

1st Place, Fiction

The Bruised Banana
By David Douglas

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"How'd you do?" Trevor asked.

"The same way I feel... terrible!" I complained.

"You sick?"

"Am now. Why does a math major have to take a computer programming class anyway?"

"No idea." Trevor pushed open the door and held it for me.

I forced my wheelchair over the protruding threshold and freed myself from the confines of red brick asylum — named accordingly, because I often thought a person would have to be *crazy* to want to be a computer programmer.

I turned toward Trevor. "Well, I guess I'll see ya next week. I just wanna go home and forget about this day."

"I hear ya. Take it easy."

Trevor and I parted ways, and I began my hustle to the library parking lot. I turned left onto the wide downhill sidewalk between the *asylum* and the library. I let go of the hand rims and began coasting. Immediately, I noticed an oncoming *surfer dude* staring at me. I slowed down, because I could tell something was on his mind.

"You're lucky," he said.

I squinted at him and asked, "How so?"

"You get to cruise down this big hill, while everyone else has to walk. You're lucky."

Oh, there were so many things I wanted to tell him. *"You should've seen me an hour ago, when I was out of breath, my upper arms were burning, and I still had 30 feet of incline left to climb."* Or maybe, *"Yeah, I was real lucky last week, when I had to roll up and down this hill in the rain. On my way up, my hand slipped on the wet rims and my thumb collided with the brake — nearly removing my thumbnail. Fortunately, it was raining or someone may have been concerned by blood trail leading into the Computer Science building."* And in my general aggravation, I wanted to say, *"Lucky, huh? Lucky that I'll never again run, skate, or slow dance with a girl. And of course, I'm lucky with girls too, right? Lucky that when a girl looks at me, she never sees a potential mate. She sees someone to pity, to avoid, or doesn't see me at all — because, to some people, I'm not even a person. Yeah, you nailed it, surfer dude. I'm real lucky! I'm as lucky as the lone, bruised banana in the grocery store. Someone removed it from the others in the bunch and left it behind. It is ignored, pushed aside, and abused until the produce employee tosses it into the trash."*

I took a deep breath to calm my heart and clear my mind. Knowing it'd be a waste of time to say anything I was thinking, I simply agreed, "Yeah, I guess so."

The surfer dude grinned and traipsed away, while I carried on down the hill. Quickly, my path was blocked by a couple who were holding hands and walking at a snail's pace. As I detoured left to bypass them, I was startled when a bicycle wheel suddenly appeared in my peripheral vision. I looked over my shoulder and noticed an angry bicyclist attempting to slow his speeding contraption.

"Watch it!" he yelled.

"You watch it!" I protested and swerved in front of him. I pushed past the slow couple and looked back at the bicyclist. His sour face matched my mood. So I stayed in the middle of the sidewalk and pushed my wheelchair to its limit. Soon, I was barreling past people at speeds I thought impossible. The wheelchair ferociously vibrated from every dimple, crack, and bump in the sidewalk, but come what may, I refused to slow.

Upon nearing the end of the hill, I looked back at the bicyclist. Pedaling with force, he would soon overtake me, but I did it. I had beaten him to the bottom. Gripping

the right wheel's rim, I stopped its motion. Instead of turning right, the speed churned me in two full, dizzying circles. Never had I been so grateful for my inclined wheels and seatbelt.

I closed my eyes and shook my head to clear the dizzy spell. Suddenly, the back of my head started throbbing. When I opened my eyes and saw the bicyclist pedaling away, I realized he had slapped me.

"Better luck next time, Quickie!" he yelled, mocking the brand of my wheelchair.

A passing girl, who witnessed the incident, ran toward me. "That was repulsive! Do you want me to chase him down and push him over?"

"No," I replied, holding the back of my head.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," I assured. "It's just one of those days." I looked past her dark-rimmed glasses and what I saw wasn't pity. I saw genuine concern in her eyes. I desperately needed something else to say. I couldn't lose this moment. That's when I noticed the banana in her hand. Pointing to it, I asked, "Is that your dinner?"

She opened her hand. "Oh... it's just a snack."

I studied the many black marks on the peel. "It looks quite bruised. You might need to throw it out."

"No way! The bruises give it character."

"Really?"

"Of course! What does a bruise really do to a ripe banana?"

I shrugged.

"It makes it softer... gentler," she explained. "You're right, I could throw it out, go to the supermarket, and buy a new one in perfect condition, but why? I don't want an

unripe, tough, sour banana. I want one that's been on a journey through life. One that's ripened, softened, and sweetened. I bet if you share it with me, you'll understand."

"I'd be delighted to share it with you. Do bananas heal headaches, by any chance?"

Two years later, I married that girl. She works as a physical therapist. And me, I'm a computer programmer. Turns out I didn't do so terrible on that test after all. In fact, I aced it, and soon after, I switched majors. And one other thing... I finally realized the surfer dude was right. I am lucky.