

The Loser ● ● ●

By

B. H. James

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... I like B.H. James' "The Loser" for three reasons: the concept, the dialogue, and the tightness with which he writes.*

Bob Sanders is a man who shows up to work one morning without shoes. He is a man who loses things. He is, ultimately, a loser. James creates such a wonderful little concept to act as the vehicle for the point of his story. A man surrounded by loss, that has such a standoff-ish response and cavalier attitude for losing things, and he doesn't see it until it is too late. His loss erodes the foundations of his life that weren't very strong to begin with.

There is something to be said about dialogue that works on two levels. James doesn't waste a word:

"What makes it any of your business?" Bob said.

"It's all of our businesses," the new IT guy said. "We all have to do our work. And none of us wants to do our work while looking at your...at your body...your shirtless body."

"So don't look," Bob said.

These lines are snappy – literally – full of vitriol and paint a perfect picture of a man who is ready to lose everything in face of others until he finally realizes that he's lost himself.

My favorite part about this piece is the use of language. Every word, every line, each little break between sections all have purpose. I find that to be one of the more quintessential talents of a solid writer. How to make each line drive the point of the story forward. How to tighten up the dialogue to create an image through subtext and not merely just words that people are saying. James has crafted a well-done story.

To make too easy of a line, you would be the loser for not reading this story.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

The new IT guy didn't know Bob's name, so he called him Bud.

"Hey, Bud," the new IT guy said. "It looks like you're missing your shirt."

"What's it to you?" Bob said.

"Well," the new IT guy said. "I just thought you should know."

"Don't you think I know I'm not wearing a shirt?" Bob said.

“So what do you plan to do about it?” the new IT guy said.

“I plan to do my job,” Bob said. “That’s what.”

“I don’t think you can do that,” the new IT guy said.

“Do what?” Bob said.

“Work,” the new IT guy said. “With no shirt.”

THE LOSER

Bob Sanders, on Wednesday, went to work without shoes. Just in his socks.

Nobody at work said anything about it. Bob was a standoffish guy. No one said much to him anyway. Bob told himself that he didn’t mind it that way.

Monday it had been his phone. He’d set it down somewhere, but couldn’t remember where. He hadn’t spoken to his wife or kids in two days. The week before, he’d lost his keys and hadn’t been home since.

When they’d moved in, Bob’s wife, Linda, had hung a placard with little hooks on the wall by the front door. The placard had the word Keys on it. Linda had said to Bob, “This is where we put our keys. And this spot here, by the stairs, is where we put our shoes. And here is where we put our wallets.”

The placard had come down when they painted, and Bob had never put it back up. Besides, Bob wasn’t the kind of person who came home and hung his keys on a hook. He was a man of the moment. A man of action. Things landed where they landed.

Linda wasn’t even Bob’s wife anymore. A month earlier, Bob had lost his wedding ring. Had taken it off to make a meatloaf and hadn’t seen it since.

On Thursday, when Bob came to work without a shirt, someone finally said something.

The person who said something was the new IT guy. The new IT guy walked up to Bob's desk and said, "Hey, Bud."

The new IT guy didn't know Bob's name, so he called him Bud.

"Hey, Bud," the new IT guy said. "It looks like you're missing your shirt."

"What's it to you?" Bob said.

"Well," the new IT guy said. "I just thought you should know."

"Don't you think I know I'm not wearing a shirt?" Bob said.

"So what do you plan to do about it?" the new IT guy said.

"I plan to do my job," Bob said. "That's what."

"I don't think you can do that," the new IT guy said.

"Do what?" Bob said.

"Work," the new IT guy said. "With no shirt."

"What makes it any of your business?" Bob said.

"It's all of our businesses," the new IT guy said. "We all have to do our work. And none of us wants to do our work while looking at your...at your body...your shirtless body."

"So don't look," Bob said.

The new IT guy went and got the new HR guy. Everyone but Bob was new.

The new HR guy said to Bob, "Hello, Bob."

The new HR guy knew Bob's name. They had just spoken the day before, about Bob not wearing any shoes.

"Hello, Bob," the new HR guy said, smiling. The new HR guy always smiled when he talked, no matter what he was saying.

“It looks like we have another problem, Bob,” the new HR guy said.

“I’m just trying to do my work,” Bob said.

“That’s great, Bob,” the new HR guy said. “It just seems like you’ve forgotten your shirt today.”

“I lost it,” Bob said.

“Dang it,” the new HR guy said. “And still no shoes?”

“Lost,” Bob said.

“Hm,” the new HR guy said. “Maybe you can call someone?”

“I lost my phone,” Bob said.

“Oh, no!” the new HR guy said. “Well maybe if we can get ahold of your wife somehow, she can help.”

“I lost her, too,” Bob said.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the new HR guy said. “But the bottom line is that I can’t let you stay here at work, doing your work, if you’re not fully dressed.”

“I won’t bother anyone,” Bob said.

“Oh, I’m sure not,” the new HR guy said. “But you know what they say: no shirt, no shoes, no etcetera. Why don’t you just head back home and we’ll try again tomorrow.”

“I can’t go home,” Bob said.

“Why’s that?” the new HR guy said.

“I lost it,” Bob said.

“Darn,” the new HR guy said. “Well, let me see then. I’ll go make some calls and see if I can find someone who can help.”

“I don’t want help,” Bob said. “I just want to work.”

“Let me go make some calls and see what I can figure out,” the new HR guy said.

The new HR guy called the police. They came right away.

The police asked Bob his name, his birthday, his address, his phone number, but Bob didn't have any of it. It was all in his wallet, and Bob couldn't remember when he'd last seen his wallet.

The police put Bob into their car. Bob figured they were taking him to jail, but instead they took him to a house. On the way up the front walk, one of the officers handed Bob a shirt and a pair of shoes.

Inside the house was a woman, sitting on a sofa and leaning forward, her elbows on her knees. On the sofa with her were two children. The woman and the children looked up at Bob nervously.

“Good luck,” the first officer said, and then turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Bob asked.

The second officer, the one who had given Bob the shirt and the shoes, whispered, “This woman. She lost her husband. The kids lost their father.”

“He passed away?” Bob said.

“No,” the second officer said. “Just lost.”

“Oh,” Bob said. “But why did you bring me here?”

“Well,” the second officer said. “It works out kind of perfectly. Doesn't it?”

Bob looked at the woman and the children and then back at the officer. “But I want *my* family.”

The first officer tipped his head back and sighed.

“It's too late for that,” the second officer said.

Bob looked at his new family again and then whispered to the second officer, “But what if none of this works out?”

“What’ve you got to lose?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“The Loser” is my ninth published Bob Sanders story. Bob is a fictional version of me. Every morning, before leaving for work, I have a ritual wherein I walk from room to room to room collecting all of my things: keys, wallet, phone, glasses, shoes. As I drove to work one morning, without my glasses, which I couldn’t find, the first sentence of this story presented itself. That weekend, I had lost my wedding ring. As I drove along, squinting, the sentences kept coming. I just needed to arrive at work and find a pen and write it all down. Stylistically, this story is influenced by the fabulist/surrealist fiction of Kafka and Borges.*

AUTHOR BIO: I graduated from University of Nebraska-Omaha’s MFA program in 2010. My first novel, *Parnucklian for Chocolate*, was published by Red Hen Press in 2013 and was a finalist for the 2014 PEN Center USA Literary Award in Fiction. The novel was also included in *Foreword Reviews* Summer 2013 Debut Fiction Feature.

My wife, Elizabeth James, and I are also co-authors of *A Sea of Troubles: Pairing Literary and Informational Texts to Address Social Inequality* and of *Method to the Madness: A Common Core Guide to Creating Critical Thinkers through the Study of Literature*, which were published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2021 and 2016, respectively.

My stories and essays have also appeared in various journals, including *F(r)iction*, *KGB Bar Literary Review*, and *Tulsa Review*.