

Ceramic DM: Round 1, Match 7
maxfieldjadenfox vs. carpedavid

A Late Aubade

Ryan's day began like most days: early. He woke at four AM, which gave him a half an hour to talk to his subordinates in Texas before his daily conference call with the company's officers. As a Junior VP of Sales for one of the largest oil companies in the world, his mornings were filled with conference calls. He slipped his earpiece on, rolled out of bed, and padded to the bathroom.

"Call the office," he mumbled as he stood in front of the toilet, willing his bladder to relax. His headpiece happily beeped away as it connected him to a speaker phone in a conference room in a building an ocean and half-a-continent away.

The voice of his European sales manager greeted him, as it usually did each morning with a bizarre mix of French accent and Texas drawl. "Hello Pierre," he said with a sigh, "What's the situation in Europe?"

Pierre, the Frenchman who learned English while living in Dallas, began rattling off a list of sales prospects and opportunities in each of the EU nations in alphabetical order. Ryan sighed as he tried to picture babbling mountain streams and waterfalls. *Waves*, he thought, *maybe waves will work*.

He half-listened to the list of million dollar opportunities until one in particular caught his attention: "What do you mean Sweden won't sign on? They can't not sign on." His bladder tensed up again.

"No, I know they're concerned about global warming. It's your job to sell them on it anyway." He looked at the toilet, scowled at it, and then turned away.

"What do you mean, 'What do you tell them?' You tell them that global warming is a myth. It's a g—damn myth." Catching sight of his reflection in the mirror, he frowned at the dark circles under his eyes.

"I don't care what their experts say. We have experts, too. Everybody has experts, and we pay ours more than they pay theirs. That account is worth four billion dollars. Do I have to spell that out for you? Four. F—ing. Billion." He heard a buzzing noise, looked toward the bedroom, and saw a fly. *Sonofab—ch*.

"What do you mean it could be worse? How could it be worse? You're one step up from a retard, aren't you, Pierre? It can't be any f—ing worse." Ryan grabbed a flyswatter and ran after the interloping insect, swinging wildly. "If we lose Sweden that means that we don't make our numbers this quarter. If we don't make our numbers this quarter, then I don't get my bonus. If I don't get my bonus then I'm going to have to sell my condo, and if I have to sell my condo that means I have to move back to Texas. I hate Texas. I moved here to get away from the giant f—ing bugs in Texas." He knocked over a lamp with a backswing and then nearly tripped over a

chair. “So no, you mongoloid, it can’t possibly get any worse. You get on that g—damn phone and you call them back and you tell them that global warming is a g—damn myth.” He stopped and looked for the fly. *Where are you? There!*

“I don’t care – fly our experts up there to testify. Send bonbons or fish or turtles or whatever the hell it is they eat up there. If you have to, you go up there yourself and you get down on your knees...” Ryan slammed the flyswatter against the side of his dresser and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch.

“No, not to beg. To suck. Now, whatever you have to do to get them to sign on, you do it!” He ripped off his earpiece and threw it across the room, where it shattered against the wall.

S—t. He looked over at the clock – 4:29 – one minute to the conference call. *I’m going back to bed.*

As a child growing up in Texas, Ryan had befriended a tree. He brought the sapling home from a school fundraiser in the early spring of his fifth-grade year, and his mother helped him plant it in the backyard. For the first month, he came home every day, filled his watering can from the lake at the edge of the property, and dutifully watered the ash.

Once the tree took hold, his mother told him he didn’t need to water it any more, so he spent his time playing with his toys near it instead. Some days, he would stage elaborate battles, setting up his army men in strategic locations around the yard, marching them and their tanks to and fro, but every few minutes he would look over to make sure the tree was still there.

The first fall, he watched, amazed, as the leaves turned a brilliant orange, gold, and red. He tried to collect every one, and he plastered the walls of his room with them, where they stayed for months until they crumbled into dust.

In junior high, when he thought he wanted to be an artist, he spent days drawing pictures of the tree. His mother would drag him by the ear inside and make him eat dinner, but as soon as he was finished, he would run back outside.

When his father died during his sophomore year of high school, Ryan spent most of his time sitting under the ash, staring out at the lake. He felt comforted by the leaves that hung overhead and by the sturdy trunk at his back. On warmer evenings, he would curl up and sleep underneath it; out there, by the tree, he couldn’t hear his mother and brother cry.

When, after college, he left Texas and moved to Hawaii, he realized that he didn’t spend much time missing his mother or his brother. He missed that tree.

After stopping by the electronics store to pick up another earpiece, he headed to the slopes. Over the past fifty years, Hawaii had become the skiing capital of the United States, and Mt. Haleakala was the center of it all.

The deep powder that covered the multitude of Haleakala's trails and slopes was far superior to anything that Las Vegas' myriad resorts could boast, and Aspen had been covered by a sheet of ice nearly twenty years earlier, so everyone who could afford to ski came to Hawaii.

Ryan waved his pass at the ticket collector and entered the line for the lift to the Black Diamond trail. He watched as the multitude of regulars and tourists passed by, on their way to the Green Circle and Blue Square trails.

He looked at his watch: *ten o'clock*. On cue, the sound of gourd drums suddenly began, and a group of bare-chested male dancers paraded out into the snow. They wore floral-patterned loincloths, shell necklaces, and lei. A crowd began to gather as the men began a hula which told the story of a great feast which welcomed the first visitors to the island.

Ryan watched the audience swell, and smiled in amusement as they clapped and cheered. He had to hand it to the dancers – they really knew how to sell their act. The hula continued for another two minutes, during which time the line for the lift progressed at a moderate pace.

Finally, the line of men parted in the middle, dropped to their knees, and gestured up-slope. The audience gasped in admiration as a line of beautiful women began descending the mountainside on skis. Each of the women wore a colorful, Polynesian-inspired, two-piece outfit, and trailed a long streamer behind her that billowed in the wind. [Image 3]

Ryan wasn't interested in most of the women – just the one at the very end of the line: Amanda. She wasn't Polynesian, but she looked the part with her long, black hair, tanned skin, and cocoa-brown eyes. Because she was an excellent skier, she had taken a job entertaining the tourists after she arrived on the island a year ago. When she reached the bottom of the slope, she looked over at Ryan, who was just about to sit on the lift, and smiled.

He waved as the lift moved forward. Amanda was a goddamn hippie, in his estimation – always talking about nature, and how man was destroying the environment, and global warming, and all that crap – but she was great in bed, drank like a fish, and, at nearly thirty years his junior, wasn't interested in marriage. It was more than enough to keep him interested.

After relieving his stress on the trail, Ryan returned to the scene of the hula, where the men and women were handing out lei to the tourists. He sidled over to Amanda, who excused herself from her current mark and lassooed him with a lei.

“Hi Tiger,” she said with a wink.

“Hey gorgeous, are you going to grace me with your presence tonight?”

“That depends. Are you going to give up your job of destroying the natural world in order to line the pockets of rich white men?”

“No, but I am making my famous chili.”

“Well, in that case, how about eight?”

“Bring something sexy.”

She leaned in to whisper in his ear and lightly brushed his cheek with hers, “There’s nothing sexier than bare skin.”

She might have been a hippie, but he couldn’t get enough of her.

Ryan hadn’t returned to Texas in thirty years. He had moved to Maui after graduating from college, shortly after the snows began to fall and the bugs began to grow, and he had vowed never to return. When his mother died the year after he left, his brother took care of the funeral arrangements and sold the family home.

When he arrived in Hawaii, he possessed a philosophy degree and no marketable skills, so he took a job hawking cheap tiki statues to tourists. Once he realized that he was good at sales, he decided to make it his career, and he quickly became the sales manager at an electronics company before being recruited by Big Oil. Each bump in salary involved a move to a new dwelling, and eventually his efficiency turned into a two bedroom apartment, and then a flat, and then a condo.

For years, he thought little about anything other than work and skiing, but that had changed once he met Amanda. Now, he was cooking chili.

The market was crowded, as was usual, so he had to push past people to get what he needed: beef, chilies, beans. He had to resist the urge to start beating a woman with a can of beans when she ran over his foot with a shopping cart. After picking out several ripe tomatoes, he grabbed a six pack of beer and hurried to the checkout.

A runaway child smacked him in the groin with his elbow as he stepped out the front doors of the market, nearly causing him to drop his groceries. He staggered over to his car, leaned against it, and groaned. *For crying out loud*, he thought, *kids are worse than giant bugs*.

He set his bag down on the trunk of his car and tried walking off the pain. After a few paces, and a few deep breaths, he began to feel somewhat better, so he turned around to grab the groceries. There, sitting on top of the bag, was a red leaf. *Huh?* Normally, he would have ignored it, but something about it caught his attention. *That looks familiar*. The answer clawed its way out of the recesses of his memory. *Oh right, a red ash. I haven’t seen one of those in years. I wonder where it came from?*

He looked around, but didn't see anything other than palm trees. *Ah, well*, he thought, *probably came off some tacky tourist crap*.

Dinner was consumed quickly, and Amanda and Ryan's clothes were shed even more quickly. He wanted to feel her bare skin under his hands; even with as little as they had in common, there was something familiar and comforting about being in physical contact with her. Early on in their relationship, he had tried to figure out what that something was, but he quickly realized that he didn't care.

The sex was, as always, amazing. Afterwards, lying on his bed, in the soft glow of the dozens of candles she had managed to insinuate into his life, he thought about that something again. She sighed and nuzzled his chest, and he smiled. *I wonder...*

He opened his mouth to ask a question, but she spoke first, "Ok, so want to do something fun?"

"Like what, handcuffs?"

"No," she rolled her eyes, "like something that doesn't involve sex."

"That doesn't sound like fun."

"You're such a boy. Seriously. It's something you've probably never done."

"What, like shave my armpits?"

"Jesus." Amanda rolled over and grabbed her purse off the nightstand. "No, it's something I've been into for a while. It's really illuminating."

"Ok. This sounds like some new age crap."

"No, not new age. Old age. It's shamanic."

"Right."

"No, seriously."

"Right."

"Do you want to try it or not?"

"Ok, fine."

“Hold out your hands,” she said as she reached into her purse and pulled out a large velvet pouch. After unwinding the golden cord that tied it shut, she tipped out a pile of large seeds.

“What the hell is this?”

“Baby woodrose. It’s called the ‘Brown Pill.’”

“What’s it do?”

“It takes you on a trip, man,” she laughed. “It’ll get you in touch with your natural side.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You’re not going to p—sy out on me, are you?”

He frowned. He had never experimented with hallucinogens, even in college, but he certainly wasn’t going to let a hippie chick, much less a naked one, call him a p—sy. “You’re such a f—ing hippie. Ok, fine. How many do I take?”

She smiled, “All of them.”

“All of them?” There were at least twenty seeds, each the size of a hazelnut.

“All of them.”

He popped several of the seeds into his mouth and started to chew. “Mmmm, crunchy,” he mumbled.

Amanda giggled, and then leaned over and began kissing his neck. “You need this,” she murmured between kisses.

“I thought you said this wouldn’t involve sex,” Ryan muttered as he popped another few seeds into his mouth.

“Shut up and keep eating,” she replied as her hands traveled down his body.

Hours became minutes and minutes became hours as time twisted in upon itself. He couldn’t tell where one minute ended and the next began. For that matter, he couldn’t tell where his body ended and hers began. Colors flashed at the edge of his vision as the candle flames began a serpentine dance.

“Why?” he asked – his words buoyed by the effervescent vapors swirling through his chest.

“Why?” she replied as she smiled coyly.

“Why do you feel so comfortable, so familiar?”

“You probably don’t remember,” she whispered as she twisted her hips. He shuddered underneath her. “It was a long time ago, but we knew each other once.”

He closed his eyes and the flashing colors grew more intense: red and orange and gold. “Why are you here?” The vapors wound their way through his limbs, causing every part of his body to tingle.

“I missed you,” she leaned in closely, now whispering in his ear. He could feel the words crawl out from between her lips, parade through the air, and then dive into his ear.

“How could you miss me?” he laughed as the colors inside his eyelids multiplied. “We couldn’t have known each other that well if I don’t remember meeting.”

“Things were different then,” she said sadly as she sat back up.

Ryan opened his eyes and realized that the woman riding him had transformed: no longer the Polynesian look-alike, her face had taken the form of a red ash leaf. The gold and red and orange were leaves that swirled around her nude form, dancing and playing in the space between them. [Image 2]

“I’m not well, Ryan,” she said. “I need your help. I’m dying.”

For some reason, he wasn’t shocked by her statement. In fact, he was fairly certain that he already knew. “Yes.”

“I love you,” her voice became light and airy. “I always have.”

The air between them shimmered and he felt her entire body vibrate. He gasped as the flashes of light intensified, and then, within a minute, his entire field of vision exploded into a kaleidoscope of red and orange and gold leaves. The effervescence overcame him, and he giggled as his entire body dissolved into thin air.

He rolled over, expecting to drape his arm over Amanda’s warm body, but instead his arm hit the bare sheet. *Huh?*

He looked over at the glowing green numbers on the alarm clock – 4:29. *S—t! Did she turn off the alarm?* He jumped out of bed, grabbed his earpiece, and headed toward the bathroom. As he padded across the soft carpet, he stepped on something rough that crunched underfoot. *Oh s—t, a bug!*

He jumped toward the wall, flipped on the light, and immediately felt nauseous. *Ugh. Bright.* He covered his eyes and looked down at what he had stepped on. *A leaf? Am I still hallucinating?* He looked around, and everything else looked normal, if excessively bright.

“Amanda, where the hell are you?” he said in a voice which felt a whole lot louder than he knew it was. *Ow.* “What the hell did you do to me?” He listened for a response, but heard none. “Amanda?”

He looked over at the night stand by the bed. Her purse was gone. *So she drugs me up and then leaves. What the hell?* He sat down on the bed as he fought off another wave of nausea. *Oh god.*

Something tugged at his brain. *Oh, the leaf.* He staggered back over to the floor and picked up the leaf. *Where the hell did this come from?*

His earpiece rang. *Crap.* “Answer.”

“Good morning, gentlemen and women. This is Ryan.” A cacophony of voices greeted him, which he ignored until he heard the voice of his direct superior, the Senior VP of Sales.

“Good morning, Ben, I’ve got good news on the European front...” he stopped as the voice interrupted him.

“What bad news?” His heart sank. *That b—tard, Pierre! That little frog sold me out.* The voice continued.

“I’m sorry?” He dropped the leaf, which twiddled gently to the ground.

“No, I can’t. I mean, I can, certainly, but that’s short notice...” His heart began to race.

“Right. Dallas. Tomorrow morning. I’ll see you then.” The earpiece clicked off and he stood for a minute in stunned silence. Then, he ran to the bathroom and vomited.

As Ryan stepped off the plane after his eight hour flight, he had to fight off hyperventilating. He hadn’t been able to get in touch with Amanda before he left, and he realized how much he relied on her presence to keep him sane. *You’re not going to get fired, you’re not going to get fired, you’re not going to get fired,* he kept repeating in his head over and over.

Hoisting his bag over his shoulder, he walked briskly down the concourse. After fighting the crowds, he arrived outside and hailed a cab. He gave the cabbie the address and then closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest. *G—damnit, this can’t get any worse. This just can’t get any f—king worse.*

He opened his eyes and looked out the window to his right. Perched on top of a small blue and yellow brick building was a fly the size of a large truck; it fluttered its wings in the breeze and

then rubbed its forelegs together. [Image 4] “Oh, Jesus!” Ryan screamed as he dove off the seat and pressed himself to the floor.

The cabbie laughed, “First time in Texas, sir? You’ll get used to them.”

“No, actually, I left thirty years ago to get away from them.”

“Oh, well, don’t worry, sir, that’s a house fly. It’s the horse flies that you have to watch out for.”

“Horse flies are demons. My father was killed by one.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ryan was quiet for a moment. Then he carefully climbed off the floor and stared out the window at the giant insect. “No, it’s alright. I just haven’t thought about it in a while. He was a cop, you know.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah – it was just after they started growing big, after all the frogs died off.”

“Global warming has killed a lot of things off.”

“Global warming is just a...never mind,” he paused and took a deep breath. He stared out the window again as the building with the giant fly disappeared from sight behind another building. “So we lived on this big, fishing lake northeast of here, and frogs had just died off, and the insects had just started to grow to huge sizes, and my father was on patrol, and this giant horse fly just came out of nowhere. Bit his head right off.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

“I was, too.”

He tried to call Amanda from the cab, but there was no answer. His stomach lurched. Did she say that she was dying? Did she really say that she loved him, or was that part of the hallucination, too? On the plane, he had convinced himself that it was the latter, but now he wasn’t sure.

After the cab dropped him off, Ryan spent a good ten minutes staring up at the office tower. *S—t*, he thought, finally. *Might as well get this over with.*

His boss’ secretary hustled him into the office as soon as she saw him, and the Senior VP of Sales shook his hand warmly. “Thanks for coming in, sit down.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said as he sank into the plush leather chair. His boss sat down at his cherry wood desk, flanked by a panoramic view of the Dallas skyline. Ryan glanced out at it for a moment, and it made him uncomfortable.

“Get you a drink?”

“Am I going to need one?” Ryan replied with a laugh.

His boss smiled uncomfortably, and then took a deep breath. “Ryan, we’ve been doing some thinking, and we’re going to take a different tack with this global warming thing.”

“Oh?”

“The European governments aren’t responding to the myth angle any longer.”

“Ok.”

“We’ve decided to acknowledge global warming.”

“What?” That idea ran counter to everything the industry had espoused for the last thirty years. “But we’ve spent billions on that strategy.”

“Yes, yes. But you know just as well as I do that sometimes you have to change strategies in order to catch your opponent off guard.”

“I know – but what about all of those experts, and all of the studies?”

“I’m sure they can get jobs experting something else. We’re planning on closing down the Institute for Climate Research at the end of the fiscal year.”

“Wow. Ok. Well, what’s our new strategy?”

“Well, our new strategy will be to offer compensation packages to these governments in exchange for long term contracts. Build them new refineries, clean up their shorelines – that sort of thing.”

“So, in effect, we’ll be bribing them.”

“Well, essentially, yes.”

“Well, ok. We can make adjustments. I’ll have to cancel the current marketing campaign, but I don’t think it’ll take too long to implement a new one. I’ve already got focus groups lined up...” A wave of his boss’ hand stopped him.

“Well, you see, Ryan, you’re part of the old guard – part of the old strategy, if you will.” He took another deep breath, “And we don’t see you fitting in to this new one.”

Ryan's eyes narrowed, "Who do you see fitting in?"

"Well, Pierre has already presented a very detailed and innovative plan. We think he has the vision to get Europe back on track."

His chest tightened as he desperately fought the urge to vomit. "So that's why you called me here?"

"Yes, I always find that it's best to do these things in person."

"I see."

"You've made us a lot of money over the years, Ryan, so we've arranged a very generous compensation package for you. Think of it as an early retirement. Hell, I almost wish it were me getting this deal," he said with a stilted laugh.

"Almost."

"Almost."

Ryan nodded and pressed his lips together. After staring out the window at the skyline for a minute, he finally replied, "Ok, thank you." He stood up, shook his former boss' hand, he wandered to the elevator in a daze.

"Call Amanda," he said to his earpiece as the elevator descended to ground level. The line rang, but she didn't answer. *Come on, you g—damn hippie, pick up the phone.* He exited the building and waited for her to answer. After twelve rings, he hung up. He stood there in the middle of the sidewalk, in front of the tallest building in Dallas; people rushed past him – the lifeblood of the city flowing through its veins.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a solitary leaf floating through the air above the crowd. It drifted lazily toward him, occasionally tumbling in the wind. Eventually, he was able to reach up and pluck it from the air: a red ash.

He stared at the leaf as people crushed past him. Finally, he drew a deep breath, clutched the leaf to his chest, and then stepped to the curb to hail a cab.

"Can you take me to Lake Lavon?" he asked the man who finally stopped to pick him up.

The cabbie looked at his watch, "Sure man, you can be my last fare of the day." After Ryan seated himself, the cabbie pulled away from the curb, and then looked in his rearview mirror. "You going fishing?"

Ryan chuckled – the lake had been one of the most popular fishing spots in the area when he was a kid. "No, I used to live there. I want to go back."

“Ah – you live in town?”

“No – right on the lake.”

“Oh,” the cabbie was silent for a moment. “How long has it been since you been back?”

“Thirty years.”

“Right on. I’m not sure how to tell you this, but they tore down all of the houses and raised the water level of the lake about a year ago. Said it was to hedge against drought caused by global warming.”

Ryan was quiet for a long time before he responded, “Well, just get me as close as you can.”

Two hours later, the cabbie dropped Ryan off near the new edge of the lake. He hadn’t been lying. They had raised the water level by about four feet, which meant that most of the neighborhood he had grown up in was now underwater.

He wandered for a while before he found a man who rented rowboats to the fishermen. “It’s getting late,” the man said. “Are you sure you want to head out now?”

“Yes,” he replied quietly, “I’m just out for some sightseeing.”

The man looked at him with a puzzled expression, but rented him a boat anyway. Ryan chose a small white rowboat and began to paddle out to where his house used to stand. A gentle breeze tousled his hair and brushed against his skin. It took him nearly an hour to reach his destination, by which time the sun rode low on the horizon, throwing long shadows over the lake.

An overturned, rusted-out tug lay on its side right where his house used to stand. [Image 1] He remembered watching the tug as a child as it made its near-daily runs to pull broken-down fishing boats back to the docks at the far end of the lake. Now, it was the one in need of rescue.

He dropped the anchor overboard and quickly climbed out onto the tug. As he stood on top, he looked out at what used to be his backyard. Everything was gone except for one thing: a lonely ash, devoid of nearly all foliage. Water circled its trunk, a few yellowed leaves populated the high branches, and a single red leaf hung near the water.

He choked back a sob as the solitary red leaf fell from the tree. It bobbed on the surface of the water for a moment, and Ryan was about to jump in after it, but then it began a slow journey, floating toward him, carried along by the ripples caused by the breeze. He clambered down the far side of the tug, nearly losing his footing twice, and grabbed the leaf.

For a long while, he cried. Two giant dragonflies danced over the surface of the lake in the distance as he held his face in his hands, sobbing. “I’m sorry,” he whispered over and over again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

After he stopped crying, he sat in silence until the sun finished its journey behind the horizon, and then he slipped on his earpiece. “Directory assistance,” he spoke quietly. Thirty seconds later, a voice sounded in his ear.

“Lavon Lake, Texas, please.”

“Yes, you can help me by connecting me to a landscaper. I need to transplant a tree.”