

The Catastrophe

The catastrophe described here actually happened; only the names have been changed to protect the guilty.



One icy winter afternoon in upstate NY, the day after Christmas, Mary and Ed, visiting from California, went to a large rural movie theater. They ordered some popcorn and a pair of Cokes. The holiday rush had consumed all but the gigantic 24-ounce containers, and the concession stand was out of lids, so they made their way through the crowd with two brimming, wobbly plastic containers and serious trepidation. The gods were smiling on them, however, and they managed to get through the crowd and into their seats without spilling a drop. They took turns holding their drinks and wriggling out of their coats, and at last leaned back in their seats to enjoy the show.

In the next row was an attractive young couple who were obviously deeply in love. The girl sat directly in front of Ed, her long frizzy black hair curled into the fur-trimmed hood of her winter parka. As the packed theater gradually grew quiet, she and her boyfriend were dreamily staring into each other's eyes. Periodically, the girl would raise her hand like a princess while they both admired her new engagement ring. Mary and Ed smiled at each other. Although they were several years older, they'd only just been married a few months before and their hearts were full of empathy.

The lights went down and a few previews played. The young couple remained absorbed in their expanding love and diminutive diamond.

When the feature opening credits appeared, something strange happened. Perhaps it was because Ed had been concentrating so long on not spilling his three-pint Coke, which required a firm grip, but, lacking the reinforcement of a lid, tended to squeeze into an oval, which raised the bubbling surface right to the edge. Or maybe it was a lingering chill from the icy weather outside. Ed would never know why it happened, even though he and Mary replayed the event many times in the years to come.

Whatever the cause, Ed's right hand spazzed—one of those lightning-quick involuntary large-muscle twitches that happen as you're falling asleep. Unfortunately, his right hand was holding the oversized Coke, and to his horror, almost all of the brown liquid was ejected straight up out of the cup, about a foot into the air, a veritable column of quivering sugar liquid. Ed jerked back in his seat, reflexively spreading his knees to avoid its descent.

But there had been just enough forward momentum in his twitch to carry this fearsome, slow-motion Coke-thing a few inches forward, so that when it came down a half-second later, instead of splashing all over his lap, it landed neatly in the girl's powder blue hood, filling it to the fur trim with fizzing syrupy sodapop.

Ed sat for a second, in shock. To his right, Mary stared with her mouth open. Ed looked down into the big white cup. Only a few ounces remained at the bottom—the rest was pooled in the girl's hood. Ed could see little brown waves rippling across the surface. Tiny bubbles were collecting around the edges of the murky cola pond.

Ed's mind filled with conjectures about how waterproof the hoods on some nylon coats might be, in this climate. Perhaps Cola doesn't pass through rip-stop nylon? Nevertheless, 20 ounces of Coke were now fully contained in the girl's parka hood, and her generous twist of thick black ponytail was now slowly sinking below the surface, utterly saturated, Coke-logged. The whole mess probably weighed a couple of pounds.

Mary and Ed looked at each other in awe. Ed was thankful that he wasn't soaked with Coke; amazingly, there wasn't a single drop on him. At the same time, Ed was so astonished at what had just happened that he couldn't move. For several minutes, they both sat in shock, watching the girl's long hair slowly sink into the cola, wondering if the liquid would splosh over into the fake fur trim on the parka.

The entire event had taken only a few seconds. No one else had noticed.

Ed turned to Mary and whispered. "If I tap her on the shoulder, she'll turn around," he said. "Then her hair will drag it onto her neck, and the cold Coke will run down her back."

Mary nodded.

"Then she'll scream," Ed said. "She'll jump up, and turn around, and sling Coke from her pony tail onto everybody nearby."

Mary nodded. "What should we do?" she whispered, very softly.

Ed shrugged. He had no idea.

Somebody behind them made a shushing sound.

The girl and her boyfriend were staring at the screen, oblivious. Amazingly, she hadn't heard or felt anything, and to Ed's temporary relief, she had not yet moved.

For the next half hour, Mary and Ed were barely aware of the film, trying to come up with a way to silently alert the girl without making things worse, and without causing a commotion in the crowded theater. As they pondered and whispered, the couple in front of them remained absolutely still, engrossed in the movie and each other.

Eventually, as the Coke slowly congealed, the girl's voluminous hair submerged into the dark pool within her hood. Ed and Mary allowed their attention to return to the big screen, and soon they too were engrossed in the film. An hour passed. The Coke in the girl's hood was by now a mass of hair-reinforced goop, miraculously contained by the nylon, but surely having soaked well into the artificial down.

The lights came up, and the audience began to move. Ed and Mary looked at each other for inspiration. This was their last chance to warn the girl not to turn her head, and to offer apologies and some cash for the dry-cleaning bill. Everyone was getting up around them, and they stood, but before they could move, the young couple had slipped down their row into the aisle. The girl had still not noticed the syrupy time-bomb lurking at the nape of her bare neck.

Ed and Mary struggled to pursue them, but the patrons in their aisle were too slow, and the young couple disappeared into the lobby. A few moments later, Ed and Mary watched helplessly as the couple crossed the parking lot and climbed into a blue pickup that roughly matched the girl's Coke-saturated hood. She had still not turned her head, or sensed

the soggy weight that would soon bring a scream to her throat and a cold, sticky deluge down the inside of her coat.



In the years that followed, Ed and Mary retold the story of the column of Coke they had accidentally poured onto this anonymous girl, just engaged, and how strange it was that the entire misfortune, though caused by Ed's twitching hand, had brought them not the slightest inconvenience other than a few minutes of horrified distraction as the movie, now long forgotten, began. Somewhere in upstate New York, another couple tells their friends of the horrible prank inflicted upon them in a movie theater, when they were first engaged, and they speculate as to which of their mischievous acquaintances had done the cruel deed.

