

Mike took a deep breath as he walked briskly to the senior parking lot next to the football stadium. He had to walk fast. If he slowed down, he knew he would lose his nerve. He had made up his mind that today was going to be different. It would be the line of demarcation that separated the Mike that had been a coward from the Mike that was going to be a winner, the Mike that was going to show up.

Since Mike was in grade school, he had been in love with Artemis Grey. However, he had never had the guts to ask her out until this morning. Last night, on social media, he'd heard the news that she had broken up with her boyfriend, Rip Dup. Rip was the classic example of the Neanderthal man, or Cro-Magnon, or some other primordial creation. He was tall and burly. He had muscles stacked on top of muscles. Mike thought that perhaps he might have seen a slight slope in his forehead. Further, he was more hairy than one might expect for a teenager. At any rate, once Mike saw that Artemis had ended her relationship with Rip, he had made up his mind that he was going to work up the courage to speak to her. As he passed her in the hallway that morning, he said, "Hi." She smiled in response. He couldn't believe it. She actually smiled at him. He floated. Everything was right with the world.

Unfortunately, the same social media that had blessed him with the knowledge of Rip and Artemis' breakup was also the same one that cursed him. It put a massive bullseye on his back. Word got back to Rip. He told everyone that he was going to destroy Mike after school. Ever since then, each step that Mike took was heavy. He felt like he wore lead-filled shoes, but he couldn't stop. He fought back the fear and nausea with each footfall. She had noticed him. The girl of his dreams had noticed him. It didn't matter that Rip waited at the senior parking lot, so he could beat him into a puddle of bloody goo. In fact, nothing mattered but Artemis. Mike held no illusions about his chances of success. He knew this was a fight he was going to lose. However, suddenly, he stopped. He tried to take another step forward, but his foot wouldn't budge. It was as though his body had decided to override his will. His legs trembled. They felt like wet noodles. *What am I doing? He's going to kill me. Why don't I just walk home? I can come back tonight and get my car.* Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw Artemis' smile again. *So beautiful.* All of a sudden, Mike felt a rush of energy that bolstered his sinews. He shook his head so hard he felt his brain rattle against his skull. Yes. He was going to lose. However, if he could just land one punch, Mike would consider it a victory. Surely, he could do that. After all, he had already shown up one time that day when he spoke to Artemis. She had rewarded him with a smile. Good things came to those who had the guts to show up. Surely, he could do it again. Mike regained control of his body. Slowly, he put one foot in front of the other. Mike willed his body to move forward into his destiny.

By the time Mike made it to the parking lot, a ravenous crowd had gathered. He scanned the faces that cheered for his untimely demise. However, he noticed one concerned face. It was Artemis. The girl that changed his life forever with a smile had come. Mike took in another deep breath. Then he walked over to Rip.

Rip smirked. "Can't believe you showed up for this beating. But I guess it's just as well. I would've found—"

Before Rip could finish his sentence, Mike pulled back his right hand. He swung with all his might. Mike struck Rip in the face. Rip stood with his mouth open and his eyes wide as blood trickled from his nose. Suddenly, the look of shock on Rip's face

changed. The shock turned to rage. Mike saw Rip's fist move towards him in slow motion. He knew what was coming. So what? He had shown up. That made him a winner