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12 Again

Bobby Osgood woke up one October morning and he was twelve years old again. 'This is crazy,' he thought, upon finding himself back in his kid-size bed, in the little white house where he'd grown up. 'I'm 32. I live in New York. I work in a bank.'

He didn't have much time to ponder this absurd situation. His mother yelled from the kitchen downstairs that breakfast was ready and if he didn't shake a leg he was going to be late for school and he had a big math test today, remember?

'Ah, so that's it', Bobby thought, and closed his eyes once more. 'This is one of those anxiety nightmares, caused by stress, which I am often under, at my job. In this bad dream, I'll be back at my old school. I will have to take a test, and of course I won't know any of the answers. Also, I will have forgotten to wear pants.'

Yikes.

'But then I'll wake up and it will all have been merely a dream.' He pulled the Cowboys n' Indians blanket over his head and waited for reality to resume control of the airwaves.

The half-naked test nightmare had never included Bobby's mother Doris coming upstairs and pulling off the covers, falling on the bed and holding him down and tickling him all over until he was totally wide-awake and laughing like a clown.

'Mom!' Bobby looked at her. She was smiling bright, giggling like a girl. She looked young again, and so pretty. 'I never noticed how pretty Mom was,' Bobby thought. So he did something he hadn't done too terribly often when he really was a kid. He put his arms around his mother's neck, planted a kiss on her cheek, and told her she was beautiful.

She hugged him back as though she never wanted to let go. Bobby sort of never wanted her to, either.

'What's gotten into you today, mister? You aren't trying to sweetstuff your way out of going to school, are you? 'Cause it ain't going to work.'

'No, Mom. It's just...'

'Get dressed, then. Put on your blue shirt. I ironed it for you. And speaking of irons, I've got waffles ready downstairs.'

Was she going to watch him get dressed? Bobby remembered she used to do that, sometimes. How embarrassing. 'Uh...Mom, do you mind?'

'All right, Mr. Grown-up. Better hurry, though.'

He went downstairs for the best waffles in the world. Bobby's mother Doris told him to eat a banana, too. Brain-fuel for the math test. So Bobby ate waffles and sliced banana with butter and maple syrup.

'Thanks Mama, that was delicious. You were...I mean, you *are* the best cook ever. And so gorgeous, on top of it.' He couldn't help repeating that she was beautiful again, because it was true, she was.

'Flattery won't get you out of no exam, buster. But it's sweet of you to say so. You sure you're feeling OK?'

Bobby Osgood said I love you Mom and kissed her again before he went outside to wait for the school bus. He hadn't kissed his mother much back when he was a kid, he remembered. Not nearly enough, anyway. Mama Doris shot him a puzzled look, blew him a kiss and waved when he boarded the bus. Bobby felt like crying as he watched her go back in the house.

Of course, he couldn't start boo-hoo-hooing on the bus. Not in front of everybody. There was Mrs. Thompson, the bus driver.

'Good morning, Mrs. Thompson. Thanks for picking me up.'

Mrs. Thompson shot him a funny look. It occurred to Bobby that he'd never thanked her for bringing him to school all those years, even though she was a safe driver, always on time, and not unfriendly. Isn't that why people say thank you?

Mrs. Thompson smiled. 'Hey, thank *you*, Bobby. You're a good kid. Now *go siddown!*'

Bobby Osgood traipsed the no-slip rubber-lined bus aisle, grabbing seat-backs as Mrs. Thompson pulled away, screeching her tires. It was weird being short again, weird being driven around, weird seeing all these faces he hadn't seen or thought of in years, all these people who, like him, had become kids again.

Bobby saw a boy named Stu Tabb. What a cool name. What a perfect haircut, what a tough jacket. Bobby shuddered as he stared at Stu Tabb, because he remembered hearing that Stu had been killed in a car crash years ago. Yet here he was, alive again, still alive. Bobby said, 'Hey, Stu.'

Stu Tabb just stared back, a trifle annoyed because he, Stu Tabb, was an older kid, in high school, and older kids in high school have zero time to talk to 6th grade punks like Bobby Osgood.

Someone else was staring at Stu Tabb: a pretty girl with green eyes. Bobby turned to tomato sauce when he saw her. She was Becky Raven and Bobby was...and Bobby had...he couldn't look at her.

'This is stupid,' Bobby thought. 'I'm an adult male, 32 years old, despite whatever's going on today. I've been married. Why can't I even look at a 7th grade *chick*?'

He tried again, but couldn't force himself to look straight into that pale thin face, not after what had happened.

Another kid was waving at him. 'Hey, c'mon! I saved you a seat.'

This was Cliff Brown, Bobby's best friend. Bobby knew that he and Cliff stopped being friends later, because Cliff was a bully who beat up little kids. Also, he'd once gotten Bobby in trouble by cheating off his answers on a Civics quiz.

Bobby went to sit next to Cliff anyway, even though he felt more like sitting next to the fat kid whom everyone called Spaz, and being nice to him, for a change. Bobby and Cliff didn't have much to say to each other, but that was OK because they were still friends and friends don't necessarily have to talk.

Cliff was scanning the streets for muscle cars through the window. Bobby was staring three rows ahead, at Becky Raven's long black hair that swayed with the motion of the bus.

'Ooooooh, Bobby's in love!' Cliff's face was a Halloween mask of mockery. Bobby was busted, for liking girls.

'Shut up!' Bobby slammed his elbow into Cliff's ribs. The fact that he was still in love with Becky Raven bugged him. Cliff and Bobby traded punches and wrestled all the way to school. Bobby hadn't slugged or strangled anyone in years. Man, it was fun.

So much fun, he almost forgot he had a math test coming up. Yow!

Wait a minute...a 6th grade math test was nothing to worry about. Hadn't 32-year-old Mr. Robert Osgood been working at the Grand Central Bank these past seven years?

Mrs. Wilkes the math teacher, gray-haired and bespectacled, handed out the test papers, which smelled of rubbing alcohol. 'Nice, how everything gets handed to you at this stage of the game,' Bobby thought.

He said, 'Thanks, Mrs. Wilkes. This looks like a really interesting test you've put together for us.'

Mrs. Wilkes looked at Bobby as though he'd gone stark foaming nuts. Then she smiled and said, 'Well. Looks like someone has studied...for a change. Good boy, Bobby. Now *get to work!*'

Cliff Brown gave him a karate chop on the back of the neck. 'You butt-kisser.'

The math test was a piece of cake, with sliced banana on top. Algebra's no big deal, once you get the hang of it. 'Why couldn't math have been this easy back when I was really twelve?' Bobby finished the test in ten minutes flat, checked his work, and swaggered up to Mrs. Wilkes' desk to hand it over.

'Are you sure you're done, Bobby?'

'Oh yes ma'am. Thanks. This one certainly covered a lot of material. Nearly stumped me with question #9. Pretty tricky.'

Bobby knew how hard teachers have to work, after the last school-bell rings out. He said, 'Thanks, Mrs. Wilkes, for all the great stuff you taught...I mean, *teach* us. It came...that is, I know it *will come* in handy, later.'

Bobby went back to his desk, but Mrs. Wilkes called him back to the front of the room again. A curious, serious look flashed from over her black plastic cat's-eye glasses.

'Bobby Osgood, did you cheat on this examination? Tell me honestly.'

'Oh no ma'am. I swear it.'

'Well isn't that funny,' she said, as though it weren't funny at all. 'You've never gotten all the answers right before, or solved all the problems so quickly. How do you explain this phenomenal performance?'

'Uhm, er...I guess you were right before, Mrs. Wilkes. I studied extra-hard this time.'

'All right then, Bobby. Good work. You may go sit quietly until the bell rings.'

Back at his desk, Bobby whispered a few answers to Cliff Brown, to avoid getting a judo sock behind the ear. Cliff was pretty strong.

Bobby didn't run into Becky Raven again until after lunch. Seeing Stu Tabb alive had been weird, but watching Becky walk towards him down a locker-lined hallway was even weirder.

He hadn't thought about Becky Raven in years. How could he still be in love with her? Why couldn't he go up and talk to her, or even look her in the eye?

He knew exactly why. If he was 12 now, and back in the 6th grade, then what had happened hadn't happened all that long ago. Bobby Osgood had run up behind Becky out in the playground and kicked her in the butt. Not just a playing-around kick in the can, either. Hard enough to hurt. Hard enough to make pretty Becky cry shiny fat tears down her cheeks. Why? Because Bobby was mad at her. Because Bobby was secretly in love with her, but Becky was only interested in Stu Tabb, who was older and cooler and tougher. All those horrible feelings came back to 12-year-old Bobby. 32-year-old Bobby had almost forgotten them. Almost.

Becky Raven looked as though she couldn't see Bobby. He thought, 'So, I'm invisible. That means it's only a dream, after all.' He punched himself in the stomach so he could wake up and not be looking at Becky Raven.

But he didn't wake up.

Becky looked at Bobby then, because let's face it, it's pretty strange to see a kid whomp himself full-force in the gut.

Now or never. Bobby Osgood looked into Becky Raven's dark green eyes and said, 'Becky, I'm sorry I kicked you. I'm really sorry I hurt you. I wish I'd never done it, but it was only because I like you so much. I know it sounds stupid, but it's the truth.'

Becky looked at him as though she didn't remember what had happened. She looked as though she didn't know who he was, or what he was talking about. This made him feel even worse, if that was possible. Then she shrugged her shoulders, tossed her black hair and said, 'Oh. Oh yeah. Uhm...it's OK, I guess. Didn't even hurt. Uh, see you later.'

She scooted down the hall, turned left and went off somewhere to stare at Stu Tabb some more. Stu Tabb wouldn't even look at her, because she was in 7th grade and still wore T-shirts. But Bobby felt as though a 10-ton weight had been hoisted off his chest. He'd been forgiven, more or less.

The rest of the school day was a warm breeze that went by too fast. Bobby had plenty to say about *The Red Badge of Courage* in English class. Because he'd finally actually picked it up and read it when he was 24, and it's not all that boring. He and Mr. Popper the hippie English teacher discussed the horrors of war and attaining manhood while the rest of the class yawned and doodled. Mr. Popper wasn't just a freak with long hair. Too bad 12-year-old Bobby Osgood couldn't legally invite Cosmo Popper out for a beer or something after school.

Principal Brainerd stood at the school's main entrance as the last bell rang. He made it a habit to observe his youthful charges as they fled the building for the day, their heads packed, or so he hoped, with a little knowledge more. He was massive, bald, wore charcoal gray suits. His main interest was anthropology, Bobby knew, and every summer he went to explore places like Africa and New Guinea. All the kids were slightly afraid of Principal Brainerd. No one wanted to be sent to his office. Principal Brainerd looked so lonely, a big, bald, dark-suited Invisible Man who stood still as all those kids tore past him, eager to get out of the school he ran for them.

Bobby approached Mr. Brainerd. It was like looking up at a mountain. The guy must've been six-six, six-seven, but he decided to be a school principal instead of a pro-football jock. 'Life is strange,' Bobby thought, but he said, 'Thanks, Principal Brainerd. School was really great today. I, uh...I learned a lot. Really.'

He felt sad as he said it. He knew Principal Brainerd had died too, a few months before Stu Tabb. What else could he say? Don't give those pygmy headhunters firewater? Bobby knew from going to the movies that it's unwise to interfere with the course of history.

Principal Brainerd bent at the waist, bowed low, and extended a right hand that could've made a basketball disappear. He said, 'Thank *you*, Bobby Osgood. How nice of you to say so.' He had a deep, gentle voice. Over three hundred kids, and he knew all their names.

On the bus, Bobby contemplated sitting next to Spaz, the fat kid who was always either teased or ignored, but he didn't, in the end, because grappling with Cliff Brown was too much fun. On his way down the aisle though, Bobby leaned against Spaz's lonely bench and said, 'Chin up, Spaz. You're going to be a big rock star when you grow up.' And he knew it was true.

Though it seemed wrong, since it'd been so easy, Bobby told his mother Doris he'd scored 100% and gotten a big fat A on the math test. She seemed so happy about it. 'See what you can do when you try, smart guy?'

Bobby wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon with his mom, but she said, 'Go out and play. Get some fresh air, run around, see the world. You can take a break from doing homework, since you're a math wizard all of a sudden.'

So Bobby went out and played.

Play was something 32-year-old investment banker Mr. Robert Osgood hadn't done in a long, long time. He ran around with the other kids in the neighborhood, jumped on human piles, got dirty, ripped his clothes, skinned his knees, chipped a tooth and it didn't even hurt. Pain comes later. When you're twelve, the only reason to stop playing is that it gets too dark.

He could barely see the sidewalk as he walked home for another meal cooked by Mom: meatloaf and carrots.

After dinner, after he helped clean up and put everything away, Bobby asked his mother if she'd read him a story, instead of TV.

'You haven't asked me to read to you in over two years now, Bobby. You sure you want to miss Batman?'

Bobby nodded. Mom had always loved reading to him, he remembered, and being read to, he knew, is as sweet as it gets.

He got to fall asleep listening to his mother read one more time. His last words that night were, Thanks, Mom, I love you. He used to feel so dumb when he said that. Through half-closed eyes, he saw her standing at the door of his room, against the light, looking at him. She looked happy.

Bobby knew he'd be a 32-year-old banker again when he awoke. How did he know this? Let's just say that nothing like being twelve once, let alone twice, can last long. You'll see.