spell things out. "I'm with someone, okay?"

Dudek broke up laughing. "This geek?" he said, grabbing Elliott by the blond hairs sprouting on his chin and pulled him to his feet. Elliott's eyes were wide with fear, his chin directed toward the ceiling. A pathetic little squeaking sound was escaping from his mouth.

"Let go," I said, and stood up like a guy might, like I could take him on. Women did not settle things this way. For centuries, they had been getting even and not mad, but it seemed senseless in this context. Ridiculous hypothesis, and probably unproveable. I couldn't think—my ears were busy hearing Elliott, goddamn him, hearing his voice going up and up and up as if he couldn't stop it, stupid goddamn engineer.

"Why should I?" Dudek's eyes looked curious and innocent. On my feet, I came up to his shoulder, which got me thinking right away about another strategy. I glanced around but Atlas's was so full, so noisy, it might as well have been completely empty. Strangers in UCLA jackets were lined up across the bar. Across the room, Gary stood bent forward with his back to me, sighting out a shot. And over everything, in a voice higher than mine, Elliott was calling out my name.

"Let's play a game," I said to Dudek, "let's play pool. Best two of three. You lose, and you're out of here. You win, and you can have the earring." He eased his grip on Elliott more slowly than I thought he would, like he was thinking about the whole idea, and thinking, for a guy like Dudek, took some time. Elliott dropped like a rock when Dudek eased the pressure, and nearly hit his head against the bar. My hand jumped as he fell, and if he had collided with the wood, I would have caught him. I would have saved him if it came to that. When he turned away and headed toward the door, I was still reaching out my hand.

Imagine a pool table, frictionless, and without pockets. The rack is

broken and the game is set in motion, but the balls don't stop; soon they are randomly distributed across the felt, colliding, bouncing in all directions. What is the probability that within a certain time frame all the balls will be for one instant on one side of the table? That one specific ball will hit the eight? That's what I was thinking back in Atlas's, looking at my hand, considering the range of things it could collide with, and that explained why I was not surprised when Dudek slapped his fingers over mine and led me to the table. I knew that it was going to happen, which explained why I didn't look "alarmed" about it, as I heard later, through Tatu.

At the table, Gary was angled low, lining up his shot: a must-hit banker on the eight ball. Right away, I knew the game he was supposed to play: he wouldn't like this. He'd be jealous. Mad at Dudek, and annoyed at me, and who could blame him? After all, we'd been together for a long time. The cue ball skidded neatly off two bumpers and with the tiniest of nicks came to rest against the eight. Tatu, who thought he'd finally won a game, let his stick drop onto the floor.

"He's a jerk," I said while Dudek went for quarters. Game or not, the situation did require explanation. I was not the kind of girl who picked up guys like cigarettes, or picked up guys at all, and Gary knew it.

"Yeah?" Gary pointed out a bank shot to Tatu.

"I mean, this isn't what it looks like." I wanted to explain it all to him, tell him not to be mad, not to get upset, but his face stayed flat and calm. Calm and flat. Infuriating.

"Do what you want. It's a free country." He pulled back and stood out of the light so all I could see of him was upper legs and torso in the shadows. And that was it. He'd seen, he'd heard, and he'd decided: he wasn't going to put up any fight at all.

Tatu, also ignoring me, was playing the game of his life. He nailed the bank and somehow, probably by chance, left himself a clear shot on his last ball. What was it that made a man stand up and fight? I'd always thought that love was what you fought for, bottom line. "He's your friend," I said. "You could say something. You could have mentioned we're together." I knew, I *knew* that if this all were turned around, I would have stood up for him.

"I could have. So could you." Tatu dropped the eight ball in the corner pocket and as it fell, exactly on that cue, Gary walked away. He walked

like he was going to a funeral, slow, respectful; he walked like there was nothing more to say. Tatu, his grin a mile wide, followed him like a shadow to the door.

When Dudek got back, he had beers for both of us, and I took one, half from habit, half to fortify myself over the Gary thing. Dudek couldn't take my taking it as a sign of anything, I thought—by the time the beer was gone, he would be, too. In the crude light from the Olympia beer lamp swinging low over the table, Dudek's hair, his beard looked almost green. He leaned into the balls to break, then reconsidered. "You," he said, gesturing toward me with an elbow. "I love to see girls break. It turns me on."

"Forget it, Dudek," I said, furious at his assumptions, hoping that the dull, thick sound of his own name would strike him as insulting. "Forget I'm a girl." I snapped into the cue ball; stripes again, two down. Around the corner, sizing up a long shot at the ten, I felt anger move like water down my arms into my fingers. "I'm two months from a degree in physics, you haven't got a prayer. I know this game, I study it."

Dudek lit a cigarette, and looked down his nose at me, considering. Fourteen ball skidded down the bumper, rolled, and dropped into the pocket. "Physicals," he said, smirking as his hand slid down the rail. "That what you do? Physicals?"

"Chaos," I called out as I nicked a striped ball neatly in the side. A kiss was what you called it; even the jargon was letting me down. "Chaos studies," I said, still louder, feeling suddenly diminished by the jukebox I hadn't noticed until then. "It's math. I design computer programs to describe turbulent fluid flow." It wasn't fair—no matter what I said, my words sounded ridiculous. Around my head, even the music was imitating chaos. Songs were playing simultaneously, words and melodies colliding randomly like pool balls. I looked around, but Elliott was gone, and there was no sign of Gary or Tatu—inside the whole of Atlas's, I didn't recognize another soul.

"Keep talking, baby," Dudek said, "you're turning me on." I watched another ball drop, only half aware it was my shot. "Get this straight," I said, standing my cue stick on the vertical and staring hard into his eyes. "I'm not interested, all right?"

Dudek wiped his palm across his chest. "Baby, if you weren't interested, you wouldn't be standing here."

He never even saw it coming. I moved before the eight ball dropped,

inverting my cue so I could use the thick part of the handle. A lever. A baseball bat. I had learned to swing it years ago: elbow up, weight centered on the foot behind the plate. With my hands together on the cue stick I stepped into the swing, my left foot first, remembering to keep my eyes exactly at the point of contact, remembering to follow through.

Of course, it isn't like I settled anything by hitting him—however concrete fights are, the winning and losing is abstract. It's who you are and how you look at it; it's all in where you're standing. It's back to Einstein. You ever notice how his hair was kind of long for when he was alive and calculating? How mousey his face looks? He's got those sort of milky, runny eyes that say go on and punch me, kick the shit right out of me—it won't make any difference in the long run. He's past the point where physical means anything at all.

Dudek took the shot—absorbed it—just above the ear, which seemed to me so damn appropriate I could have cried. Instead I stood there, ready as he fell, my right hand still tingling from the blow. Most girls don't realize it hurts, that hitting part, and suddenly it seemed like something Elliott should know, another nugget he might need to catch the girl he'd probably never find. That's what makes a woman different: it isn't only knowing that it's going to hurt that holds her back from hitting. There's something else that stops a woman, Elliott, but—and this is the one thing, the only thing that makes me panic—I can't think what it is.