

a line  
between desert  
and ocean  
father couldn't have done it  
in the sitcom





# Friends

Nate Mancuso

*Setting: 20ish couple on first date at NYC restaurant circa 1996:*

“So did you watch *Friends* this week?” Jen gushes immediately after we’re seated while the hostess walks away (I’m pretty sure that about one out of every three girls I know is named Jen, and she always had a friend named Meg) on our first *real* date (getting drunk and hooking up at a bar last weekend probably doesn’t qualify as a “date”).

“I think so,” I reply. It’s happening again. I cannot escape this fucking show. It’s like Pennywise the Clown.

“You told me last Friday night that you that you watch *Friends* every week!” Jen exclaims with a touch of playful accusation.

I don’t remember anything about last Friday night including what we spoke about or any of your personal details, I think to myself while smiling at Jen, I only know your name because you wrote it on a bar napkin I found crumpled in my pocket on Saturday afternoon.

“Oh yeah, of course!” I lie, feigning all the enthusiasm I can muster.

“I love that show, it is SO FUNNY!” Jen giggles. “So anyway, like I’m totally Monica, my roommate Amy is *sooo* Rachel, and my other roommate Meg could literally be Phoebe’s twin!”

“Wow cool, what a coincidence,” I reply. I’m in pain now, desperately looking around for the waiter to come take our drink order like a wounded infantry soldier looking for a field medic.

“So what guy are you?” Jen asks with an impish grin.

“Huh?” I’m confused and caught off guard by this question.

“What guy on *Friends* are you? You know, out of Joey, Ross and Chandler?” Jen is exasperated and impatient. I have a strange feeling she’s asked this question at least fifty times over the past two years.

As much as I want to spit out a wiseass retort—like “I’m the mysterious next-door neighbor Jeffrey from Milwaukee, whose apartment smells like human decay and is always chasing his naked boyfriends down the hallway with a power drill and a hypodermic needle”—I simply can’t do it. Jen’s face looks angelic when she talks about *Friends*—lit up and glowing like a little girl sitting cross-legged beside the tree in front of her beaming parents while unwrapping her presents on Christmas morning. Cracking a joke right now would be like popping a kid’s balloon or stealing his ice cream cone at a three-year old birthday party. I bite the bullet and stifle it.

After about five seconds of deliberating Jen’s question with all visible indicia of deep thought and studious contemplation (furrowed brow, pursed lips, etc.), I announce my verdict: “Well... I guess if the *Friends* guys were a mixed drink, I’d be an ounce of Joey with a splash of Chandler and a dash of Ross.”

Jen looks puzzled. “Oh, so you’re a combination of all three guys?”

“Well yes,” I explain patiently, “but an *asymmetrical* combination—like an ounce is more than a splash which is more than a dash; the exact ratio is critical.” Disclaimer: I never really knew the meaning or proper usage of the word “asymmetrical”—just that people who say it with confidence earn the immediate respect and admiration of their peers.

Jen raises her eyebrows while looking down at her menu. Oh no. She thinks I’m weird. I hate this part.



After studying her menu for a few minutes, Jen looks back up at me with a smile.

Oh Jesus F, dude, please no more *Friends* talk! I become flush and begin to sweat. Our drink order seems to be taking forever.

“So Meg’s buddy Eileen is bartending at Mulligan’s tonight, you wanna go there after dinner?” Jen asks.

I feel like I’ve been rescued... like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away* sans the scraggly beard and pet volleyball (and spearfishing prowess).

“Awesome!” I respond with genuine delight, realizing this date has been salvaged.

*Setting: Present day, 28 years later:*

“So do you like your new roommates?” I ask my daughter, who just began her freshman year of college.

“Yeah, they’re cool. We’re actually all in the living room watching this old TV show from like twenty years ago. OMG dad, it is SO FUNNY!”

“What show?” I ask reflexively, not even suspecting...

“*Friends!*” she exclaims.

I go silent and stare forward at the wall with a blank expression while my arm slackens and I drop my phone to the ground. *Pennywise is back.*









# American Sentences

Melissa Lemay

Parents used to tell children “there are starving children” in Africa.



Children have easier access to guns, drugs, and crime than healthy food.











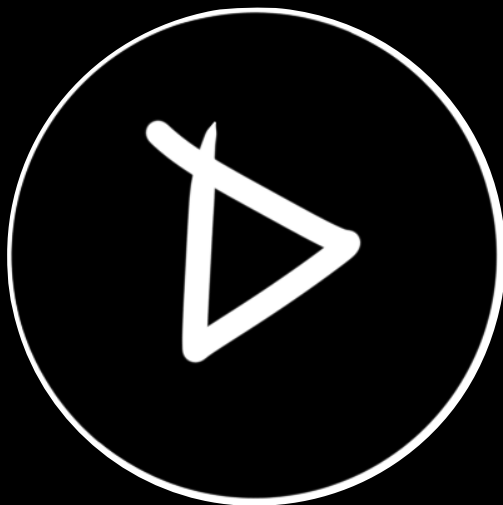


## IKEA Weather

Reza Jabrani

Cloudy with a chance of  
breakups over Swedish meatballs.





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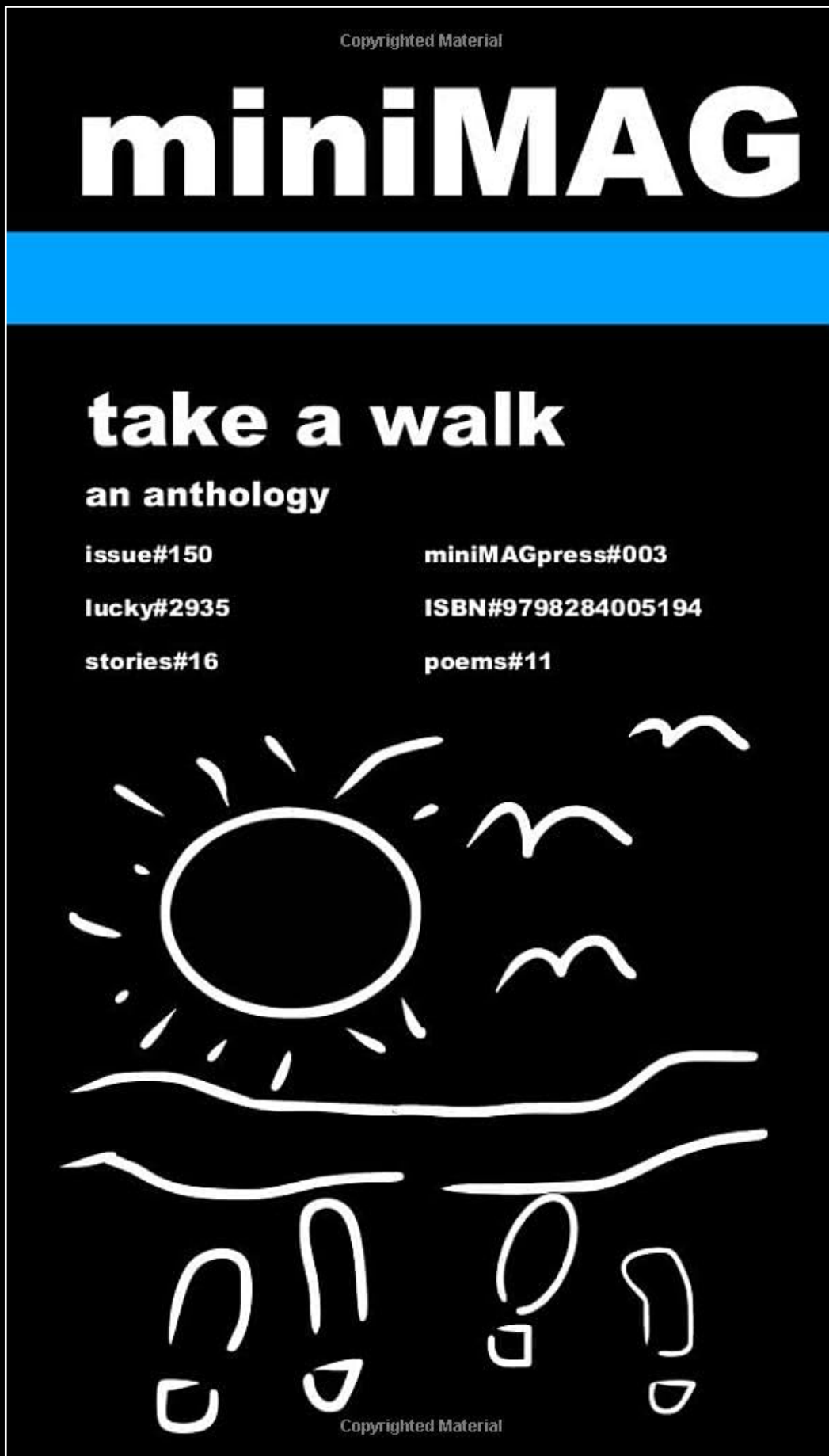
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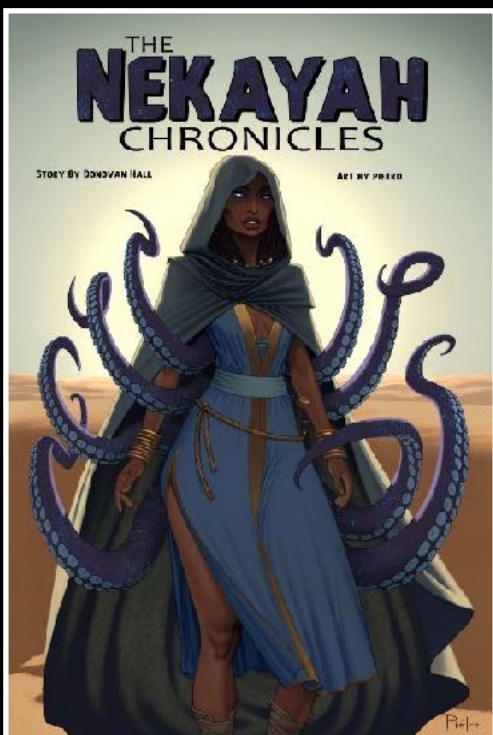
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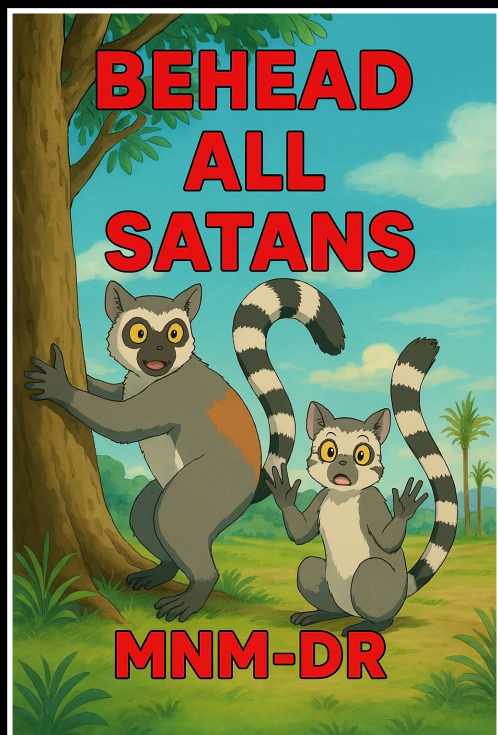
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