

Spring 5-18-2012

You're Among Friends

Denise Dirks

University of New Orleans, denise_dirks@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dirks, Denise, "You're Among Friends" (2012). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1432.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1432>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

5-18-2012

You're Among Friends

Denise Dirks

You're Among Friends

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts
Concentration in Creative Writing - Fiction

by

Denise Dirks

B.A. University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh
M.A. University of New Orleans

May 2012

Acknowledgements

Family, of course, and friends, too—in both homes, Neenah and New Orleans. Endless conversations at Parkview, at Perkins. Tremendous effort on the part of many acquaintances and classmates to make sense of much drivel on the author's part.

Many thanks to the University of New Orleans CWW workshop, in its official and unofficial activities, for getting me started and keeping me going. From my C3W Kiki to my brah The Circumstance—you guys stay saucy. You keep life interesting.

Thanks to my professors at the CWW, and Barb Johnson in particular, for helping me with so many things along the way.

And thanks to Wisconsin. The old tourism slogan read “Discover Wisconsin: You're Among Friends.” Inviting, but in such a strange way. Like the place I'm from.

Table of Contents

Rat's Nest	1
If You Blink.....	21
Lights In the Sky.....	36
Get A Leg Up	58
Funeral Hotdish.....	75
In A Box	83
Author's Notes for an Important Story about Heartbreak.....	101
Vita	115

Rat's Nest

for Allie Dirks

The rats were back again this spring and nothing Eileen did would get rid of them. Each night she lay awake next to Vic until the leaves rattling outside turned into the minute scratches of rat feet in the walls. When she switched on the light in a dark room, the darkness took a second too long to retreat—long enough to take the shape of vermin scurrying out of sight.

Their daughter Maribeth was the one at the Boogeyman age, but Maribeth didn't fear the Boogeyman. Eileen did. Everyone did, everyone in town was afraid of the Boogeyman that had lived among them. That evil man, that Dickie Burmeister. The Boogeyman in their own backyard. Folks were too caught up thinking about that to notice any of the little twitches Eileen had picked up. They would never notice if anything has changed with her. She's not sure if.

Dickie was dead now. He couldn't hurt anybody any more. But Vic had a new habit of looking over his shoulder, even while he did the milking, ever since his neighbor got found out a killer. The town was more social but more suspicious. Church potlucks grew, filled with more dishes and less laughter. People didn't rush, not like they used to, to shake hands with the summer families when they came in.

*

Vic got back from town with the groceries and came in the kitchen where Eileen sat at the table with her morning toast. "Take a look," Vic said, and set the newspaper in front of her. Coffee perked on the stove. The smell mixed with the one from the spice cake in the oven. He tied me down, Van Boxtel tells police. More remains found in Lake Waukegan.

"I don't need to see that," Eileen said. She folded the paper in half, turned those typed-up screams in on themselves, and pushed it across the kitchen table with the back of her hand.

"No, maybe not," Vic said. He sat down and buried his head in his hands. "Run into Lenny on the way back from town. He says the hotel's still full of reporters. Christ." He looked up at her. "You know they're bound to come back for more interviews. The unsuspecting neighbors. Did we ever see anything unusual." He went back to digging at his hair. Eileen wished he wouldn't—he'd only thin it out more. It made him look old.

Eileen rose to peek in at the cake. Still wiggling in the middle. She sat back down. "I suppose they will."

"Can you handle it?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to."

"Well," Vic said, getting up, "long as they keep away from Maribeth. That's the important thing. That sonofabitch from that magazine, the goddam nerve. Coming up the back way, coming up to her in the sandbox, asking about her *babysitter*."

Eileen poured each of them a coffee. The cups were all stained inside. Ought to scrub those out. "I'll keep her safe."

Vic coughed. "They'll want to come in and look around, too. See if we've got any skull-bowls up on *our* shelves."

She wanted to touch him. That would quiet him. But it seemed like too much trouble. "I won't let them in, then."

She never looked for long at the newspaper photos of what their neighbor had done to those boys. She didn't stare at the dots-on-paper version of the newly infamous rocking-horse. Dickie had grown up in the house next door. The toys in the upstairs playroom at Dickie's house

had all been his. How horrid—the killer who toys with his victims. The pictures tried to be graphic, but they didn't show how the handgrips had been grimed with years of blood and sweat, the one against which ropes had strained so often for some desperate young man to get free that they'd worn deep grooves. When she'd been in the playroom, she'd run a finger through the grooves, compelled by something she still didn't quite understand—she hadn't touched any other thing in the place, not by urge. Eileen poked the top of the cake; it didn't spring back, so just a minute more. A little time to scrub the stains out of the coffee cups. She should have told Vic to pick up some borax for her while he was in town. She washed her hands first. She could still see her fingertips on those handles, pale against wood nearly stained black.

Vic had bought Maribeth a play horse for her last birthday that turned out to be just like Dickie's. Eileen had stitched together a yarn mane with ribbons, Vic had glued it on. Maribeth rocked back and forth for hours, plaiting the mane, pretending that she was a princess and her horse was her unicorn best friend. She told secrets to it. Eileen had snuck through the back field and in through the shed door—police hadn't thought to lock that one. She'd gone all through the house. Through the filthy kitchen, through the clean front parlor, all that nicely-arranged furniture dressing up the only room she'd ever been in at Dickie's house before, then up the stairs, past moldering clothes and rusty tools and bits and harnesses, all labeled with tags. Funny how evidence tags looked just like sale tags down at the store. Dickie's horse was upstairs in that hideous playroom. She stared down at it. She could smell Dickie's boys on it.

How many boys? They'd found fourteen now, if Lake Waukegan had coughed up another, but there might be more and they'd never know now that he'd gone and hanged himself in his jail cell. Dickie had lived alone, he'd had the run of his twenty acres and nobody could dig up all of it; anyway, he had the Miller farm on the far side of the property and the Millers had always kept

pigs. Dickie wouldn't have hesitated with the leftovers of the boys themselves. They were just things, Dickie was no stranger to hard work, and he knew when to put away his toys. "Fun is fun and done is done." That's what Dickie had always told Maribeth when he was over for supper and it was time for her to go to bed. Dickie always brought something nice, a sack of pie apples, a bottle of the cherry wine he'd picked up on a trip to Door County. Sometimes a Coloring Fun Time book for Maribeth. He'd bounce her on his knee while Vic smoked his pipe and they chewed over the latest from the old fogies down at the store. Eileen would do the dishes and listen to the radio. Maribeth would torture Dickie with drawings, questions, demands that he watch her do handstands and somersaults. When Eileen finished up, she'd call for Maribeth to get ready for bed.

"That's right," Dickie would say. "Fun is fun and done is done." Maribeth would give Dickie a goodnight kiss before bounding upstairs to change into her nightgown.

Dickie was dead. He couldn't tell them anything. But Eileen knew what he'd done with the bodies, because it made too much sense for it not to have happened. All those solid young muscles gone slack and heavy, body rolled down from the rocking horse or the narrow child's bed, untied from one of the iron hoops Eileen had seen mounted to the playroom walls—Dickie was a handy man, could rig up anything you liked, could shim the house or rock-pick the field or drive to town to find a few young hands—body stubborn as wet clay, lugged into the back shed. An ax, a wheelbarrow with wheels greased quiet, a dark night. He'd got rid of them like any other leftovers on the farm. A ragdoll that wept for its life and bled onto the seat of a rocking horse, well, once you cut it up, probably it looked like any other slop in the pig trough.

The cake was ready to come out. Through the window, Maribeth twirled between sheets hung out to dry. Not a single cloud in the sky, a little breeze. Beautiful day out. Maybe they'd

have supper outside on the picnic table, they hadn't done that in a while.

The Millers' pigs always came up well, nice feeders. Fetched a good price in Dubuque every time, Vic said. Lenny Miller always held one or two back to butcher and smoke himself, and he remembered the family each Easter. He'd drive up with a ham propped in the bucket seat of the truck. He'd always chuckle and tell Eileen what this one's name had been. "Happy Easter! This here's Bill. I'm betting he'll be mighty tasty." Eileen wondered if Dickie had known any Bills. There had been a Tom, a Gerald, a Samuel, two Michaels, and of course the Van Boxtel boy who'd gotten away and had staggered up their own front steps, naked, bleeding, crying. Oh the mess he had made of their new carpet.

She always saved aside a little of the grease. Ham grease, best thing for rat traps. Easter resurrects more than Lenny Miller's sense of humor. It brings the rats back into the house, up through the cellar and into the breadbox, the potato bin. Floury rat tracks across the kitchen counter. Every year it seems to get worse. They always find new places to dig into, to chew through, to ruin.

She'd wanted to tell Vic she'd gone to Dickie's house, but she didn't at first and now it was too late for it to look right to tell him. How could she have told him, anyway? And she could never explain how everything inside was horrible. Horrible. How the banister felt like skin and the paisley kitchen wallpaper made her eyes ache and how she couldn't bring herself to walk directly under the water stains on the ceilings for fear that they might split open and shower her with some fetid liquid. Why did you go there? He would ask her. She wouldn't know what to say.

The cake cooled on a wire rack. Eileen finished her coffee and took the cup to the sink to scrub it. Vic sat at the table, staring at the unopened newspaper. Eileen scrubbed a while. The stains wouldn't come out. Eileen turned the cup in her hands, frowning at it. She scrubbed harder.

*

Eileen hummed in the kitchen, flipping through recipe cards. Having the Schmidts over for supper was just the right idea. Over a month since Dickie had killed himself and finally the reporters were gone and there was a little peace and quiet. She had a big supper planned. Not ham, though. Too early to abide the thought of ham, though it seemed that no one else had thought about what might or might not have gone into the fattening up of the Miller porkers. That was Eileen's own nevermind and she'd have to get over it eventually. Vic loved ham gravy over riced potatoes. But for Walt and Allie Schmidt, that nice venison roast they'd been saving. The last of the corn relish and cranberry sauce they'd put up in the cellar last year. Eileen hated to go down there. The cellar was a wet musty nothing, only good for keeping preserves or sitting in broken-backed kitchen chairs during storms that had that look to them.

They'd had a funnel cloud pass over them once, when Maribeth hadn't hardly been potty-trained and the house was still brand-new to them, forty acres all their own between Black Creek and that nice Dickie Burmeister's house. The clouds had been black and the sky dead yellow. Vic took her hand and they all went down cellar without a word. The air grew thin and electric around them, even in the mildewy damp. Maribeth trembled against her and she and Vic sat, holding hands, waiting for oxygen to fill the air again. The Dahls a mile down lost their barn that night. There had been a church plate dinner to raise the money to rebuild. Eileen had put up three pies. Dickie came, too, with an angel-food cake. Everyone had loved it, Dickie had gone modest and said it was his mother's recipe, there had been a missing boy a month later, a summer boy up at a lakehouse with his family. Searches in the woods, divers in the lake. Nothing. Dickie had

gone on one of the searches. He'd told Vic about it while Maribeth colored in a new book Dickie had got her and Eileen worked on a doily for Vic's mother and shook her head at how awful it must be to lose a child that way. Maribeth had held up her picture for Dickie to see. "That's real nice, sweetie," he'd said. "You did a good job coloring. Try to stay in the lines, though. Be more careful." Advice he hadn't taken, maybe, when he let Frankie Van Boxtel slip out of his bloody ropes and escape. Advice Eileen hadn't taken when it wasn't good enough to just pour the kerosene on the back step, light it, and leave it at that. She'd had to go inside, only to stagger out what felt like hours later, plans forgotten. The upstairs playroom at Dickie's had been a cellar, too. That sour smell, those too many dank corners. Rotten dirt cut off from sunlight was no different than adrenaline and tears soaked into cowboys-and-Indians wallpaper.

Corn relish and cranberry sauce. Eileen breathed through her mouth and tried not to think about rats, tornadoes, black widows, snakes, spaces with no air in them. These chores were dreams set underwater. She plodded down the steps and stood staring, a vague frown on her face, forgetting for a moment what had brought her there. The Schmidts. Dinner. She plucked jars off the shelf.

The rustling noise was faint but unmistakable. Her mouth went dry. She slipped the jars she needed into her apron and reached back into the bottom shelf. She took each jar and set it gently at her feet. Soused herring, stewed tomatoes, pickled eggs. Behind the jars, deep in the shadows, there were multicolored shreds of paper. Scraps of newspaper—stories about Dickie, probably, ad circulars, church bulletins. Eileen could see loops of crayon on some of the other scraps. Coloring Fun Time. In the center, a large rat glaring at her, baring her teeth and panting. Hairless babies clung all around her. A funnel cloud passing over. The vacuum it creates, all the sounds gone. Can't breathe, can't think.

Eileen reached up to a higher shelf for the largest jar, held it high, and brought its end down on the rat's nest, pushing and twisting, grinding. She heard a few thin cries from the babies. The mother screamed and screamed. Eileen pushed harder. Her arm trembled. A final crunch, and the rat was silent.

Eileen pulled the jar away, regarded the squelched bodies and bundle of bloodied paper. "Fun is fun and done is done," she said, as if advising the dead rats. She looked down to the jar she'd used, the last of the dandelion wine Vic had put up before Maribeth was born. Ought to bring it out for supper. Walt Schmidt liked his wine. Eileen was feeling a bit thirsty herself.

There was a thud upstairs. Maribeth cried out from the kitchen. Go up calmly, set jars in the sink to rinse, wipe hands on apron. Maribeth sat in the kitchen doorway, bawling. Eileen brushed her daughter's hair away from the red mark and kissed it softly.

"There," Eileen said. "All better."

*

The kerosene can was in the shed, up on a high shelf so Maribeth couldn't get at it. Eileen took it down, cradled it in her arm. Red edged with rust, light from a naked bulb glinting off the handle. Almost a full gallon. They didn't use it much any more, not since the new electric stove and the oil furnace, but Eileen still remembered how to get a fire going.

She squeezed the handle, felt it in her hand. It was almost fall, almost time for the kids to go down to the edge of town for dump-burning. The girls all sat up in tree branches, the boys crouched behind bushes with their BB guns and .22s, and they waited. Old Sal would get the burn started and everyone would wait for the rats to run out. The boys had a point system all

worked out. Eileen had gone when she was young. She had always cheered the boys on. But she couldn't go back to Dickie's place. They had probably locked the shed door by now. And did she really want to walk back into that place? She did not. The ghosts of those dead boys, the rats in the walls. They had taken the place over by now, surely.

She traced her fingertips down the sides of the can. Fire cleaned; it purified. She pictured herself sitting on the living room couch, Vic lying next to her, his feet in her lap covered with blisters from working in new boots. She had taken her longest needle from the pincushion and run it through the candle flame before piercing each sore. Clean with fire, heal a wound. If someone didn't tend to Vic's blisters, they could get infected.

She heard a rustle behind her and jumped. The cowboys and Indians on the walls in Dickie's playroom had distended and warped with age. Rats burrowed behind their leering faces. She put the can back up on the shelf and went inside.

Vic looked up from the paper.

"You look pale, sweetheart. Are you all right?"

I could hear rats in the walls at Dickie's house, she thought.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just a little tired is all."

"Mm. Well, you ought to get to bed a little early."

"I will."

She sat back down to her sewing. She realized just before bed that she'd forgotten the ammonia. She sent Vic out for it.

*

"I'm thinking of buying it," Vic said.

They were out on the picnic table, probably for the last time this year. Fall already, chilly, leaves mostly gone, and it was getting dark so early now. They had to rush through four o'clock supper to bring everything in before nighttime. The sun was a faint, faraway glow past the fields.

Eileen glanced up from cutting Maribeth's meat. The wind blew a lock of hair in her face, so she couldn't give Vic the look she wanted to. She knew what "it" was; the bank had finally put Dickie's house and lot up for sale, and it was all anyone had been able to talk about after church the last couple of weeks. The tagged evidence had long ago been taken off to the big State Police office in Madison, and the bank had auctioned off the rest of the effects just last month. Nobody Eileen knew had gone to that. Nobody in town was crazy enough to want any of Dickie's possessions. Lenny Miller had told them that Town Hotel had filled up again, this time with ghoulish horrible men who wrote "real crime" stories and people who wore too much black and stared too intently at you. A man from Barnum and Bailey, a man who claimed to be a professor of deviant psychology, everything in-between. They bought up Dickie's spoons and lamps and ceramic figurines, and they'd thrown thousands at what the papers had called Dickie Burmeister's Death Wagon, that old International Harvester truck of his that had taken boys on their last rides. Rumor was it fetched the bank over ten thousand. And now Vic wanted land that at least a few of the bodies that had ridden in that truck were most likely fertilizing.

"Well," Eileen said slowly, "It might be expensive. Those vultures that bought up all Dickie's things might want the land, too."

"You think we'd be outbid?"

It was possible. Somebody who ran a freak show might pay a song for what was really nothing more than a sad old farmhouse that a bad man did bad things in. "Could be."

Vic tapped his fork on his plate, frowning. "Well, my mind's still made up about it. I'll be putting in a bid for it. That land could make us a lot of money."

Maribeth's mouth smacked around a bite of chicken. "Why do we want Dickie's yucky old house, Daddy? Are there still bones in there?"

Eileen tapped a finger on Maribeth's hand. "Manners." She turned back to Vic. "Well, what would we do with it? The cows don't need that much pasture, and I don't know if we could afford that much land *and* more head."

"Not pasture," Vic said. "Not more livestock. We'll lease it out first, make some of the money back, but I could plant. A little hay, maybe seed corn. Dickie used to grow seed corn."

"Well, if you'd just use it all for planting, you'd have to knock down the old house."

"Of course."

Like Old Sal doing dump-burning. Eileen smiled at Vic. He smiled back. "Well, then, I think you ought to go into town and talk to them at the bank. Once we clean the land, there's all kinds of possibilities."

"Clear the land."

"What?"

"You said 'clean.'"

"Well," she said, wiping Maribeth's face with her napkin, "it's pretty much the same."

Vic helped her pick up. He hadn't done that in a long time. And he held the door for her and ushered her in, giving the back of her neck a little rub as he did. She would stay up a little later tonight, stay downstairs with Vic after Maribeth had gone to bed.

*

Of course Maribeth caught that flu from playing with the Millers' piglets. Come home in Len's truck cab, strapped just like a little ham into the seat, dirty fingers wrapped around a sucker. Making mudpies right in the pigpen for all Eileen knew, and then sticking that dirty red lolly in her mouth with pigshit under her fingernails. Jane Miller would have made Maribeth wash up before a treat, but Lenny didn't have good sense like that. Any way it had happened, she'd caught a bug, which meant staying up with her to rinse out the basin when she was sick and combing her sweaty hair to soothe her. Damp rags for her forehead, the gentler light of the kerosene lamp on the bed table, and ice cubes on sticks for treats. Hot water bottles, too. It was below zero outside. Inside was warm, a stuffy room filled with the smells of bile and sweat. Maribeth's sticky gaze followed along as Eileen read to her from fairy-tale books.

She wouldn't let Maribeth back to that pigpen again, not without Jane around. Lenny had no sense. A killer for an ex-neighbor and not two thoughts to rub together. Eileen wondered how Dickie had gotten the boys to go along with. They'd have wanted more than lollipops. Maybe odd jobs on offer, maybe money, maybe just hitched rides. She whispered to Maribeth, stroked her hair. Everything will be all right, you'll feel better soon.

But perhaps not. The skin under Eileen's hand had turned from hot and greasy to hot and papery dry. Maribeth's eyes sparkled as she looked in the corner of the room. "What's that?"

Eileen looked. Shadows, thrown by the old lantern, jittered along the baseboards. "There's nothing there, sweetheart. Just shadows."

"No," Maribeth whispered. "No, I *see* it." She pointed at a spot further along the wall.

Eileen saw the rat sitting on its hindquarters and grooming its face with front paws. Up from the cellar, Coloring Fun Time shreds hanging from its whiskers. Her stomach was ice.

The hand on her daughter's forehead remained still. There's nothing there. "There's nothing there."

"But," Maribeth gasped, "but."

The walls, dim and gray, blossomed into black flowers before her eyes. She could almost see the framed paint-by-numbers horses hung on Dickie's playroom walls, the rusted iron hoops mounted between. The way the tatters of wallpaper had swayed in drafts she couldn't feel. The sounds in the walls. The rats.

Those are shadows. "Those are shadows," she whispered.

"Shadows?"

"Yes." Eileen closed her eyes. "And when they move, it's almost like we can see *things* moving. Big things, little things." Closing in. But only if she let them, and she wouldn't. She stood up. "I'm going to get you some more water." But she walked first toward the corner, willing her steps to sound fearless, menacing. The rat fled into the dark. When Eileen returned, Maribeth's eyes had slipped shut. Had her forehead cooled a bit? Perhaps.

She woke her an hour later, holding aspirin and water out to her. Maribeth took her medicine with her eyes locked on the far wall. "Is there anything there, Mommy?"

Eileen didn't look. "No, dear. Now go back to sleep."

By midnight the fever had gone down considerably. Eileen reached to turn off the lantern, glanced at the wall, and froze. The rat was back, sitting on its hind legs again, watching her. There was nothing there. She might have caught Maribeth's fever. The rat that wasn't there inched closer. Eileen stared without blinking as it drew near, a flicker of lamplight in each of its eyes.

She left the lantern burning and lay down next to her daughter. Just before dawn, she

slept.

*

Demolition. Teardown. Better words than the ones in the Bible like *atonement* or *absolution* or *purification*. She liked the words Vic and the construction men used because they were words that reminded you that cleaning up was hard work. Bible forgot that. Church, too. Raising money for the Dahls' new barn was important, but you had to swing a hammer to get a barn built. And over at Dickie's, well, *purification* wasn't the precise word. You could dip a baby in water and get rid of the little bit of sin clinging to it, but no amount of water would wash Dickie away.

So they tore the house down and Eileen stayed at home while they did. Structure gave way to machines, and maybe no one thought of the poison it must have released when it was torn open, the vapors released by the teeth of a wrecker snapping boards into pieces. She sat in the living room, book forgotten in her lap, and watched the wind shake naked tree branches waiting for spring as she strained to hear the sounds of destruction. She stayed that way until Vic came in the back door expecting lunch. He ate, and she stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders.

"God, don't that feel good," he said.

She smiled. "It's all over?"

"It is. We'll sort through it starting tomorrow. Lot of good material in that house."

"Haul it away," she said, kneading a knot in his neck.

"But, scrap lumber—"

"No. Not even to burn in the fireplace. I don't want it in this house. It's filthy. It's..." She thought about how to say it. "It's a contamination."

He didn't answer.

It took days, and it cost more. Vic grumbled about waste and Eileen pretended not to hear him. The crew hauled everything to the dump, where eventually Sal would burn it and the town kids would come and watch and shoot down the vermin that the flames released.

*

At the sink, scrubbing the cups. Warm enough to open the windows again, to send Maribeth outside to play and finally get some work done in the house. She'd gotten her borax and the cups looked better. But the cups weren't what she needed to do right now. She was stalling. If she kept putting it off it'd never get done. She'd heard the trap snap, the first catch of spring, and she ought to have been happy about it. They were back, they were worse. Ragged holes in the bottoms of cardboard cartons, droppings in the cupboards. She'd tried all the remedies, none of them worked. She couldn't use real poison, good poison like arsenic, it was bad to have around Maribeth, she wasn't a baby any more but always safe, never sorry. And if she started sprinkling poison she'd never stop. No fun is fun and done is done there, no. That kept her from doing it, but only barely.

Arsenic. Sweet powdery poisonous stuff. She hadn't seen any in *Dickie's* pantry. No rat traps, either. He let them live. Rats, not boys. Like called to like.

Going down the stairs, she could hear the rat's thin, metallic cries. Like tinsel being stuffed down her throat. Hard to breathe. Tornadoes in the mind.

Eileen stood at the foot of the stairs. The rat wasn't dead despite being cut nearly in half. Its insides gleamed through damp fur. It had managed to drag itself, trap and all, almost to the

preserve shelves at the far wall. She watched the rat dig its claws into the dirt and heave its body another inch. Dig, heave. Dig, heave. Its midsection pulsed, a bloody, sinewy purple showing with each movement forward.

She'd had to calm the Van Boxtel boy down. He'd been terrified of Vic, although they hadn't known why. He was grown, but that night he'd only been a scared little boy, whimpering, shivering, the little manliness he had all drained out of him and added to the mingled juices of Dickie's dirty playroom. Weeping in their living room, he had climbed into Eileen's lap—well, mostly, he was grown and she only had so much lap—and she had stroked his hair while Vic kept out of sight and called for the Sheriff. She hadn't known who the boy was, where he'd run from, or what had happened to him, but she had held him close. Her fingers had caught once on the wound and he had hissed in breath. She never touched it again, but she parted the hair to look. Nasty. Like he'd been hit on the head with something that had an edge to it. The flat end of a pry-bar, a metal table-leg, something blunt but had also sliced in. The wound had clotted brown on the edges, but it wept in the middle, gleaming purple.

Eileen wheeled around to the stairs and lost her balance. She landed on the basement floor and opened her eyes to see the rat's dead backside, trailing helplessly behind the scrabbling frontside, right in front of her. She screamed with no air, lurched to her feet. She grabbed the closest thing to hand. A chair—one of their tornado chairs.

She hit it. It was dead. Was it? She kept hitting.

*

Spring thaw brought just one unpleasant surprise—a body. Lake Waukegan had coughed up

another, just when things had finally settled down.

No one could identify the body. Just a drifter, just some nobody that Dickie had picked up and given a ride. Just some dead nobody.

The body had come to the surface, a scrap of rope still tied to its leg, just past where Eileen had taken Maribeth to give her an ice-skating lesson. In the summer, she would teach Maribeth to swim. That was even more important than skating. Knowing how to swim could save your life some day.

*

She sat at the kitchen table. It was hot, so hot. A dark and murky summer night. But she curled herself close to the candle that burned on the tabletop, folding her shoulders around the glow it gave against the shadows.

Why the carving knife? She didn't know, only that it felt right in her hand and that she could almost feel the tongue of candle flame run up and down the blade. Up and down, the glint of the knife bright against the suffocating dark outside and the rustles in the darkness in here, in this kitchen around her. The whispers of vermin in the black. All the tiny scratching chasms all around her.

Up and down, the blade running hot. Clean with fire. Heal a wound.

Her skin puckered at the touch of the blade, and she sliced in. No sensation of heat or pain. Encouraged, she sliced in again, deeper, elbow to wrist. She gripped her upper arm and bore down on the blade. It had gone in almost to the bone, but where was the bone, the blood? The knife encountered no resistance. She felt nothing.

She set the knife back neatly on the table and touched her forearm. Something inside crackled; she could feel it, hear it. She pried the slit open with her fingernails and saw nothing. Her fingers only bumped against each other and found no purchase.

By turning her shoulder, she could reach deeper, and finally her fingers caught on something. She clenched her teeth, closed her hand around the mass inside, and pulled.

She held her hand up to the candlelight. Paper. A fistful of paper. Shreds of newspaper, scraps of sheets with straggly connect-the-dots and loops of crayon, soup can labels.

She reached again. Paper again, along with pieces of thread and yarn and wire.

Again. Chewed, dried-up apple peels, half-grains of oats, scrids of tinfoil and fabric and more paper, endless paper.

Again. Again. Fistfuls of paper, piles of it. It cascaded out of her arm almost by itself and she kept digging. The nest exploded out onto her lap, onto the kitchen floor and trailing out into the hot darkness all around, her jaw was locked shut against a scream, and she could feel something inside of her, burrowing deeper into her and away from her seeking fingers.

She woke, burning hot and rigid in the bed. Vic snored at the other edge of the bed. She got up to check on Maribeth but found herself headed downstairs to the kitchen instead. She switched the light on, scattering the dark on the floor. Any of which could have been a rat. They were in her cellar, in her kitchen, all over the house.

She turned off the light and strained to hear. At first, only the tick of the clock and the sound of crickets through the open window. She listened. She waited to hear the rats. She knew they were there.

*

She sent Maribeth out with Vic in the fields. Maribeth didn't mind; she loved to pet the calves, feed them, let the little ones lick at her palms when her handful of hay was gone. And it had rained hard enough to make mudholes all over the fields for her to play in. Eileen stood in the kitchen doorway, hand held up against the sun, and watched them chug away on the tractor until they were just a speck against the horizon. Vic loved that new tractor. It was every right decision he'd ever made, up to and along with razing Dickie's house. The Dahls had rented the new fields for soybeans, and a few years' lease would pay off the principal. Planting or renting would take care of the rest. Everything had gone just right.

Eileen stood at the door a while, then went down cellar.

Jars fell to the dirt. A quart of stewed tomatoes broke open, splattering her shoes and soaking through her stockings to her bare skin. The juice felt warm, nearly alive. She reached deeper. She could feel it—shreds of paper, just as she'd suspected.

Did she hear a noise?

Farther back. Her armpit scraped against the front edge of the shelf. Why had she ever let Vic build her pantry shelves this deep, too deep to reach? All that unused dark, just an invitation for trouble. Forgotten spaces harboring rot and contamination.

Still farther. Her fingers brushed against more paper, and she pulled a piece forward. She lifted it up to see. Cowboys and Indians with wrinkled, warped faces. Empty little hollows where their eyes should have been.

Her hands darted in again, snatched up whatever they could find. Paper, fabric, threads. She could almost feel it as it tumbled out of her hands. So much, dear God. So much mess. No more. Done is done.

Noise in the corner. She whirled around in the thick air, wide-eyed. Nothing there, but that didn't mean there *wasn't*. Didn't mean there wasn't something you couldn't see.

*

The smell of kerosene, sweet. Sharp like a needle to pierce a sore. Without swift, decisive action, infection spreads. It is not to be endured.

If she could have told Vic, she would have. The problem wasn't that they hadn't known. No one had known. The problem was that she couldn't *stop* knowing.

Eileen dipped her hand into her apron pocket and brought out the matches. She lit one with a quick, practiced motion and held it before her, just for a moment. She licked her lips.

If You Blink

Rich watched her slump further down against the car window. That's right, honey, rest up, get a nap in. We've got a whole lot of not much to do up at the cabin. Rich drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He thought about patting her on the leg or squeezing her shoulder, but if he had to think about it, it probably wasn't the right thing to do.

"Well, we're halfway there, anyway," he said to her.

"Great."

Last year, she'd rolled down her window to take pictures of the leaves turning and laughed as her hair whipped around her face. He'd helped her comb the snarls out once they got to the cabin, then they'd swum in the lake until their skin turned pruney. This year, she stopped his reach for the car radio with a look. Rich didn't think they were going swimming again.

Halfway on a long-ass drive. Rich liked his Uncle Ed, always volunteered to help him shut the cabin up for the winter, which made Ed feel a little better, probably, about flying south for the winter. Still, the drive was a pain, and no kind of getaway. Even less so this fall, and never mind the light filtering through falling maple leaves or the mellow smell of field-burning. He had to bring the swimming float in for Uncle Ed and take Janine "somewhere." Somewhere was supposed to be romantic or picturesque, some place where they'd kiss and get close and just try to relax and not worry about it, but Rich didn't feel like going through the motions of a vacation to remember. What he'd remember no matter where they went were the inevitable fights. Did you call the clinic, do you want to schedule with that specialist, we need to talk about this. So no sense going all cherry-picking-in-Door-County or dinner-and-Milwaukee-symphony about it. Uncle Ed's. Get in some late-season swimming, maybe, or go grab a fish-fry somewhere. They'd stop in Black Creek on the way back and go through a couple of those

kitchen-and-antique shops where everything was cast iron or gingham and Janine could swoon over a cornbread pan where the indents were shaped like ears of corn. Or a rooster cookie jar that looked like her grandma's but said Made In China on the half-scraped-off sticker.

Then they could go back home. Rich marketing sausage for VanDerHey Meats, Janine running accounts for Happy Times Daycare, both of them whistling while they worked. Well, sort of. Two desks in the spare room, His and Hers for take-home paperwork among the boxes of old clothes and the useless stuff they'd gotten years ago from the wedding registry. It had all looked so great in the store while they ran around with zap-guns, putting together the registry with everything they could think of wanting. All those things that his parents and her parents and all the aunts and uncles (and Uncle Eds) had bought them. Napkin rings, candelabras, a cheese board. Now all the silver and linen had migrated into cartons in the spare closet. Lots of junk in there. A breadmaker, a deep-fryer, a box of old receipts with fertility clinic pamphlets Janine had hidden at the bottom. Stuff they didn't need.

*

They passed through Black Creek, where homey-tacky storefronts were in good supply. Rich mentally noted the shops he could bring Janine to on the way back. They closed in on Ridge Rock, Janine's head loose against the window and wagging with the bumps on the highway.

They passed a rusted old sign that read: Slab City, Unincorporated.

"I'll be damned," Rich said.

And, just past it, a tall, square building with a flat roof and blinding white stucco on the walls. No windows, a door shaped like a coffin. The sign hanging above the place looked like it'd

been painted by the cast of Hee Haw, the letters all crooked and bunched together toward the right-hand end. It said The Morgue.

"Holy shit!" Rich shouted, laughing. "It's there! How did I never see it before?"

Janine stirred. "Are we there?"

"No, no, we're not there yet," Rich said, still laughing. "Sorry, I just can't believe it's real."

"What?"

"Slab City. Uncle Ed always talks up this tiny town called Slab City. 'If you blink, you'll miss it,' he says. He loves it. Catfish races and homemade head cheese, and some old roadhouse called the Morgue."

"Okay... so?" Janine waved her hand, as if expecting Rich to fill it with something more important than Uncle Ed's bullshit stories.

Rich flapped a hand back at her outstretched one. "We just went through Slab City. I just saw The Morgue. I gotta tell Uncle Ed. He'll laugh his ass off at me for having missed it all this time."

Janine yawned. "Probably he will. Well, I blinked. I missed it. Too bad. You'll have to point it out to me on the way back home." She leaned back against the window and closed her eyes again. Rich looked over, frowning.

Slab City, though. Goddam. And this whole time he'd thought it was just Uncle Ed being the Goofy Old Uncle, talking bullshit, peppering his rants about other family tree branches or last year's weather or the President with phrases like "bet you dollars to donuts" and "finer than frog's hair" and the ultimate weirdness of "faster than a gerbil on icy pavement." Slab City was real, and so was The Morgue. Probably they hosted catfish races and sold head-cheese sandwiches

behind the bar. Bet you dollars to donuts.

They stopped for gas in Thorpe. Rich stood staring at the tarmac while the tank filled and Janine went in for coffee. When she came back out, she looked past him across the street and laughed.

"What?"

She pointed. "You didn't see that?"

He looked. An ancient-looking neon sign announced the Thorpedo Restaurant, with a blinking arrow pointing down to a lozenge-shaped door. Even from across the street, he could see a lunch counter ringed with stools. Thorpedo? World's worst pun.

"Rich, let's grab some dinner there. C'mon."

"What, at the Thorpedo? You've got to be kidding."

"Oh, come on. It'll save us a trip out later. And I'm *dying* to see the inside." Her eyes had picked up a gleam that Rich hadn't seen in a while. And she was grinning. "I bet you the pies are on a rotating rack and the waitresses wear support hose."

He grinned back, but it had an edge to it. He didn't want the Thorpedo, he wanted some cheap drive-thru and to get to the cabin before dark. And she hadn't cared about Slab City, so what was with the sudden whimsy anyway? "I see enough support hose at the office, thank you very much. Maybe we can find a Hooter's—there's some hose that don't need support. Or, hey, I think Sapphire's up in Shawano will still have happy hour going on when we go through. We could go there and *support* some hoes."

Janine's smile fell off her face, fast. Almost as fast as a gerbil on icy pavement. She handed him his coffee, got in and buckled up.

Rich felt bad. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings; she usually laughed at his bullshit. He

tapped on her window. She didn't roll it down. He got in on his side and put a hand out to her. He didn't quite dare to take her arm.

"I was only kidding, hon. Come on, you want to?"

She moved away from his hand. "Forget it. I'm not hungry. Let's just hurry up and get there."

*

They didn't stop at Hooter's. They didn't stop at Sapphire's. They went directly to Uncle Ed's squat little crap-shack and sat facing each other at the old Formica table in the kitchen/dining/living room and ate sandwiches and potato salad while the radio spat out parts of the Brewer game and All Things Considered. Junebugs too stupid to know that it was September smacked against the window like idiot rain. Janine tore into her sandwiches like they'd pissed her off. He'd made the sandwiches before they left, made hers with extra horseradish like she liked.

Rich sighed contentedly, stretched back, slapped at his belly. "Good stuff, good stuff," he said. "Now to round off the meal..." He leaned over and snagged a grocery bag, pulled out the two-pack of Twinkies he'd brought with. He offered the box to Janine. "Third course?"

It startled a laugh out of her. "You so fancy. But we should save something for breakfast. I forgot to pack any. And all the sandwiches are gone."

"Twinkies for breakfast? That's no the way to start the day." He tore open the package, peeled one off the paper, and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. He grinned around it at Janine. She gave him a scolding look.

"Well, there's your breakfast, then. You'll have to go out tonight and buy something,

unless you feel like getting up at dawn and going down to the lake to catch your meal."

That one was full of bait. Rich sensed she was spoiling for a real fight, not the snap-and-sigh of the last few weeks. But he didn't feel like biting tonight. "Catch? In this lake? No dice, not never. Unless you want snapping turtle. I could go and catch one of those. Make some good soup."

She blinked. Good—a potential defuse. "Turtle soup? You're kidding."

"No indeed. My Aunt Eileen used to make it. Uncle Vic'd find a big snapper in the pond, crack the shell open, and Eileen'd boil it down. Good stuff. Probably on the menu at the Thorpedo, right next to beer-cheese soup. It's a classic."

"So you're going to get up at dawn and catch a snapping turtle? And then I'm supposed to cook it?"

"Nah," Rich said, trying to pull her from her seat, "you go at night. C'mon, let's go swim with the snappers. Then we'll wrestle one out and stick it in the sink. Make soup tomorrow."

She almost got up. But then she sat back down. "Maybe not. I don't want to go out there. Especially not at night. It's creepy. This whole place is creepy."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "All right, all right."

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

She glared at him. He glared back. They were both pissed off, fine, but why should he have to give in? Was it his fault? Even if some things were, not everything was.

Finally she shoved her way out of her chair. "I'm going to bed."

She crossed to the bedroom and slammed the door. Rich looked down at the other Twinkie stuck to the paper. He picked it off the cardboard, stuck it in his mouth, and swallowed it whole, concentrating on the painful trail it dug down to his stomach.

*

He grabbed his swim trunks and a flashlight and banged out the door toward the lake. It was cold out, maybe fifty degrees. The water would be a little better. He stomped down the path. Sticks and rocks dug into his feet, maybe breaking the skin, maybe not. The flashlight beam bobbed up and down, throwing every mangy tree in front of him into harsh outline against the black of the woods.

At the edge of the water, he shucked off his clothes, considered the trunks for a moment, then threw them on the ground along with the flashlight. Nobody was out here at Ugly Fuck Lake; nobody cared if he flashed his useless little wingding around. He stomped off across the sand and through the muck and weeds at the water's edge and dove in, driving for Ed's swim-float with a sort of slap-the-water front crawl, snaffling water up his nose and feeling it sting his open eyes.

He got to the float and pulled himself up, ignoring the ladder anchored to the side. He collapsed onto the indoor/outdoor carpeting Uncle Ed had glued to the top of the platform. It was worn bald with years of rain and use. Not to mention a few midnight wrestles with Janine not so long ago. But he didn't want to remember those, not now. The hollow thunk of waves against the old salt barrels underneath them. The way their breath echoed in the space below the platform. The dim, watery reflection of the moon. He wanted her here, beside him. It wasn't going to happen.

Rich closed his eyes. The motion of the float rocked him back and forth. He was nearly asleep when a mosquito whined in his ear, startling him. He swatted it and got awkwardly to his

feet. He tried for a dive back into the water, but ended up with a bellyflop. He paddled back to shore, bundled up his clothes, and walked back to the cabin.

Steeling himself for trouble, he went into the bedroom to get to the bathroom. Janine was up, reading. She looked up at him as he stood at the foot of the bed, naked, dripping wet.

"Turtle's in the sink," Rich growled at her. "I'm going to The Morgue."

He watched her reactions: surprise, confusion, anger.

"What turtle?"

"None. I was kidding. Just a joke. I'm a wacky guy like that. It's why you married me."

She arched her brows, turned the page of her book. "Whatever you say. Just don't get in trouble. I'll be here."

He threw some clothes on, got in the car and drove off.

*

It was 11:00 by the time Rich got to The Morgue, and there were a suspect number of excellent parking spaces available for a Friday night at—he had driven around all four blocks to confirm it—the only bar in town. Maybe everybody had blinked and missed it tonight, or maybe The Morgue was more of a Saturday-night rager. He parked along the side of the building and savored the walk up to the coffin-door. The Morgue. Might be, ha-ha, dead inside, but the place had a great hook nonetheless.

Rich swung in; the handful of patrons inside all swung around to stare at him.

No music, nobody playing pool. Rich looked up at the TV mounted above the bar in time to see the Hallmark channel's logo flash and disappear to be replaced by a rerun of *Walker, Texas*

Ranger. The cronies turned away from glowering at him to watch the show. A squat, obese probably-woman with short hair stood back-to behind the bar. She turned to meet Rich when he walked up, and Rich beheld a wonder of a face: forehead rolls laddering down to a broad, piggish nose and poxy cheeks, a puckery mouth with threads of nicotine stain in each line, a triple chin. She clumped over to where Rich stood and said nothing.

"Uh, hi there."

Some more nothing.

"Um, what've you got?"

"Bud, Miller, Schlitz, Blatz, Old 47."

"Old 47, please." Probably the beer of choice here, probably out-sold all the others. The stuff was ten bucks a case. Nobody but the Morgues of the world had such success with Moldy Oldy, not if their patrons were in a higher income bracket than Broke-Ass.

The bartender cracked it and brought it back foaming. "Two bucks."

Rich set down four dollars. The size of the tip didn't seem to improve things; if anything, the woman grew more sullen as the bills were swallowed up in her fist.

He sipped his beer and let his eyes roam the place. Framed picture of George and Laura Bush. Framed American flag. Framed Dixie flag—that at least had a little roadhouse flavor to it. A handwritten sign (done by the same person who'd done the main sign outside, judging by the way the letters crammed up toward the end) that said "using the F--- word will stop you're drinking here."

Rich sighed, leaned against the pool table, and tried to watch Walker with the rest of them. He was going to be one of these guys at this rate, another sad old dude with nowhere else to go on a Friday night. He was already in The Morgue; now he just had to learn how to be as

dead as these guys.

But Walker, who these old dudes were genuinely rooting for, was roundhouse-kicking through a warehouse of bad guys to save some professionally-adorable little boy, some brat tied up for ransom and stashed in the back room, and it was a little too goddam much. Every few seconds cut between Walker's gritted teeth, a stunt punch in a baddie's face, and glycerin tears twinkling in the kid's eyes. Goddam kid looked exactly like the one on the latest pamphlet Janine had brought home, the one that made it clear she no longer thought they had a chance of making their own adorable kid, of either amateur or pro status. *Family Solutions*, the pamphlet promised. Adoption Counseling Available.

Rich sneered at Walker and killed a little more Moldy Oldy. He surveyed his future—obviously he needed to invest in a few hunting caps and some Lee jeans. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw the bartender stuffing handfuls of chips into her mouth without looking and felt sick. She was a human Jabba the Hutt. Maybe he was destined to fill one of those empty, split vinyl seats at the bar some day, but no way was he getting closer to *that* yet.

Walker broke for commercial and Rich drifted to the side-hall of the bar, toward the dartboards and a whiff of fresh air from the open back door. Dartboards all along the one side, trophies along the other. There were dozens of them. Third Place, Bonduel Dart League Open. First place, Black Creek Nine-Ball Championship 1978. Fox Valley Lanes Open 1995. Rich found a stash of darts on one of the trophy shelves and started to play. Just for a bit, just long enough to finish his one Moldy Oldy and get back to the cabin while Janine was still awake. Maybe he'd sit her down and finally talk to her about it. The clinic couldn't be that bad. They could run tests and maybe find out something that could be done. Or, well, there were other *Family Solutions*.

Walker came back on and Jabba the Bartender turned up the volume. Rich got the full effect of the soundtrack. The touching music. Synthesizers spearing his brains. Caws of joy people he couldn't see. Junior reuniting with his parents, obviously. He couldn't see it, but hearing it was bad enough.

"Mommy! Daddy!"

"Oh thank God, you're all right! Thank God, you're all right!"

Mommeeeee! Daddeeee! And so on. And *so* on. And—Jesus, how many times did they need to have that exchange?

Rich started throwing the darts harder. He collected them and did more of the same. Fuck it. He wasn't in any mood to talk about Solutions tonight. Janine was probably already asleep and didn't want to see his face in the place anyway. So he was stuck here with fucking idiot Chuck Norris and his fucking idiot show. Mommy! Daddy! Thank God you're all right!

Rich found himself staring at The Morgue's conglomeration of useless trophies.

Don't get in trouble, Janine had said.

Solutions, the pamphlet said.

God, this place was so full of idiots. Idiots at an idiot bar with their trophies commemorating idiotic achievements. Everything from Highest Pinochle Score to Least Diseased Cow. Some idiot with a sharper sense of humor had thrown a World's Best Dad trophy on the shelf. One of the good old boys warming up a seat for Rich? Or maybe Jabbartender was really a man after all, and there was a World's Best Dad somewhere under that leathery shell. And no wonder no using the F--- word; no wonder Rich wasn't anybody's World's Best Dad. He used the F--- word. No World's Best Dad would stand for that. That's who was tending bar at The Morgue. The Fucking World's Best Fucking Dad.

Rich clenched the two darts remaining in his hand, spun around and flung them at the board. They bounced off the wire and fell to the ground. He stalked over to the trophy shelves, not sure until he got there if he was going to pick up World's Best Dad and smash it against the wall, starting the trouble Janine had warned him about and more. He restrained the urge.

He held out his hand to the World's Best Dad trophy, and paused. He was only visible to the short side of the bar, where four split-vinyl seats gaped open with no fat Old 47-filled asses to support. All of them, Jabba included, were no doubt huddled at the other end, waiting for the next episode of Walker to start.

World's Best Dad.

Rich plucked it off the shelf and looked it over. Small, spraypainted-gold plastic thing. "Engraved" plate glued on at an angle. You could get them a dollar a dozen (bet you dollars to donuts) down at the Salvation Army any day of the week, but Jabba here had it up on a shelf as if it was something to gloat about, to show off to strangers. See that? I won that. I *earned* that.

Rich jammed the trophy in his pocket, where it poked pointy cold plastic uncomfortably close to his balls. But who gave a fuck? Damn things weren't doing him any good lately anyway. Like these trophies taking up space back here, Rich thought. These aren't doing you any good, Jabba.

"Fuckin' Jabba," he whispered, face splitting into a huge grin.

He finished his beer, dropped it in a nearby trash, then brought the can back with him to the trophy shelves. 300 Game, Rhinelander Lanes. Dart League Championship, 1991 next to it. Butte Des Morts Softball Tourney, 2nd place. Shawano County Fair, Best In Show. He took them all off the shelf, dropping them into the garbage can one by one. They didn't make much noise going in, just quiet little thumps.

After he was done, he double-checked the new addition to his pants to make sure he wasn't bursting at the seams, then went back around to the populated side of the bar. Jabba and her cronies were indeed settled in for another karate-chop-ful tale of the Texas Ranger. Jabba didn't even look over as Rich sidled up to the bar, just kept her mostly toothless mouth working on a straw stuck into a can of Diet Sprite. She sold him another Old 47 and he took it with him out the coffin door and into the car. World's Best Dad he propped up on the passenger seat, green and white glimmers from the dashboard bouncing off its gold paint.

Rich held his beer up to it in a toast. "To The Morgue."

He drank, then paused. That wasn't quite right.

"To not being in The Morgue."

There. *That* felt finer than frog's hair.

He downed the rest of the beer and tossed the empty. He gave the trophy a companionable little pat—easier to touch some crap trophy than your own wife, though, what's that about, Rich?—and got headed home.

Janine was asleep, book facedown on the pillow beside her, all the lights on. He picked up the book, moved her bookmark to the right page. He'd talk to her in the morning, maybe on the drive home. He would. A quick shower washed away the mental reek of decades of Old 47. He killed the lights and slid in next to Janine. Kissed her on the cheek. She turned over in her sleep and threw an arm across his chest. Rich smiled up at the dark.

*

The lake was even colder in the morning. Rich dove for the anchor-chain for the float, unhooked

it, and swam back to shore as fast as he could (faster than a gerbil on icy pavement). Janine didn't go in at all. She did, however, sit at the shore's sandy edge and watch him haul the float in, then help him drag it all the way up to the grass and flip it on edge to dry. They sat side-by-side at the picnic table to rest before going in to pack up. She handed him a towel.

"How was The Morgue?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Oh," Rich sighed, pulling her feet into his lap, "About how you'd imagine it." He brushed the sand off her legs with his fingers. She watched him do it. "What a waste of a coffin-shaped door that place is. They all sat at the bar and watched the Hallmark Channel."

Janine threw her head back and laughed. "So. The Morgue turned out to be *dead* inside. Har har. Sounds like a joke you'd tell."

"You know me," Rich said. "I'm a wacky guy. Fulla jokes. It's why you married me." All the sand was gone, but he kept running his hands over her legs, moving down to rub her feet. "Place was just a bunch of gross old bachelors drinking gross old bachelor beer. The bartender was old enough to be my dad." Her feet were warm in his hands. He patted one. "C'mon. Let's get this done. We'll go shopping in Black Creek, then grab lunch at that Thorpedo place if you still want. We can order pie off the revolving rack, even. Then, home."

She smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

They dragged the float into the shed and locked it up. Rich stuffed their bags in the trunk while Janine double-checked the cabin for anything they might have forgotten. Rich dashed off a note to Uncle Ed—thanks again for letting us stay over, everything was great, the float's locked up, see you in the Spring—and left it on the kitchen table. He held the cabin door open for Janine, then locked up and followed her to the car.

She hadn't gotten in. She stood looking in through the window, head tilted nearly

sideways, no doubt trying to figure out what was propped in her seat.

Rich grinned over the hood of the car at her. "You like it?"

She looked up. "Rich, what..?"

He reached in, grabbed it, held it up as if he'd won it.

"What do you think—can we make it happen? World's Best Dad?"

Lights In the Sky

Mike tried to ignore it. He focused on the route: skate down the driveway slope, down the sidewalk to the corner, turn around, then up the slope all the way to behind the garage. Got to learn how to turn on the board without having to stop and adjust so much. Every time he came back up to the end of the route, though, Rommie was there on his porch, a can of beer in his grubby fist, staring over at him. Watching him like he was a T.V. show.

Couldn't go down the street to practice. He wasn't any good yet, which wasn't a big deal on Whitetail Drive because there weren't any other kids, but if he went down the block to Green Acres, somebody else would see him. He didn't want that to happen until he was really good, maybe good enough to do jumps and go over ramps. So he practiced at home. And Rommie watched him the whole time, only moving to grab another can of beer out of the carton next to his frayed lawn chair. Creepy old Rommie with his three yellow teeth.

Mike had meant to practice until dark, but after only a half-hour or so he couldn't stand the weight of that stare any more. He raked off the dorky helmet and kneepads his mom made him wear and threw them and the skateboard into a corner of the garage. He went inside and sat in front of the T.V.

"Mike? Something wrong?"

"No."

"Well, you look crabby. You want a pop?"

"No, Mom."

"Ice cream?" She gestured at the empty dish sitting next to her on the table. "Me and your Dad had some. There's a little left."

"No."

Mike's dad leaned forward in his recliner, watching Mike carefully. "No what, Michael?"

Mike knew better than to roll his eyes. "No, thank you."

"That's better."

The show came back on, some stupid cop drama thing. Mike sat looking through it, feeling the itchy carpet on his elbows, a bad taste in his mouth. Ice cream? He'd barf.

During commercials, his mom got up to put her ice cream dish in the sink and lock the back door. She'd never locked the door before Rommie moved in last year. Maybe she didn't think Mike had noticed, but he had noticed.

*

Mike stopped going straight home. He could be anywhere he wanted as long as he was home for supper. Some days, he would bike to the woods behind the high school and ride along the trails, grinning fiercely as his tires churned up the neatly-mulched paths and splashed through puddles, stirring up mosquitoes. Sometimes Nate and Sam—the two kids that lived closest to him, over on Green Acres Lane—came with him, and they'd race each other, maybe swat the branches hanging overhead so they'd slap the guy behind them in the face. Then they'd go over to the sled hill, climb up it, then try to somersault all the way down. Or they'd go to Green Acres and get a football game together to play in the street.

Even if the weather was bad or he was tired, Mike still didn't go home. His dad was gone until five and his mom was always out running errands, so there was nothing to do but watch T.V. or try to play outside, but playing outside sucked because Rommie was always there. Even

if Mike couldn't tell if Rommie was really gone or just hiding inside his gross house with the shades all pulled, he was there. Mike knew, and not just because Rommie's rusty old pickup was always in the driveway. Rommie never really left. Mike could just feel it. Sometimes he imagined he could even smell him, a mix of sour beer and something awful like burning hair.

School was going to end in a month. Nate and Sam were counting down the days. Mike counted with them, too, but he really wasn't that excited.

*

They handed out report cards the last day of school, and it was as bad as Mike thought it was going to be. The way Mr. Sturtevendt had looked at him when he handed off the envelope, it was like he knew he was sending Mike to his death. Not that Mr. Sturtevendt cared.

The D in Science wasn't too hard to make into a B. The other D, in English, he had to let that one go. If he changed all the grades, it'd look weird. One D changed, maybe Mr. Sturtevendt just had a pen-hiccup or his hand shook or something. And Mike was good at changing grades. He'd been practicing for a while, sweating it at the desk in his room over changing Ds and Fs instead of playing outside because grubby old Rommie made outside suck.

And even better, it wasn't an F in Health, it was a U. It had that curve already, it was easy to make a C. And in regular old red pen, as if anyone couldn't go buy those at the store. Not that Mike hadn't been ready with one of Mr. Sturtevendt's own pens. He got one from Mr. Sturtevendt's desk drawer during lunch break last week.

Mike walked his bike to the top of the sled hill, laid the bike out, sat down with his report card and handful of pens. He took out a safety pin and scratched just a little of the heavy card

stock off where the grades were, then filled the rest in with red pen. U into a C, D into a B. Mr. Sturtevendt wasn't really into comments, which was good, there wasn't much to get him in trouble, but he'd said some stuff that might be hard to explain.

"Mike has withdrawn in this last term. His performance is not up to speed. Perhaps some tutoring or extra work in the summer? I can send along a list of suggested activities."

He would just explain that Mr. Sturtevendt didn't like him, and that he didn't feel like raising his hand as much any more in class. He'd get better in English. And he'd say he wanted to do the Book-It thing again. He did, actually. Book-It was easy. You said you read a book, you told them one thing that happened in it, and you got a star. Four stars, you got a free mini-pizza at Cranky's. He'd promise to do that, and his parents would be satisfied.

Down the sled hill on his bike. He felt big. He rode through the woods toward home and let all the branches slap his face, hard. It felt good. Chipmunks scattered as he went by, and he laughed. He only wished they moved a little slower, so he could give them a chase. Maybe someday he'd get one of them. He'd have to get faster on the bike was all.

*

They wanted to punish him for the D like he knew they would, but he headed them off, mostly. Said he was sorry and that he should've done the extra credit. "I didn't know I was getting a D. That's way worse than I thought. But I like English, you know I do. I wanna do the Book-It this summer, and I promise I'll do better next year."

It worked. "Well, all right," his mom said. The report card, already glanced at and folded back up, lay on top of yesterday's mail. That part was good. His parents giving each other looks

from each end of the kitchen table, not so good. Mike wasn't that worried, though. Just one D, that wouldn't be so bad. Mr. Sturtevendt had only given him one D. One D, two Cs and a B, those were good grades. He was pretty good in school.

"All right," his mom repeated. She sighed. The chairs scraped the floor as they both pushed away together. "You do better next year, okay? You won't have Mr. Sturtevendt any more, so you'd better do better."

"Yes, Mom."

"Right. Now go help your Dad with the yardwork."

"Yes, Mom."

His dad reached out and rubbed Mike's hair as they stepped out. Mike grinned. He'd gotten away with it.

"I'm gonna get the lawn mower ready. You go pick up all the sticks in the front and the back, got it?"

"Got it."

Rommie sat in his usual place, plunked into the sagging lawn chair on his back deck. A cardboard carton sat open next to him—case of beer. A stack of empty, collapsed cases leaned against Rommie's patio door. And, of course, Rommie was watching him. Eyes scraping little bits of him off like the little puffs of paper he'd scraped off the report card. All around the yard, everywhere he went.

"They gotcha doin some hard labor, yeah?"

Mike looked up, startled. Rommie had said it.

"Um... yeah. They do."

Rommie grinned at him, exposing the black, uneven stumps of his teeth.

" 'S good for ya, kid. Builds character."

Character? Mike thought. How would Rommie know? He didn't even have a job.

"Uh, yeah, I guess you're right."

Rommie seemed satisfied by the response. He settled back into his chair, reached down for another beer, cracked it open.

Mike finished picking up sticks and bundled them into one of the leaf bags in the garage. His dad was pushing the mower into the driveway to start it up. He looked Mike up and down.

"Got it done, good. Now I don't want to keep going over it, but your grades are disappointing. You know that, right?"

Sweat ran into Mike's eye. Had he been sweating? He hadn't been aware of it. He swiped his arm against his forehead and nodded.

"All right, kiddo. I'll take you to the library after supper, get you a couple books. You can't be getting any more Ds. You're too smart for that." School was a waste of time, nothing but worksheets and film strips and books about kids who were supposed to be his age but weren't anything like him, but his Dad was right about not getting Ds on the report card. If he got any more Ds, he better get better at turning them all into Bs.

His dad smiled, rubbed Mike's hair again. God, Mike hated that. But it meant his dad was happy, and a happy Dad was necessary if you didn't want to get in trouble for something. "All right, go get cleaned up for dinner."

"Okay, Dad." Mike headed inside, wondering if you could wash off something like Rommie's stare. Probably you couldn't. Builds character, he'd said. Right.

*

Nate and Sam loved street football. Mike, too. Even more in the summer, because they got to put together twice as many games—before supper and after supper. No one had to be in until dark, so there were two more hours of play time every day to use. By mid-June, everybody was covered in scabs from being knocked to the ground by hard tags. Mike woke up sore most mornings, but he couldn't complain, because he threw a lot of tackles, too. But then the neighborhood moms got together and demanded that Nate and Sam and the other big kids on the street start playing easier games so that no one got trampled. But the moms meant playground baby games like Freeze Tag and Red Light Green Light and Red Rover and Hide and Go Seek, and none of those was much compared to football. Then Sam got the idea to set up two Foursquare courts, one for the babies and one for the big kids, and everything was solved. Summer was working better than Mike had hoped. He woke up in the morning and watched game shows and ate breakfast, then did his chores. In the afternoon he mostly took his bike over to the sled hill—he was trying to get strong enough to ride all the way up it—or rode around in the woods. After supper, he would walk down to Green Acres with his skateboard tucked under his arm and his helmet and kneepads hidden in his backpack. Then, once he turned onto Green Acres (not before; he still couldn't turn corners that well) he would skate up the road, ditching his backpack in Sam's driveway, and skate right up to where the courts were chalked on the pavement. He had afternoons riding the paths, chasing the chipmunks, and thinking about nothing but the sound of air rushing past his ears, and nights doing super bounces and headbutts and spikes on Sam and Nate's foursquare court with the little kids who tried to play with them, and slow walks home in the almost-dark, trying to catch grasshoppers with one hand while the other was wrapped around his skateboard. And when he got to the back door of the house and

Rommie was in his usual place, staring at him, it didn't bother him. Not much, anyway.

*

Foursquare got a little old, so Sam asked to try Mike's skateboard. He wasn't any good.

"We should practice on it more and get better," Sam told him.

"Yeah," Mike said, relieved that Sam was just as bad at skating as he was. Sam was usually such a badass. It was sort of a relief he sucked at this. "We totally should. I need practice, too. I can go pretty good but I can't turn corners yet."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

So they left Nate playing foursquare with the little kids (Nate didn't mind; he always got to be Ace and call out whatever bullshit rule he wanted and no one called him out on anything so he always won) and took turns on the board.

"You should lean back more when you try to turn."

"You gotta plant your feet wider."

They took their own advice and started doing much better.

"Let's take it down to Birch Court," Sam said.

"Why?" Mike asked.

"Just cause," Sam said. "C'mon."

So they took turns riding the board out to Birch Court, which had a shabby old apartment building and a nursing home and not much else. Sam ducked into the trees alongside the utility shed of the nursing home. "Come here."

Mike followed. "What?"

"Check it out," Sam said, holding out his hand. Two cigarettes, a pack of matches, and a knotted-together bundle of firecrackers.

"Cool," Mike said. It was.

"I kified the smokes from my Dad. He never notices if I take one or two. Here, you can have one."

Mike had never smoked but you never said that. They lit up on the same match. Sam inhaled and blew out a huge cloud of smoke. Mike tried to inhale without coughing so that he wouldn't look like a pussy. It tasted like dead moss and tire fires.

"Hey," Sam said. "I'm gonna be gone for a while next month."

"Gone? Where?"

"I'm going to Camp Onaway for two weeks in July."

Mike tried not to look dismayed. "Two weeks?"

Sam laughed. "Yeah. Nate, too. That fucking dork, the whole time he'll probably talk about how much he misses his foursquare court."

Mike laughed, trying to sound just as mean as Sam. "Yeah, fucking Nate. Still, you get to go somewhere. I don't get to do anything this summer."

"Yeah, but you're gonna be way better at skating than me by the time I get back. Me, I get Nate for two weeks, probably in the same cabin. I won't get any sleep. And he'll get me in trouble from all the pranks he'll pull. He loves doing that stuff."

"Yeah, I guess," Mike said, shrugging. "Sounds like fun, too, though."

"Yeah, it's sort of fun, I guess."

"When do you go?"

"The first. We come back on the fifteenth."

Two weeks of nothing but riding out to the woods or the sled hill? Two weeks by himself.

Oh my God, Mike thought. I'm going to go crazy.

"Hey," Sam said, holding up the firecrackers, "let's set these off, huh?"

"Sure. Where?"

Sam looked around, grinned, pointed at a lit window in the nursing home. "There."

"What, the old folks' home?" His grandpa had stayed in there once. He sort of remembered going to see him.

Without looking to see if Mike was following, Sam crept up the lawn to below the window. Mike had to go with. He looked in, could see an orderly sitting behind a desk, a T.V. glow in the corner.

Sam lit the fuse, yanked on Mike's collar. "Come on!"

The crackers went off in quick, nasty bangs. Floodlights came on, lit up the whole lawn.

"Go! Go!" Sam shouted, laughing. Mike grabbed the skateboard. They ran all the way back to Green Acres. Mike started laughing, too, and when they threw themselves down on Nate's lawn, exhausted, they were still laughing.

"We maxed out some fuckin' pacemakers tonight, Mikey!" Sam said.

Mike wiped tears from his eyes. "Fucking right."

Nate came up from the foursquare court, where the game was almost done. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Mike said.

"Yeah, nothing," Sam said.

Nate rolled his eyes and walked off. Sam and Mike looked at each other and started howling.

Wonder what would happen if I set them off under *Rommie's* window, Mike thought, and laughed even harder.

*

He didn't go to say goodbye to Sam. That would have been really lame. But he called him the night before he left to wish him a good time.

"Thanks, man," Sam said. "Get good on that skateboard so you can give me lessons when I get back. And hey, see if they'll sell you some firecrackers or something at one of the firework tents. Or maybe kife em from your Dad, if you can."

"Sure. See you on the fifteenth."

"Yeah. Cool. 'Bye."

Mike felt tears building in his throat as he hung up. He shut himself in his room and lay on the bed. He surfaced briefly when his mom checked in on him at bedtime and found him there, fully clothed and mostly asleep. She pulled the sheet up over him, turned off his light, and softly closed the door.

*

Mike started exploring the workshop and his parents' room when they were gone. Nothing much interesting. Receipts, envelopes full of papers. Nothing cool like money or a gun. One Frederick's of Hollywood catalog under the long johns and thermal socks on Dad's side of the dresser. Some of the stuff in there looked completely crazy—who would wear an underwear-

thing that made your dick look like an elephant trunk or a flamingo beak?—but some of the girl clothes were really good. Made him feel like he did when he rushed through the woods looking for chipmunks to chase. Maybe even to run down.

*

Sam was gone and there was nowhere to go now after supper. Even that retard Nate was gone, and Mike couldn't go over the Green Acres to play with the babies, and he couldn't go out in the yard and be Mike TV for Rommie's never-ending Beer Hour and wait for dark to come.

Tonight, dinner was burgers and hotdogs on the grill, and when Mike ran a plate of something out to his dad, of course Rommie was out on his porch, watching them. He had a newspaper in his lap this time, but he wasn't reading it. As if Rommie could read, anyway. Creepy prick.

"You say something, Mike?"

Mike looked away from Rommie, startled. Had he said it out loud? "No, Dad."

"Quit staring at Rommie, Mike. You'll bother him."

"Yes, Dad."

"C'mon, suppertime." They headed inside. His mom paused in setting plates out. "Let's eat outside tonight, why don't we? It's so nice and cool out there." his mom said.

"Sure. We could do that. Mike, go on out and help your mom set the picnic table."

Outside? Where Rommie could watch them? "I don't want to."

His dad gave him a look. "Mike."

"What? I don't want to. I *hate* that guy next door. Every time I look at him, I wanna barf."

"Oh, come on," his mom said. "He doesn't bother you."

"Yes he does. He always stares at me. I hate him."

Dad's hand came down on his shoulder, hard. Mike knew he was supposed to look him in the face, but he couldn't do it. He didn't want to do it.

"You listen to me, Mike. Rommie doesn't bother you, so don't you bother him. He has every right to sit on his own porch that he paid for with his own money. We're not going to invite him to your goddam birthday party. He's not coming to dinner. So you knock this off right now."

Dad was so much bigger than him. It wasn't fair that he always got Mike to mind just because he was bigger. But Mike couldn't change it. He tried to sink a little under the hand gripping his shoulder. "Yes, Dad."

"All right. Now you are going to eat outside with your mother and me, because we want to eat out there. And if Rommie bothers you, just ignore him."

Ignore him. Right. He wolfed down two hotdogs and half a plateful of potato salad while Rommie's eyes crawled all over him, then excused himself to go wash up and play on Green Acres.

"I thought Nate and Sam were away at camp."

"The other kids still play foursquare," Mike said. "I wanna go."

"Oh. Okay, sure. Go ahead. Be home by dark."

Mike hurried inside to the bathroom, stuck his finger down his throat, and got rid of dinner. He brushed his teeth, then ran outside for his bike. Maybe he'd get all the way up the sled hill this time. He just had to stay mad, then he could pedal longer.

*

His dad said he didn't feel like dealing with the crowd at the 4th of July fireworks downtown, so he took Mike out to one of the big fireworks tents out by the mall and let him pick out stuff to set off at home. Mike wanted the biggest assorted set they had, but his dad said no, it's smarter to buy a few really good, really big fireworks and a bunch of little stuff like bottle rockets and sparklers instead of a package with a bunch of not-that-cool medium stuff. He let Mike pick out the big ones. He didn't notice Mike slipping a package of Black Cats into the cargo pocket of his shorts; the guy running the tent didn't, either. Or when Mike came back the next day, bought a box of Snap-Pops and stole a packet of bottle rockets.

When it was time to set them off, his parents let him help light all the fireworks. Mike tried to look like he didn't have any clue about it, which fooled them. And his dad had been right about buying a few really big fireworks instead of a bunch of mediums; they were huge, and definitely worth it. They shot up into the air and burst into giant sprays of color just like the ones they shot off downtown. Mike laughed as sparks turned to ashy snow and sifted down to the roof of the house. After they'd used up all the good fireworks and his mom started complaining about the mosquitoes, his dad gave him all the rest of the sparklers in two huge handfuls and lit them all at once. Mike ran around the yard with them, enjoying the contrast of the cold dew soaking through his sneakers and the electric heat of the sparklers creeping toward his hands. He ran and jumped and spun in circles, left tracks of smoke and swirling afterimages behind him. Just when the sparklers sputtered out and died, Mike's eyes drifted over to Rommie's house, dark like always. Rommie was standing on his porch, pointing at the sky. His face was a skull. His eyes glittered.

"Lights," he whispered. "Lookit em. Lookit all those lights."

Mike turned to his parents, mouth already getting started to say, *See? Did you see that?* but they were at the other end of the yard. He turned back to where Rommie had been, but Rommie was gone.

*

Summer had turned hot and sticky. Mike sat on the edge of the picnic table in the backyard gluing together a model car. He didn't want it, but his dad was home from work early today and told him to get outside and stop watching T.V. and moping around the house or else. He had that look that told Mike that nothing he said would do any good, so Mike went down to the basement and grabbed the model out of a pile of forgotten Christmas presents. Now he was sitting out here, his fingers tacky with glue, putting the stupid thing together. The glue was making him dizzy. He wasn't sure what "or else" could be worse than having to sit out here killing time, but if he got his dad mad on a day as hot as this, he would probably think of some kind of or else.

Sam was still gone, so he couldn't hang out with Sam. He couldn't go to the park to chase around the woods because he'd broken his bike chain. Anyway it was unbearably hot out. He wished he was sick in bed, maybe even throw-up sick, so he could stay in bed and drink 7-Up and actually read books for stupid Book-It. But he wasn't sick, just miserable. If he stayed inside too much, he'd get in trouble. And Rommie was watching him.

Or maybe he wasn't. Mike couldn't see from this angle. It didn't matter, it always felt like Rommie was watching him no matter what. Rommie's stare was just *there*, like the humidity or the glue drying to a crust under his fingernails.

Rommie was always outside now that it was so hot. Rommie didn't have air conditioning

like his parents did. He just sat out on his back porch and drank. He had to sleep some time, had to eat, but it seemed like he never did. He just stayed put, all day and all night. Watching Mike.

Mike glued the last piece in place and set the model aside. He'd been out long enough. It was probably okay to go back in now.

When he got up he told himself he wasn't going to look over at Rommie's house. It didn't matter, Mike didn't care, let him stare, so what. If Rommie bothers you, just ignore him.

He got up from the picnic table, looked over at the house.

Rommie was on the porch, watching him. When he saw Mike look in his direction, his face split almost in half with a grin. He waved with the hand not holding a can of beer. Sweat trickled down Mike's neck, but he shivered. He looked like a jack-o-lantern. Like a real one.

Mike walked across the blinding driveway and through the garage to the the back door. He burst into the cool kitchen and slammed the door behind him. And locked it.

By the time dinner was over, the model was dry and ready to be taken back inside. Mike ran out and grabbed it and took it down to the basement. He held it in his hand, trying to crumple it in his hand like Rommie did with his beer cans.

"I hate you," he said. He looked over at the toy bin and pictured Rommie's face in the pile of toys, yellow Legos for teeth and dusty checkers for eyes. If Rommie bothers you, just ignore him. Ignore him? Mike hated being watched. School, his parents, he was used to that. You did what they wanted and they left you alone. But Rommie didn't want anything except maybe to watch him. He wanted Rommie to leave him the fuck alone, but he couldn't make Rommie do it.

He squeezed the model in his hand harder and felt it crack, then slung it into the toybin, into the Rommie-face. It broke apart. Mike smiled.

*

Mike couldn't sleep. He was excited about Sam coming back, but that wasn't it. His brain just wouldn't shut up. And some asshole was shooting off fireworks down the street. People always did that all through the summer, it was no big deal, but tonight it was driving him crazy.

After an hour of trying, the bed was too hot and he'd used up all the cool spots on the pillow. He rolled out of bed and tore off his uncomfortable, bunchy pajamas. Lay back down. No good. He sighed and rolled out of bed again, this time reaching for some clothes. Faintly, though the window glass, he could hear bottle rockets whistling somewhere near.

That's what he'd do. He'd go shoot some bottle rockets. He had to save some for Sam, but he had plenty; he'd kiked five packets of them from the fireworks tents around town. He'd go to the lot behind Rommie's and shoot a few off.

He could get in deep trouble, shooting off fireworks in the middle of the night. But even as his hand hesitated while turning his doorknob, he rolled his eyes and grinned. What would his parents do? Ground him? Good. Then he could stay inside the house and not be on display for a while. He dug into his stash in the mattress, loaded his pockets with rockets and matches, and a handful of firecrackers, just for good measure.

He slipped out the back door and snapped his head around for a quick glance at Rommie's porch. He expected Rommie to be out there, drinking, planted like a poison toadstool in the dark. He was surprised to see no Rommie there.

Not wanting to waste good luck, Mike ran down the length of the yard and cut across the back edge of Rommie's property to the vacant lot behind it. The lot wasn't very interesting; it was no good to play in, so mostly it was just a place for weeds to grow. Mike walked slowly through

the lot, liking the slinky feel of the foxtails against his shins. It was nice out here. Quiet. He found a spot toward the back of the lot and set up the rockets, staking them into the dirt. He started to point them all straight up, then reconsidered and pointed them at sharper angles, back toward Rommie's house.

Too bad I don't have any sparklers, Mike thought. Or some of the good big fireworks. Then Rommie could lookit the lights in the sky. Maybe he will anyway.

He lit them off one by one, watching as they shot out at crazy angles despite how he'd aimed them. Whoever had been lighting rockets down the street had stopped, but that was okay. That just meant that there wouldn't suddenly be twice as much noise.

The last one sailed right on course to Rommie's porch. It hit his back screen-door and popped. A light went on inside. Mike ducked down and ran for his own house, trying not to giggle. He dug the firecrackers out of his pocket as he went. Just like him and Sam out on Birch Court, maxing out the pacemakers.

Mike got out of sight between his house and Rommie's just as a screen door banged open and Rommie appeared. Mike peeked around the corner. Rommie was wearing the grossest, yellowest underpants ever. They sagged from his hipbones—had the creep always weighed ninety pounds? Mike snickered. He's littler than I am, almost. A chipmunk in the woods.

Mike darted around the front of Rommie's house and crept up the driveway, unfurling the firecracker fuse. His heart was pounding, but his hands didn't shake. He flicked his lighter and gazed for a moment, breathless, at the flame. Touched it to the fuse of the firecrackers and waited for the sizzle, then took careful aim to throw them. They landed right where he'd wanted—under the porch, right under Rommie's chair, right where he sat down every night to watch The Mike Show. He crouched low and waited.

The crackers went off and Rommie shrieked. He leaped up into the air, then got down onto the porch floorboards, as if he was dodging bullets. From the edge of the house, Mike could see Rommie's eyes bulging in fear. Laughter started bubbling up his throat again and he clapped his hands over his mouth and ran for his own house, cackling.

He got inside and back to his room as fast as he could and got back into his pajamas while his parents were muttering in their own bedroom about what was that, I heard something, we'd better go check. Mike stood by his door and waited to open his when they opened theirs.

"Mom? Dad?" He rubbed his fists into his eyes. "I heard a noise."

His mom came over, stroked his hair. "We did, too, sweetheart. Dad's going to see what it was."

Mike leaned against her and listened. Their front door, then their back door opened and shut. His dad came back.

"Well, I looked all around, but I didn't see anything. Probably those damn kids down the street." He looked down at Mike. "It's fine, kiddo. You can go on back to bed."

His mom leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Goodnight, sweetie. Go back to sleep."

Mike lay down and had nearly fallen asleep—finally—when a flash of color outside caught his eye. Blue, pulsing light. He slid out of bed again, pulled on jeans, and got out the back door. There was a cop car at the curb in front of Rommie's house, lights slowly revolving. Interesting. Mike snuck over to the raggedy bushes at the edge of Rommie's yard and crouched down.

Rommie was at his front door, waving his arms and babbling at a cop who was holding a little notebook but not writing anything down in it.

Uh-huh, uh-huh, the cop kept said, nodding. Uh-huh.

"They're after me!" Rommie's voice was all cracks and squeals. "I mean it! I don't know why they're after me, but they are, all of em. Sending people around to spy on me, to shoot at me—they shot at me! Shot! I was shot!"

"Uh-huh. You said that," the cop said. "But I don't see that. You say you were shot at... in your backyard?"

"Yes! *Yes!*" Rommie screeched. "How many times do I have to tell you that? Shot up my porch and me on it!"

"...your *back* porch."

Rommie gaped at the cop. Mike grinned in the bushes.

"But— but—"

"Sir, you've obviously been the victim of a prank of some kind. I can take a statement down and we can record an incident of the disturbance. But I find no evidence of any 'shooting' of any kind—"

Rommie grabbed the cop by the shoulder, just like Mike's dad grabbed him when he was mad. That was supposed to make you look him in the face, to really listen. But ohh you don't do that to a cop, Rommie, you dumb retard. Mike held his breath and leaned forward.

"Listen! Listen to me!"

The cop took Rommie's arm and spun him around. Handcuffs flashed in the moonlight.

"Sir, you are under arrest for assaulting an officer."

Rommie was faced in Mike's direction now, but he couldn't see Mike. Not in all these shadows. Mike hoisted two middle fingers just above the tops of the bushes and waved them in Rommie's direction as Rommie struggled to talk. Mike saw spit dangling from Rommie's chin. He looked like somebody with that Old Timer's disease, the one where you can't remember

where you live or what your kids' names are. He'd been scared of this guy?

The cop hustled Rommie into the back of the squad car and drove off, lights still flashing silently. Mike waited in the darkness and looked all around at the other houses—the Burmeisters across the street, the Mahoneys kitty-corner from Mike, old man Torneau next to Rommie—to see if anyone else was out, watching. Nobody.

Mike made himself count to a hundred before he slipped back around to Rommie's back door. The door was open just a little. He couldn't wait to see what that creepy cocksucker's house looked like inside. Nobody could stop him from doing it, least of all Rommie. Little chipmunk got locked up, too bad. Time to see how little chipmunk lives. And if little chipmunk's nest gets fucked up, oh won't he be scared. He won't be able to sleep, wondering if someone's watching.

Mike's mouth was dry and his palms were slick with sweat. His dick was hard, even. This was going to be *way* better than Dad's underwear catalog.

He slipped in through the back door.

*

Sam came back a few days later. After supper, Mike went out to the garage to get his bike, pausing only to look over at Rommie, who had, unfortunately, gotten out of jail after only a couple days. He was back on his porch, watching Mike like always, but it didn't bother him any more, did it? Nah. Mike got his bike out, hopped on, and gave Rommie a big smile, pointing a finger like a pistol at him as he did it. Rommie squirmed a little in his lawn chair. He looked like he was having a hard time smiling back. That's a good little chipmunk.

Mike raced over to Green Acres and found Sam playing horse with Nate. Mike waited

until Sam won, then said, come on, let's go to the woods.

They rode their bikes through the paths to a place Mike had found, a clearing out past the sled hill where high-schoolers came to party. There were empty liquor bottles around, and a trash barrel full of ashes from a fire.

They sat on a log near the fire-barrel.

"Here," Mike said, "I got you these." He handed over two packs of bottle rockets.

"Cool," Sam said. "How'd you get them?"

"Oh," Mike said, shrugging, "I kified em from a firework tent."

Sam looked impressed.

"But that's not the best thing," Mike said, digging in his backpack, "I got all this, too." He pulled out his stash. His dad's old Frederick's of Hollywood catalog, fireworks, lighters, half a pack of cigarettes, a magazine called *Bondage Babes*, a pipe, and a baggie of weed he'd found in the drawer of Rommie's coffee table.

"Whoa," Sam breathed.

Mike grinned.

He didn't pull out the set of keys he'd taken from the hook in Rommie's kitchen. Those he kept in his pocket like always. Just in case he might need them.

Get A Leg Up

I'd have never suspected Christian had such a very professional Jerk Fade-Away. Masterful. But after a year of what I thought had been a pretty mutual, comfortable arrangement, to be dumped? To sit at home watching TV marathons and burning frozen pizzas for lunch and dinner while I was supposed to be working on my lab writeups? It was bullshit. Even fuckbuddies get despondent, you know. I expected better from a guy whose diatribes about Schopenhauer I had endured as often as he had my rants about improper potassium storage.

One week, he and I were at the diner with Sara after class, sharing the big plate of chili cheese fries like usual, then going out for our dinner-and-fuck Friday, then a whole lot of not much. He answered fewer and fewer calls, moved from full body hugs to one-armed hugs to shoulder-squeezes when I was out with him and his coffeeshop coworkers. Then, finally, nothing but a fist-bump across a table crowded with friends. But never a mention, public or private, of not wanting to be around me; that wouldn't have been nice.

And no, I wasn't dumb enough or desperate enough to text or call him once we hit re-entry into Planet Friend. We were just friends again. Pals who had spooned for a few consecutive Friday nights. Acquaintances who happened to have fucked a couple dozen times.

So I hung up my jock for a while, metaphorically speaking. I made myself forget how his hair felt curling around my fingers, how good he was to talk to about everything. He de-stressed me.

But I didn't need a fuckbuddy; I needed to aim higher. Highest. Wasn't that what senior year was supposed to be about? No more moaning for your old Phil-302 tablemate. I figured I could bother with boys and all the other stuff once I'd gotten the degree under my belt. No sense

getting all drag-around-the-house-y and screwing up my senior year recuperating from the sting of a brush-off. No distractions. Eyes on the prize. You know, whatever that turned out to be.

So I put blinders on. I had shit to do. Big labs, volunteering (read: sucking up) in the Chem Department, the internship with Kakauna Cheese, and, somewhere in there, enough hours at Family Video to keep everything chugging along. I smoked too much, I drank rootbeer floats laced with vanilla vodka, and I got straight As. That, I figured, would pay off better in the end. Help me get a leg up on the competition.

*

A hundred and fifty bucks for my internship wardrobe. My last day, after I cleaned out my cubicle, I got as far as the Dairy Queen a mile down Lake Road and had to pull over and tear the blouse off. The reek coming off the collar made me sick.

"Oh, yah, it's pretty bad," Big Donna had said on my first walk-through of the place. "It's the rennet. Better now that it's synthetic, but still. It's not gonna be as bad when you're in the labs, but here on the floor, it's kinda nasty." She walked slowly, as if to spite me for my wrinkled-up nose and watery eyes. Probably it was really because Big Donna was, well, Big. Anybody who introduces herself as Big anything has a commitment to bigness, which I suppose includes moving at a certain pace.

"Oh," I said, "it's not so bad." The air was so thick and bilious that I imagined it was actually yellow and our bodies cut through it, leaving swirling currents of reek in our wake. "I was just expecting it to smell, you know..."

"Like cheese?" Big Donna bared her teeth at me in something like a smile. "Yah, it don't

smell much like cheese. Smells like recycled cheese, if you know what I mean."

"Recycled... oh." I pushed out a laugh. "Yeah, it does smell a little like that."

Big Donna opened up the door to the labs and ushered me in. The smell was a little less in there. I told myself it'd be fine. And Kakauna Cheese was the best internship available. Hours of sample-racking and coffee-brewing for profs had gone into this, and I wanted to bolt because it smelled like bile and Limburger? Hell with that. I was moving on up to my pick of sweet lab gigs in May. No more re-racking the Pokemon and porno tapes at Family Video for this kid. This was the in.

Big Donna introduced me to the politer and thankfully un-Big lab supervisor Steve, who smiled apologetically after Big Donna had lumbered back out to the floor.

"It gets better," he said after I'd introduced myself.

"Sure," I said. No matter what "it" was, I was being un-paid to agree.

*

Sara and I spent a lot of time together that Spring, too, when I wasn't compulsively washing my button-downs or moping like an idiot. Always the same booth in the diner. I smoked and she chewed pencils; I ground out reports and she added and removed curlicues in her grad-school application materials. A lot of club sandwiches and bullshit went into those applications, which the departments who rejected her either totally understood or didn't understand at all.

One night at the diner, Sara's eyes a little too shiny as she stared down at her manuscript, Christian strolled in, a hook-nosed blonde in tow. The gal headed right for a booth on the other end of the smoking section, but Christian lingered.

"Hey guys, how's it going?"

I rolled my eyes. Sara dug her hand into her hair, pulling at it.

"Great," I said. "Just great."

"Oh yeah?" He smiled and slid in next to me, tilted his head to nice-chat angle. "How's your internship going?"

"Great," I said. My hands didn't have enough to do. I reached for my pack, and Christian raced to flick my Bic. Um, okay. "It's great. It's gonna look *so* good on my resume. My supervisor Steve already promised me a great letter of rec. So did Dr. Nuren."

Sara looked up at "letter of rec" and a look washed over her face, I knew I'd just hurt her all over again. "Oh, God, letters of rec," she groaned. "I wish I could've seen them."

Christian looked over at her. He was obviously concerned. I was, too, actually. Sara's was usually the beatific smile at the table.

"Come on, Sara," he said, and moved to turn her manuscript face-down. "Don't let apps get you down *that* much. I applied to a bunch of places. I didn't even hear back from all of them."

Sara stuck a pencil in her mouth and started gnawing. "But you got in."

Christian laughed. "Well, yeah, at Green Bay. Big stretch there. We already go there. You'll go somewhere bigger and better. I mean, come on. How many classes have we been in together?"

Sara laughed. "Too many."

"And how many times did you get the A when I got the B?"

"Yeah..."

He turned back to me. I wasn't expecting it. God, he had great eyes. Why he wanted to focus them on that peroxide skag in the corner was just totally goddam beyond me.

"Sara will get into grad school. Somewhere awesome, probably. And I'll be at good old Green Bay, and you—" he poked me in the side, just above a ticklish spot he damn well knew about— "you'll be running some slick lab, turning lead into gold. Right?"

I happened to catch the eyes of his new lady-friend just then. I blew my last drag out straight up into the air and raised an eyebrow at Miss Thang. "Sure, a happy ending for everybody."

Christian grinned and slid out. He headed to his booth, where he'd regale the broad with tales of Heidegger. Hopefully he'd choke on a chili cheese fry.

Sara snapped her fingers in my face. "C'mon, help me. I need to get this right. What if I put this paragraph up here?"

*

After graduation, just about the time Christian had declared I'd be turning lead into gold, I started shopping myself around. It should have been a cinch. I had everything any lab could have wanted: UW-Green Bay Dean's list, cum laude, letters of rec that just made me want to cry about how awesome I was. My name was even on a couple of published articles, for shit's sake. I was amazing.

And there were no jobs.

Moving back in with Mom and Dad is the dumbest, most uninteresting story there ever was. Always is. Highlights included my falling out the bed the first couple of nights because I'd forgotten, apparently, how to sleep in a twin-size, sitting across the dining room table with Mom every Sunday, her with coupons, me with want-ads, and a screaming fight between the two of us

that inevitably dissolved into me crying and her urging me to "just get a job, honey, get anything to tide you over, it'll make you feel more useful." And Dad bringing up the novel idea of charging me rent. End of each month he pulled that one out. Like I said, most boring story there ever was.

I cleaned the house a lot. Cooked dinner a lot. Went to a lot of Saturday matinees with Leslie and dodged questions about work whenever possible. Not that Leslie asked me much. She never bothered with "the college shit," went straight into receptionist work out of high school, and by now had a townhouse, a giant, drooly dog named Bubba, and a paunchy mechanic boyfriend. I wrote emails to Sara, who'd gone away to grad school in New York (Christian had been right about her, of course--one more little annoyance, thanks).

Most nights I went out and just sat in my booth at the diner, filled ashtrays and drafted cover letters. I couldn't afford real going-out, and the busy-work made me feel a little better about being a jobless schmuck. I even started thinking Grad school, God help me.

Christian showed up one night there with a dumpy Goth chick. I didn't have Sara there to protect me, either. I gave him a good, nasty smirk despite my jackhammering pulse. This time, he didn't slide into the booth for a chat. He sat at the next booth, facing me. I could feel him trying to catch my eyes so that he could smile and say "hi." I didn't give him the satisfaction. If we said hi, he'd just come over here and try to talk about grad school or ask me where my magic alchemy lab was. I kept mangling my cover letters and didn't give him the satisfaction. My hands shook over the sentence "I am a methodical and detail-oriented lab technician with a solid foundation of knowledge in both organic and inorganic chemistry."

*

Took three months, but finally I was nine-to-fiveing it like somebody who had earned herself some great letters of recommendation. Unfortunately, it was Dad's good deed that made things happen, which was annoying. The diaper plant he worked for wanted entry-level lab rats in the testing center, I was an entry-level lab rat, and Dad gave me the jump on all the other white-coat hopefuls by walking my resume over to HR and shooting the shit with Donna (not Big Donna, although this one was pretty big, too) and charming her all up and down before he handed the envelope over. He gloated about his victory over his supper plate each night. He'd solved the problem, and now there'd be one less car cluttering up the driveway. Baby bird successfully shoved back out of nest. When he wasn't simpering at me over the meatloaf, he was shoving "For Rent" listings in my face.

"I might've gotten the interview without your sweet-talking, Dad."

"Like hell."

"The lab supervisor used to work for Kakauna Cheese, Dad."

"Okay, sure. So what do you think about this place? It's close to work, heat and water. Got a carport, that's always good. We can put it on the drive-by list. You've got tomorrow off, right?"

*

SAM—Super Absorbent Material—is great for people under the age of 3. When you're still pissing your didies, it's fantastic stuff. Sucks up ten times its volume in liquid, mats well between layers of tri-poly blend and poly-cotton absorbate, is non-toxic in granular form.

Not so great for even a semi-adult like me, one of two dozen lab rats in the diaper plant. It got under my fingernails, turned to jelly, got stuck in boogery wads on my clothes and on the lenses of my lab goggles. Even worse, it got in my hair. Every couple of days, the same scenario emerged: I stood in the shower trying to work my shampoo into hair that looked like somebody blew his nose into it. Okay, not quite like mucus; dissolving SAM is nearly identical to, well, a different human excretion. The kind I'd sort of sworn off for a while. So I'd be standing in the shower with diaper-padding bukkake in my hair for twenty minutes, the water would go cold, the SAM would plug up the tub drain and I'd stand, naked and goosebumpy, plunging the tub drain while my hair smacked down against my neck and cheeks and forehead. Finally, I would give up and get out of the tub and shiver in front of the TV until the hot water had a chance to recover.

But I was salary, the loans were all paid off, and there was a new car in the carport. Drinking out of fancy new glasses from a matched set, eating not-burned frozen pizzas off of porcelain plates instead of paper ones. And if I didn't like work, not even a little bit? Well, life ain't all bullshit sessions at the diner. You don't really get to turn lead into gold. Eventually you have to stop talking Schopenhauer and just get to work, and work ain't fun. Right?

*

Sara'd gone off doing the grad-school thing, so I couldn't talk to her about any of it. And Leslie never had any patience for my "constant whiny crap." Post-matinee drinks at her place got tense.

"Well, what do you really want to do?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. A good job."

"You *have* a good job. You make more than me. You might even get promoted some day."

"Define 'good.' I mean, I *hate* dragging myself there every day." I poked at the ice cubes in my drink. Leslie didn't have any ice cream in the house—too fattening. Vodka and rootbeer isn't as good without the ice cream.

The silence on Leslie's end of the couch was loud enough that I finally looked up. She stared at me, eyebrows lost under bangs.

"You're kidding, right? That's your crisis, that you have to drag yourself to work? It's *work*. I mean, big fucking deal. It's a job. If they didn't pay you to go, you wouldn't go. You work, they pay you, then you take the money and your free time and go do the stuff you actually like to do. You're not supposed to float there every day. Mostly, you drag. I drag."

"I don't *want* to drag," I said.

"So?"

I set my drink down too hard on the table. "Every other night I have another stupid lab-stress dream where all the deadlines are five minutes from now, and every day I'm buried in test tubes full of fake pee. It's all shit, no Shinola. I want something to go *right*, and I don't even know what right would *be*. It's just... I didn't expect it to be this way."

We sat quiet for a minute.

"I wish Sara was here."

Leslie smiled sadly. "Me, too. Must be fun, grad school."

"Well, yeah, grad school in New York must be fun is what you mean." I picked my drink up again, downed it. "Maybe I should look for jobs in Milwaukee."

"Milwaukee?" Leslie snorted. "You think that would help?"

I got up and fixed myself another drink.

*

Leslie worked at Mercy Medical, answering phones over in the Mental Health ward. She said it suited her temperament. She called me to tip me off to the opening in Histology a week before the notice hit the want ads. "Frankenstein's lab needs somebody. If you want out of that diaper factory, you should give it a shot."

"If?"

"Come on, no bullshit. You said you hate it there."

"I do." And I did—salary and a new car and blah blah, and maybe it was some whiny kid's fantasy, finding the Dream Career and floating to work every day, but the prospect of testing the absorption rate of sizes 1 through 6 of the Deluxe versus the Regular diapers for the next thirty years made me want to puke until I cried. A hospital, though—that could be more interesting.

So I took the number Leslie gave me, I called, and I poured charisma into the phone. I talked up my microscope skills and my incident-free record, dropped all the names I had shortlisted to impress, promised to send a full resume and application packet, whatever they required, as soon as I got off the phone. On the other end, Bill, who sounded like the meekest man on the planet, was suitably wowed, told me to go ahead—"whatever you think is best," he said, as if I was the one who was supposed to give him orders—and called me back the next day and told me to come on in and pack a lunch, they'd start training me right away.

I packed a lunch for my first day just like Bill said. I didn't end up eating any of it.

Bill was as tender and homely as I'd pictured him. His whole body was a limp handshake. I let him lead the way to the lab, which was hard to do because he shuffled so slowly down the

halls. Histology was in the basement, just next to the morgue. Our footsteps echoed along one beige-tiled tunnel after another. I started feeling a little claustrophobic.

"The main job is processing tissues, samples," he said. He had a little lisp, not enough to pick up on over the phone, but a touch. Or maybe he just hadn't tried the phrase "processing tissues" with me over the phone. "Most of it is diagnostic materials. Sometimes tissues recovered during surgery. The occasional biopsy."

"No problem," I said. He sounded like he wanted someone to sound confident. He sure didn't. "I can take care of any of that."

"Oh, wonderful." We shuffled into the lab. I could hear the classic rock station playing somewhere, and the lighting was better in here—less hospital-basement-ish. The beige tile was in here, too, though, which made the place feel a little like the world's biggest bathroom. The main room had three lab stations, all empty, two fridges, and a big slab of a table in the middle. A surgical pan lay on the table. Inside it was...

"Oh, your first tissue," Bill lisped, smiling. "I'll let you do the honors. Here, I'll show you where everything is."

I stared at the maroon chunks in the pan. "What are those?"

"Hm? Oh, they look like kidney stones. Okay, so here on this shelf, here's the formulin. Extra bottles in the storage closet, lots of them. You'll never run low on that. And you'll need one of these sample jars, there's a whole cabinet full. Use the smallest one you think will work. We don't want to run out of big jars the next time a hysterectomy tissue pan comes down." He pulled down a jar from the cabinet and smiled expectantly at me.

"Yeah, uh, we sure don't." A hysterectomy? As in, the next time a womb comes down the chute from Surgery and I have to put it in a mayonnaise jar? Maybe poke some holes in the lid so

it can breathe? And then I realized that I couldn't breathe.

"Uh, Bill? Where..." Where is the bathroom, that was what I wanted to ask, but I made myself stop. I wasn't going to puke. I *refused* to puke. It was just tissue, after all. This wasn't too many shots of Jager at a house party. And maybe I'd never dealt with real human pieces before, but samples are samples. This was basically human SAM. The human equivalent of 3-month cheddar. I never got squeamish carving up a lab rat. "Where should I put this?" I shrugged the arm weighed down by my lunch bag.

"Oh! Yes, I forgot about that. Here, let's get you settled. You can deal with the tissue in a second. You'll be working here." He pointed out the lab cubicle on the right. "You can put your lunch in this fridge." He opened it up and I set it in alongside a couple other bags, one with "Bill" written tiny at the top.

"Just don't put your food in this fridge." He chuckled and opened the other one up. Rows of jars on the shelves, smaller jars on the door shelves where you'd keep your ketchup, mustard, barbeque sauce. Formulin-magnified stones and scraps bulged out of each one.

I forced myself to laugh. "Yeah, that would be bad."

*

Stones are no biggie. They're just stones. They're not supposed to be in the body anyway; it's like somebody chugged some gravel and they had to get it out. A uterus or a kidney, that's harder. We only get so many organ-sized containers. Supply always promises Bill more, but it's bullshit.

Second shift in Histology had one downside—the mail. I'd considered baking some cookies or otherwise coming up with a bribe to get the mailman to Mercy earlier on the route so

the A.M. tech would have to process the deliveries, but I never held out much hope for getting the system changed. Every day, the mailman brought a stack of stool cards for us to process. Us being me. Bill mostly hid in his office and cataloged sample and tissue dates and took off at five every day. My job was the microscope, under which two dozen stool cards slid on a daily basis.

A month into the job I got over the sight of raw chicken breasts and pork loins at the grocery store. But before that... diet in a slump? Process stool cards, then drop by the Moto Mart to pick up a pack of smokes, grab a package of peanut butter cups to nosh on the way home. I may be able to look at raw chicken sliding around under plastic wrap again, but I think the smear of chocolate on the cardboard packaging of the Reese's and the poo smear on a stool card are inextricably linked now. Bummer. I really liked peanut butter cups.

*

Sara came home from NYU for Christmas. She had missed us *so much*, she said. "I have got to go back for New Year's, though. There's no better place for New Year's. You gonna watch it on t.v.?"

Leslie and I gave each other a look. We'd been in the diner for an hour, shooting the shit over fries, catching up. Sara had a pair of retro-looking horn-rims and hadn't taken off her scarf the entire time. Neither of us had said it, but I'm sure Leslie was thinking the same thing I was: we had a whole different Sara in front of us now. I didn't want to kick *her* ass so much as the ones belonging to the people that she'd been hanging out with in New York. But she did look happy. That was good, considering how she'd been the last while before she got accepted at NYU. Her entire diet had consisted of Eberhard-Faber shreds, French fries, and the kind of

cheese that comes in an industrial-sized can. Now she was groaning about how much she missed panini and falafel.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "They'll probably have it on TV wherever we end up."

Leslie kicked me under the table. "I thought we were going to the fireworks downtown."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. We'll probably do that."

Sara gave us a pitying smile. "Oh, the fireworks. I forgot about those. Yeah, you guys should do that. That sounds like fun."

She forgot about the fireworks? She'd only been gone a year. "So what's the plan for Spring Break?" I asked. "You coming back here to visit, or maybe just summer?"

Sara flipped her hair out of her eyes. "Spring Break... I don't know, I'm on the wait list for this writer's retreat Upstate. It's really important to my degree. And in the summer I'm doing that volunteer tutoring program in Chicago. Oh my god, you guys should so come visit me when I'm there! It's not far."

"Five hours," Leslie said.

I kicked her this time. "Yeah, only five hours," I said, flipping my hair like Sara to see how it felt. It felt weird. "Not far at all. We should totally come visit you." Maybe not, but it's nice to be nice.

Sara sipped her tea. Leslie drank her coffee. I drank my rootbeer, wishing for vodka in it.

"So, how's the new job, anyway? Leslie said you're at Mercy now."

I'd said that, too, but I guess it wasn't in Chicago. Or at a writer's retreat. You know, important to her degree. "Yeah, Mercy. Histology. It's not bad. Processing samples. Kinda lonely, I guess, but it's good work. Good hours."

"Oh," Sara said, toying with her teabag. "That sounds nice."

"It's all right. So, when do you find out your grades from Fall semester?"

Sara lit up. And again, when I asked her what her Spring schedule looked like.

*

The leg never gave me much pause, except that it created a logistical problem. First day back after the long holiday weekend, but I was feeling good. Came in from dinner break swinging my sub back and forth in the bag, la di dah, time for a twelve-inch meatball and a couple racks of urine samples, and found a big red Biohazard back on the Slab of Fun.

I set my sandwich a few feet away on the table and frowned at the bag. Poked it. Smoothed down the red plastic and got the general shape of it. It was pretty clearly a human leg, complete with foot and knee. Well, what was I supposed to do with a leg? We didn't keep any leg-sized jars in Histology. Anything Surgery lopped off got sent down to us, sure, but an above-the-knee amputation was a little out of our line. We kept appendixes logged in case they grew cancer and stored saliva stones. We weren't a body disposal center. This thing was over ten percent of the human body stuck in a Zip-Lock. What the fuck was I supposed to do with a *leg*?

Put it in the fridge, of course.

It was a little too big to lie down on a shelf. The foot was still nice and bendy—the knee, too, fresh from surgery, couldn't believe it wasn't still warm—so I did my best to flex the whole thing into a Z and jimmy it in horizontally. No dice. I took Bill's sixpack of Diet Coke out of the Lunch Fridge and filled that up with sample jars from the Ick Fridge, clearing all the space on the door shelves and successfully wedging the leg in that way.

I washed my hands, got out a Post-It note and wrote "Full" on it, stuck it to the Lunch

Fridge. Then, sandwich time. The footlong was decidedly leg-shaped, and the marinara sauce glared extra red under the fluorescents. I shrugged it off and helped myself to one of Bill's Diet Cokes.

At break, I called Leslie.

"Well, my day's been made. Maybe even my *week*."

"What happened?"

"Okay," I started, "so I get back from picking up dinner..."

*

The tally after a year was two legs, three uteruses (uteri?), and one glorious week where no stool cards showed up in the mail. That week was rad. It was like Christmas.

Leslie and I kept up our Saturday matinee habit. She'd gotten engaged to the mechanic and transferred to Obstetrics, so our Saturday dates were my only chance to see her. Sara emailed me once in a while from school. Each email pleaded with me to come visit her in the city. "The city," as if I'd never seen a city before. It's the best place, she said. You would *so* love it. There's lots of lab work out here, too, probably. You should take a look. You might even find something better. I'll look into it, I promised. I doubted I would.

A tech from Oncology I always talked to on smoke breaks, Brian, offered to buy me a late dinner after work one night, and I took him up on the offer. I suggested the diner, he agreed, and when I saw Christian and his coffeeshop brethren at the first booth, I didn't flinch. I gave him a big grin.

"Hey," he said, sounding surprised and happy. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever!"

"Hey yourself," I said, reaching over to bop him on the shoulder. "How you been?"

He scooted over in the booth to make room for me. "Good. Great, really. You wanna sit down?"

I looked over at Brian and smiled. Took his arm. "Oh, thanks, but I think we're gonna get a table."

Christian gave Brian a nod. "No problem. But don't leave without saying goodbye."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said.

We sat down. Brian peered at me over the top of the menu. "So, what's good here?"

I peeked back at him over mine. "Everything. Especially the fries. But, fair warning: if you want me to talk about work, you'll want to avoid certain foods."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yes. For instance," I said, "did you know that a tapeworm looks an *awful* lot like a piece of raw bacon?"

Brian gaped at me, then burst into laughter. Threw his head back and bellowed, eyes leaking tears. He was still laughing when I looked over to Christian's booth. Christian looked up, and we locked eyes just for a second. I rolled my eyes a little and smiled. He smiled back.

Funeral Hotdish

Uncle Dave's drunk. It's hard to believe, but not really, that he'd be drunk an hour after the lids are back on the pans of toffee bars. Mom took a pan of bars home, plus a huge Tupperware container of hotdish. There's enough to last us for the next few days, she said. You've got to eat it to save it, she said. She just better hope she didn't spill any on my car upholstery or I'll show *her* the meaning of saving. That thing's not even a year old; I'm still making payments on it. I should've gone home with her, made sure. That car means a lot to me—who doesn't love their getaway car?

And anyway I should've gone home instead of riding with Brucie for "just one" down to the bar. I mean, look at the class acts I'm with. Not forty-five minutes deep at Shooter's where the real wake is going on, Uncle Dave halfway to shitfaced and slurring about how he's gonna miss the old man, et cetera. I've got a can of Jolly Good Redpop in my hand and Great Aunt Eileen in my ear clucking about the food they'd had at the rectory, *oh* wasn't it so nice, but *oh* Sharon and Helen brought the same ham salad, can you *imagine* it, I just don't understand how two sisters can't do something simple like call and ask the other one about what they're bringing. I'm just so glad that me and Irene talk more than that, I mean can you *imagine*?

I want to finish this pop, clear out, get home. And not Mom's house, I mean home-home. Do not pass GO, do not spend the night, do not troop hung-over to the lawyer's office tomorrow with the droolbucket truck-driving fucktard Mahoneys to see what Grampa left us in the will. I know that's how things usually go after a Grampa dies, but for the Mahoneys I just know it'll be extra shanty, extra grabby. I want to get in the car, get back to Madison. Maybe make a late dinner. Something that doesn't coat your throat with cream of mushroom soup, something you don't top with cheese and potato chip crumbs and bake to death. I don't want to eat it to save it.

But I'm here, so I might as well see what's to see.

I switch to Jolly Good Grape, then Jolly Good Sour. The rest of the family is getting tanked and I get to watch the shitshow from the soberest seat in the house, which is sort of satisfying, but none of these Jolly Goods are making me feel jolly. They can't even cut the taste of that goddam ham salad out of my mouth. Then "Brandy, You're A Fine Girl" comes roaring out of the juke like I guess I figured it would, every time I'm at Shooter's that one comes on, and Uncle Dave puts a brandy old-fashioned in my hand. It slops over the rim of the glass and gets my fingers sticky. I didn't want to drink, I *said* that, but oh fuck it. Why else be at Shooter's? Nothing like a little slumming with the stump-tooths back home before getting back to civilization. Little hair of the dog that's bit all us Mahoneys since forever. Just one and then I'll clear out. A toast to Grampa, even. I'm going to miss him, how he called me Lambchop ever since I was little and he'd bounce me on his knee. Still called me it. Lambchop, you look just like your old man. Bet he'd be real proud you're doing so good down there in your classes at the Tech.

And you know, Grampa liked his brandy. I feel like he would've approved a second round.

Three drinks in and I gotta break the seal. Cousin Brucie sees that same old wobble in my walk, teases me for it, he-ey, lookit the lightweight city girl. Guess you can't keep up any more. Didn't I teach you nothing? Piss on him. As if the best thing in life is to stay one drink ahead of the competition. But Brucie don't know shit. Rounds at Shooter's, stealing cable from the neighbors, and ordering deer musk out of the new Cabela's catalog, that's what Brucie knows. If he ever watched a TV program that *wasn't* narrated by a guy with a Southern accent or read a book or tried to do something with his life... but nah, course not. Backwoods fucking loser.

I weave my way to the back where the bathrooms are and see too many faces smiling at

me that I know. Ugh. Of *course* I know everyone. Everybody who's anybody goes to Shooter's. It's the hottest club in the boonies. All the best townies and Rez boys come here to class it up. I recognize all kinds of people I don't want to talk to. People I went to high school with, people who used to hang out and get drunk with Brucie back in the old barn. People I have exactly nothing in common with. There's a couple of strange faces that look good by comparison, which at this point mostly just means I won't have to have another conversation about did I miss home? Isn't it great to be back? A good-looking Rez boy back by the pool tables, for instance. I don't remember ever seeing him down at the barn or the boathouse. He gives me a sly look, cocks his head at me. Tempting.

But first things first, past the door marked Bucks and through the door marked Does. In the least lousy-looking stall I lay toilet paper out on the seat and read the message punched out in label-maker tape above the toilet PLEASE DO NOT FLUSH TAMPONS. Sit down and on my right is ABSOLUTELY NO TAMPONS. On the left above the roll dispenser WE BEG YOU NO FLUSHING OF TAMPONS. Oh forget tall, dark and handsome out there. I stopped letting Rez boys grind on me at the dance hall two years ago when I moved away for good. I don't run this circuit any more. I want out of here. Cousin Brucie's a tool, Mom wants me to stay the whole weekend, great, a whole weekend eating leftover funeral hotdish, eat it to save it. Great-Aunt Eileen won't shut up about the stupid goddam ham salad, which I can *still* taste, all salt and cold fat and globs of Miracle Whip under the brandy and maraschino cherries I've taken on now that I've given up on the Jolly Good. I flush NO TAMPONS WE BEG YOU NO TAMPONS and pat my hair back into shape. Not that this is the sort of crowd where you gotta be a looker. Shit, this is Shooter's, the Mahoney family's home away from home, where Uncle Dave has five or six seven-and-sevens and starts shaving the one dollar bills off the tops of the unattended tip piles on

the bar before heading home. Shooter's, where Cousin Angel and her husband Boomer had their *wedding reception*. Shooter's, where Daddy had come after work all those years ago and loaded up on whiskey-cokes before heading out that last time, sorry Dave, gotta keep 'er moving; Death waits for no one, time to get going and put a deer through my windshield going seventy. Poor Daddy. He deserved better than that.

I knew Uncle Dave and them figured I'd moved away to make more money. That made sense to them. They'd gotten it wrong, but you can't tell a Mahoney anything. I just wanted fucking *out*. I didn't get the scholarship to college, but I moved to Madison anyway and signed up for classes at the Tech. No university, no campus full of neat hedges and ivy, but anything in Madison is better. Computer programming classes are better than hanging around here and waiting to babysit Angel and Boomer's inevitable litter. Getting up at four in the morning to boil bagels and wear a uniform and a big fake smile for the university pricks, the ones that got the scholarships I should've had, is better than getting up at four in the morning for first shift at the paper mill or hanging out at Stubby's Pizza until some dude with dip in his pocket becomes my knight in Ford Explorer, knocks me up and parks me in a three-bedroom ranch with a taxidermied fish on the dining-room wall and a big screen TV in the living room. One more Hicksville Cinderella. I'd get fat and wear mom jeans, I'd lose a few teeth. Bagels in Madison are better. My patio in the burbs is better. I'm here with brandy perking through my system like I always was on a Saturday night, but this isn't my Saturday night any more. I'm not another backwoods loser.

So fuck this noise, I'm out. I burst out the bathroom door. Bye Cousin Brucie, bye Cousin Angel, I gotta get home, yeah, I know, I'm such a lightweight, right? Not how it used to be. Night, Uncle Dave, thanks for the drinks, really sorry about Grampa. I'm sure he's happy. Your

toffee bars were *so* good, Eileen, thank you. You know, you're right, nobody made coleslaw. I bet if Helen and Sharon had talked to each other they could have made a better choice about what to make instead of two batches of PLEASE NO WE BEG YOU NO brandy and ham salad, what I wouldn't give to not be here. Brandy, you're a fine girl. A sucker is what I am, coming down to Shooter's as if I was still in high school using Angel's old fake ID to get in. I shouldn't be here. Class picks up at the Tech next week and I want to be two weeks ahead of everybody. No, three. I got the books already. One more year of stuffing bagels down fancy kids' throats and I'll have a good job, be looking for a house. A *real* one, not like Angel and Boomer's doublewide shit-shack out near the Rez. And I won't let Mom bring hotdish when she visits. I won't eat it to save it. It isn't worth saving, Mom. It's garbage, how did you never know that? Why do you still insist on it? Why do none of you guys know that it's all just a big trashy pile of slop?

I'm trying to shove through the crowd to the doors, but the place is lousy with relatives. I just *loved* the fruit salad Barb made and I can't *believe* he's gone, seventy-three's too young, reminds me of when poor Bill was in that wreck, oh that was so long ago. Does she need any help, you think? Oh, now, she don't want no charity. Seventy-three. It is a damn shame. Well I heard she's doing real good down there in Madison, oh that's nice, she's really making something of herself. The doctor said heart attack, well he had a smile on his face, Dave told me, maybe he was happy to go, PLEASE NO FLUSHING I got the last round, Boomer, you wanna catch this one?

I'm almost out the door when a stranger's face floats in front of me. Same boy I spotted before. Probably just as dull and rock-stupid as any of Cousin Brucie's friends, but I've never seen this one before. He's tall, and dark, so dark—definitely from over at the Rez, not full-blooded, maybe, but with a beautiful dark tan. I stop pushing so hard to get out.

"Hey there," I say. "Haven't seen you around."

"Hey yourself. You weren't on your way out, were you? Stay for just one more?"

The walls are flickering, Christmas lights, tiki lights, TVs, beer signs. His black hair, glossy, not greasy-looking, picks up the colors. They revolve around his face, his dark eyes. He leans forward, blotting out my view of Uncle Dave filching quarters from the bar. "Can't you stay for just one more? What's your name?"

I suppose I could stay for one more.

*

I wake up with my head on his bare chest. I've forgotten his name, and I've drooled on him a little in my sleep. He stirs as I wipe it off. The blanket is pilly and the room smells like old corn chips.

"Morning, beautiful."

When he stirs, a whiff of Febreeze comes up from the sheets. I am feeling about as far away from beautiful as someone can get, but I smile, try to act charming, kiss him on the cheek. He's still good-looking in the morning, which is a relief, and he's definitely not anyone I know or who I've seen hanging out with Brucie and Angel back at the Mahoney's underage-drinker barn, which is a bigger relief. He kisses me back. He takes my hand and drags it down to his half-hard dick, squeezes my hand around it, moves it for me as if I didn't prove last night that I know how to do that.

"Don't say you gotta go," he whispers. "I got the whole day free. You can stay as long as you want."

"Thanks but. It's just, you know. I'm supposed to be with my family today."

He lets me peel my hand away. "I understand, baby. It's a hard thing, losing somebody close. You and your family seem real tight."

Ugh. Baby. If I had a label-maker, I'd post signs all over me. I BEG YOU NO CALLING ME BABY. Maybe ABSOLUTELY NO SAYING I AM CLOSE TO FAMILY. Then again, I'd run out of label-tape. I kiss him again, better this time, then slide out to where my clothes are puddled on the floor. "Where am I, anyway?" As if I don't know. I'm back in the old stomping grounds, back to too much liquor and too little shame. Back to the Mahoney side of the family. Funny what you can see when you get a little ways away.

He gets up and pads to the bathroom, scratching his ass. "Cold Creek Apartments. Paradise Lane, right by the church." Of course Paradise Lane, it figures. Second-run movies on one end, defunct truckyard on the other, creepy duplex shacks in-between. I thought I'd forgotten all that, but hey, there it was, like it was yesterday.

I find my purse, do what I can to look presentable with nothing but some Carmex and a broken powder compact. My Paradise Lane beau is pissing with the door cracked while I find my panties. He flushes, I sling my purse across my shoulder.

"You need a ride?" He asks.

"Not where I'm going, thanks." And I don't. It's only a mile or so to Mom's house, then an hour's drive back to the city, windows probably down the whole time to air out a car that stinks like hotdish. It probably slopped all over the fucking upholstery, just a little taste of home, something to bring back with me.

The boy pulls on boxers and walks me to the door. "I had a good time, you know. I know Brucie a little, we've hung out a few times. When you get back to town next, look me up."

"I will." I won't.

I kiss him one last time and walk to the curb. There's no sidewalk here. He's on the second-to-last block of Paradise Lane, just before it dead-ends at the truckyard, back where Brucie and his friends used to hang out and get high when we were kids. I used to go there, too, until I moved away. I don't miss it. I'm not nostalgic for the good old days, smoking weed out of a Mountain Dew can and letting one of Brucie's buddies feel me up because I was bored.

I'm on one of those awful, too-bright, end-of-the-world blocks with no trees. Every step seems like it should echo. I'm in my black clothes with no shade, trying to finger-comb my hair into something respectable while I turn onto, surprise, surprise, Madison Avenue. That sign makes me feel like crying worse than anything at Grampa's funeral. I want to go home. I can feel sweat starting to trickle down my back, which already feels greasy from the Rez boy's hands all over it. As soon as I get back to the apartment, I'll take the longest, hottest shower I can and put back on my city-girl clothes. It may not help. PLEASE DO NOT go home again.

I try to swallow. I can still taste ham salad and brandy.

In A Box

for Lener

They were chasing the sun, but the sun was going to win. Heather watched out her window as it slid behind straggly winter-dead trees and sank toward the horizon. She felt cold in spite of the starchy fake warm of the car heater.

Her mom sighed. Heather had only been waiting for it. "Well, it was a nice memorial service. Such a *nice* service. I wonder what they'll do with that, you know, that collage—"

"Mrs. Ferrin has it. But she said she'd give it to me if I want it."

"Oh. Do you want it?"

"I don't know."

"Oh."

Heather got out her Walkman. She didn't want to listen to anything, but better that than have to talk any more. Every time she opened her mouth it felt like everything would just tip back out. Up to and including the plate of food Mom brought to her during the "refreshments" part of the funeral. Pineapple Jell-O with canned oranges suspended in it, baby carrots. A big scoop of hamburger hotdish. Whoever made the hotdish hadn't drained the fat off the hamburger and had used cheap Cream of Mushroom soup. Heather had sat with the plate in her lap, staring at the glistening gray mass as it overtook the side dishes. Finally her dad had poked her shoulder and said "c'mon, kiddo, eat. You gotta eat something." So Heather ate it all, even the piece of cake Mom brought her later. If she opened her mouth now, it would all come back out in ropy splatters and huge, screaming sobs and she knew it. Better to keep the mouth clamped shut. She sucked her teeth tight and watched the dead fields roll by.

She didn't want Jenny's collage or any of Jenny's drawings, either, even if she used to like

those things. Now it was all some kind of screwed-up evidence, some poem that the teacher made you read and re-read until you got smart enough to figure out what it really meant as opposed to what it actually *said*. Now she would read Jenny's collage, her drawings, try to make them answer questions Jenny couldn't answer any more. Why did you run in front of the semi? How did I not know you were going to do it?

But there weren't any answers, and it didn't help anything wondering. Heather still had to go home, do her homework, and get back on that fucking bus tomorrow. There wasn't any more Jenny and she didn't need to think about it. She needed to turn up her volume and stick with song lyrics. No riddles, no making you feel dumb. Guitar, bass, drums, singer. *I'm the man in the box, buried in my shit*. Except that brought Jenny back again. Now Jenny was in the box.

Heather faced forward. She saw her mom's mouth moving but was blissfully unable to hear or understand her. She turned her volume up some more. Dry runners of snow snaked across the highway blacktop.

*

They weren't the biggest losers at Turner Middle School if you counted Ricky Shultz, but he was Special and eighth graders didn't pull the "Ricky-germs, no-returns" stuff like they had in the seventh grade. It wasn't nice to pick on someone for stuff they couldn't help. So it wasn't Ricky, it was them. Jenny was still Poodle Hair or Chia Pet even though she hadn't had one of her terrible old-lady perms in almost three years, and Heather was still Crusty Pants from two years ago when Tiffany busted her wearing the same pair of underwear two days in a row. Right in the middle of changing in the locker room. Oh, gross, Heather never changes her underwear. Heather

tried to explain that they were clean, that Mom had done laundry the night before and they were clean, but nobody heard her. What had really happened wasn't the important part anyway. No one cared if the underwear was clean. The important part was that Tiffany got everyone to sing here comes Crusty Pants here comes Crusty Pants right down Crusty Pants laaaane for the rest of the school year and had managed to revive the song each Christmas. Tiffany even got part of the choir to sing it at the winter concert instead of the real words. The choir conductor didn't notice, but Heather heard it.

This year should have been different. Herds of dorky little sixth- and seventh-graders in the school, all so naive and clumsy and ready to blurt out unintentionally hilarious things. Heather could almost see bullseyes pinned to their shirts.

Heather and Jenny were on the same bus, which should have been great. And the first day of school, nobody took any notice of Heather and Jenny standing off to the side to wait for the morning bus, or of them getting into line behind the other eighth graders to get on. But when they sat in the third-to-back row just in front of the other eighth graders, it got noticed. Tiffany noticed.

"What are *you* doing back here, Crusty?"

"Nothing. We're all sitting back here."

Tiffany had a small head and bulged-out eyes like a Chihuahua. Stringy brown hair, flailing limbs. But her clothes were always right, she was on the tri-county gymnastics team, and she threw birthday parties that the other kids talked about for weeks. Her snaggly little mouth split open in a grin. Heather's mind locked up as she realized that she'd said the wrong thing.

"'We'? What, you think you're one of us? You think you're cool? You think you should sit back here with us 'cause you're cool?"

Heather was turned backward, facing Tiffany, so she couldn't see Jenny. She knew anyway that Jenny's head had retreated into her neck and that her face had tilted toward the floor, letting her hair fall in order to hide behind it. She wondered if that was why Jenny had grown out her hair, not because she hated being called Poodle Hair but because she would have hair to hide behind.

Heather sighed. "No, Tiffany. I don't think I'm cool."

"Good. 'Cause you're not, Crusty. You're not cool. How many days you been wearing those undies, Crusty? It's Monday. You still wearing Friday? Party in the pants all weekend?"

Seats full of eighth graders brayed catcalls in response. Heather felt Jenny sink lower in her seat.

"Leave us alone," Heather said, then turned around to face forward alongside Jenny.

Howls in response. Tiffany shouted to the bus driver that something smelled bad back there, like somebody was wearing dirty underwear, and it was stinking up the whole bus. Someone started thundering his fists into the back of Heather and Jenny's seat. Heather tried not to squirm, but it hurt after a while. From his seat across the aisle, Tim saw her squirm and yelled *atta boy, atta boy! punch that crust! beat that poodle!* and leaped over to join whoever was pummeling it. They added a kick to the underside of the seat every few seconds.

The ride was eventually over. The message was permanent. No more Ricky-germs, no more making fun of his nose-picking, no more refusing to eat the misshapen cookies he brought for Valentine's Day. This year, it was her and Jenny. The Chia Pet and Crusty Pants show.

Heather persuaded Jenny to walk home from school that day.

We should take the bus, Jenny said. It's too hot.

It's not that hot, Heather protested. She grinned the whole way home. Sweat ran into her

ears and trickled down the small of her back. She spent her week's allowance on candy and pop at the Moto Mart and cracked jokes about anything she could think of.

They sat on the curb outside Moto to eat their candy bars.

"Better than a ride home with Tim and Tiffany, right?"

Jenny smiled, but made no comment. She looked down at her Snickers, then at the Super Slam Mountain Dew in her other hand. "I shouldn't have this. It'll give me more zits."

"You don't have any zits."

"Yuh-huh." Jenny pushed her bangs back to reveal a few red spots.

"Oh, big deal. They're barely even noticeable. Tim, now—that guy's got zits."

Jenny smiled, sipped her pop.

"Dude's a walking lasagna."

Jenny's smile grew wider. Heather tried harder, got goofy. "He looks like Pizza the Hutt. He's got zits on his zits. He uses Crisco like Oxy. He could wring out his face and donate it to the cafeteria for them to make French fries with it."

Jenny rolled her eyes at Heather's jokes, but she laughed. "Yeah, but he can have a pizza face. I get one zit on my face, it's worse than twenty on his. I get picked on, not him. It matters who's wearing the zits."

"Well... maybe. But I know better and so do you. You look just fine. C'mon, finish the candy and let's go to your house."

"Okay. But you know I gotta watch Lori after Mom and Dad go to work."

"No big deal. Lori's okay."

Lori was already home from what the other kids called The Drool School by the time Heather and Jenny got there. Lori heard the door open and came thundering into the living room.

"Ah-bee! Ah-bee!"

"Hey, Lori." Jenny bent down to Lori-height to get covered in smacky, sticky kisses. Heather hung back. Jenny picked Lori up—a thing Heather could not make herself do, Lori was a heavy six-year-old and usually kind of dirty—and walked with her into the kitchen. Heather followed.

Mr. Ferrin was at the table reading the paper in his coverall, waiting for his dinner. He hadn't been to work yet, but he already smelled like the foundry. Mrs. Ferrin was at the stove fixing an early supper. The kitchen was hazy and yellow with the residue of years' worth of hard-boiled eggs and fried hamburgers with onions.

"Hi, Mom," Jenny said softly. Mrs. Ferrin glanced over at her and smiled, then turned back to the stove. Lori slithered down off Jenny's hip and ran to Mr. Ferrin and tried to climb into his lap. When he didn't move to let her up, she settled for resting against his leg. He absently stroked her head with his grimy fingers.

Jenny rooted around in the fridge and came up with two cans of RC. She held one out to Heather. Heather was surprised. "You sure?" The RC was Mr. Ferrin's stash, the only thing he drank now that he was supposed to give up the other stuff.

Jenny shrugged. "It's okay. We got a lot in the basement. It was on sale."

Lori followed them into the living room. "Ah-bee! Ah-bee!"

Jenny smiled. "You wanna watch Barney?"

"Ah-bee!" Lori kicked her legs out in front of her and landing hard, butt-first.

"Okay, here you go." More fiddling with the tracking-control than usual—the tapes were nearly dead—but Barney finally emerged and danced around. Lori loved the "I Love You" song. She demanded it every night as a lullaby, Jenny had told Heather once. Sometimes even when

she took a nap.

Heather sat and braided strands of her hair while Jenny ran the carpet-sweeper around the room trying to pick up the cereal crumbs Lori had left that day. Lori sang "Ah-bee-oo, ah-bee-ee." Barney clicked his foam heels in delight. Silverware clinked against plates in the kitchen. Heather drank her RC. It tasted like the foundry smelled. The room grew bright, then dark, then bright again as clouds passed over the sun outside.

"You know," Jenny said, frowning at the carpet, "tomorrow, they'll just make fun of us for being too scared to ride the bus this afternoon."

"I know," Heather said. They would.

*

She and Jenny discovered Walkmans. Jenny found one at the thrift store, and Heather begged for one for her birthday. Walkmans were great because they provided a new soundtrack. The music made everything around you into just another video on MTV. Maybe she saw Tim hanging from the bus's luggage rack, gnashing his teeth over some insult, maybe she caught a few words off his spit-flecked lips like "crusty" and "fucking dyke." But she heard "Very Ape" by Nirvana, which was perfect because that's what Tim was, very ape, a little monkey ook-ooking as he swung from the ceiling and the other chimps hooted and stomped in approval.

She and Jenny, wearing their backpacks across their chests like shields, tried their best each day to turn to unnoticeable, unremarkable stone. Anything to stop the hammer-blows of fists on the backs of their seats (and the occasional smack on the back of the head), anything to stop the winter boots that dug deep underneath their seats, seeking out the softest parts to kick.

The kicks became backbeat for Stone Temple Pilots, *flies in the Vaseline we are, keep getting stuck here all the time.*

Heather watched Tiffany's bug eyes and straggly dark hair, her tiny pointy-toothed smile. Tiffany always started off by wondering about Heather's level of crustiness that day. Once everyone agreed that it was probably fairly high, Tiffany would describe, in almost loving detail, the contents of the residues that caked Heather's panties that day, and which of those Heather would share with her breast friend Jenny. Heather heard it all during the quiet parts of "Doll Parts" while Tim's feet jabbed under her seat hoping to kick something tender. She looked at Tiffany and through Tiffany and heard Courtney Love roar *some day you will ache like I ache* and she didn't believe that, but she wanted to believe that, so she ended up believing it anyway.

She and Jenny traded tapes at lunch, talked tapes at lunch. *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge. Pretty on the Inside. Jar of Flies. The Downward Spiral.* They skipped the meal so they could pool their money to go to the record store on weekends. They swapped copies of *Spin* and *Guitar World* and ignored the wadded-up napkins that landed on their table.

Some days, the lunch trays got slapped out of their hands and they had to wipe up the mess. Some days the batteries in their Walkmans were too cold or too weak. Then, they had to either sit and cradle them in their hands, hoping they warmed up soon, or they had to pretend that they could still hear the music even though all they could hear was the jangle of insults around them.

By the first frost, Tim and Tiffany had begun a daily dialogue about how Heather and Jenny ate each other out and fingered each other. Heather wasn't sure exactly what that meant and didn't really want to know. Tim and Tiffany agreed that Jenny was the nastier one because she liked how bad Heather's crust smelled. Jenny hid behind her hair.

The volume didn't go high enough on the Walkman sometimes. Some days Heather's ears wouldn't stop ringing until lunch. Heather wondered whether Jenny was able to drown out the noise, but didn't have the nerve to ask.

That fall, Jenny didn't smile as much. Sometimes when Heather called, she said she didn't have time to talk, and Heather knew it was a lie.

Heather started getting zits. She raided the junk drawer at home a lot for more double-As to keep the Walkman alive, for cigarettes from Dad's open packs.

*

Heather persuaded Jenny to walk home on Fridays. "It's the weekend," she said, "we should be having fun, not riding in that hell on wheels as our first weekend activity." The truth was, they spent way too much of their time with people who only wanted to make them tiny. Screw that, Heather said, and finally Jenny agreed.

Winter was coming, but the sun was still warm sometimes, so the walk was kind of nice. Instead of a final taste of Tiffany, Tim, the seat-thumpers, and all the rest, Friday afternoons were Super Slams of Mountain Dew and Jenny actually laughing out loud, turning her face to the sun and listening to Heather as she spun the day's events into as many jokes as possible.

Heather carried her squirreled-away cigarettes with her on Fridays. She left her books at school, took nothing but the smokes and the Walkman home on Friday afternoon. Jenny was always happy to detour into the foundry's truckyard to smoke. She said she got a buzz. All Heather got was too much spit in her mouth. Trucks came and went in the yard, dropping off and picking up trailers. They had to hide from the truck drivers and run out of the lot sometimes to

keep from getting caught trespassing, but that was kind of fun.

Then they'd go to Jenny's and hang out and wait for Mr. and Mrs. Ferrin to leave for work. Once they were gone, Jenny usually wanted to go poke around in the Ferrins' jampacked garage or in the storage cartons in the spare room. They would put on a Barney tape for Lori and explore.

Poking through the garage one week, they found Mr. Ferrin's secret stash: a half-full bottle of Jim Beam with a twenty-dollar bill rubber-banded to the neck, and a paper sack full of dirty magazines. Jenny put on a fresh tape for Lori, gave her a little bowl of Cheerios to snack on, and she and Heather climbed up the tree in the backyard and onto the garage roof with the stuff.

Jim Beam tasted awful and burned going down, but unlike Marlboros, Heather could feel the buzz from this stuff. "Maybe we should mix it with RC and see how it tastes then," she suggested to Jenny, who nodded. The magazines were full of glossy, unsexy naked pictures. The women all had their mouths hanging open. They were rubbery and greasy and all bent backwards in weird shapes.

Jenny poked Heather in the ribs. "Look." She pointed to a page in the magazine she held. "That's what Tiffany and Tim say we do to each other."

Heather looked. "Gross."

"I wonder if they even know what they're talking about," Jenny said, almost to herself. She sounded sad. "It's a really nasty thing to say to somebody. It's not like saying they have B.O. or something, you know?" She sighed. "Never mind, don't want to talk about it. Bad enough *they* never get sick of talking about it."

"They never will, you know."

Jenny got up and headed for the roof's edge. "I know. What I don't know is why." She slipped down to the tree branch. "Or how long I can stand it."

Heather started down the tree, handed down Mr. Ferrin's stuff. "Maybe next year'll be different. We'll be in high school then."

"I don't know. I guess I hope so. But that's what you said about this year. And back when we started middle school."

They poured a little of the whiskey into a cup and Jenny re-stashed the rest after topping the bottle off with water. It tasted much better mixed with RC. They passed the cup back and forth as they sat on the back step and listened for Lori to yell for a new Barney tape. While they drank it they talked about what they could do for their birthdays—only two weeks apart, maybe they could throw a joint party. No one would come, Jenny said. Doesn't matter, Heather said. We could maybe still have fun.

"Maybe," Jenny said, but she didn't look like she meant it.

*

"Did you hear what happened to Tiffany in gym class?" Jenny asked.

They sat on the back step. Dinner was almost over, and now they only had to wait for Mr. and Mrs. Ferrin to leave for work so they could get to work on the new bottle Jenny found—an almost-full bottle of Beam this time, buried in a box in the spare room marked "Baby Cloths" and thankfully unaccompanied by porno mags. Mrs. Ferrin was going to drop Lori off at an aunt's house and Heather was going to sleep over to celebrate their birthdays. Jenny had already gotten her presents—a Sonic Youth tape, an 8-pack of double-As for her Walkman, a Nirvana t-

shirt, and twenty dollars for a pizza and some rental tapes for the night.

Dinner was sloppy joes and corn on the cob. The corn was mushy, the sloppy joe meat too dry. Mrs. Ferrin always bought the big plastic sausage-looking packages of hamburger at the discount store.

"What happened to Tiffany? Please. I'm eating."

"Seriously. You didn't hear about it?"

Heather shrugged. "No. Why would I?" Tiffany was in the VSG gym class, Volleyball-Softball-Gymnastics, which was only for girls who were on one of those teams, striving to Bring Home the Glory to Turner Middle School, Home of the Turner Terriers. Tiffany was on all three teams. Heather and Jenny were in a combined total of none of them.

"I heard Steffi and Casey talking about it in Math class. She was playing volleyball with all the girls, and the boys in FHS—" Football-Hockey-Soccer, where Tim normally held court—"were running laps. She had period on her leg, and all the boys saw it."

Heather paused mid-chew, forced the bite down. "No, she didn't. C'mon, Jenny, that's dumb."

"I swear, that's what they said. Steffi was filling Casey in on it. Steffi said Tiffany didn't even notice until Tim yelled something from the track. She ran to the locker room crying, and she didn't come out until everybody else was changed for the bell."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Jenny grinned. "So I guess we know who *really* wears the crusty pants at our school."

Heather gaped, then burst out laughing. Jenny grinned. Heather wiped her mouth and was about to respond when her hair was yanked down hard in double fistfuls. She bit back a scream.

She heard burbly mouth-breathing.

"Lori! Lori, you let go of Heather this instant. You know better than that."

Lori let go. She pushed between the two of them, plopped down Lori-style on the concrete, reached for the little meat-dribbles left on Jenny's plate. Heather sighed and picked corn kernels from Lori's fingers out of her hair.

Jenny wiped barbeque sauce from Lori's chin. "But it'll go away. Tiffany's lucky."

Heather looked over at her, frowning. What could she say? Jenny was right.

Mrs. Ferrin appeared at the screen door. "Jenny, get Lori ready, would you? I'm running late and I still have to get ready for work."

"Sure, Mom."

"And can you do the dishes? I won't have time."

"Okay, Mom."

"You can just let the pots soak. I'll wash them when I get home."

"Yeah, okay." Jenny smiled, picked Lori up and kissed her. "Wanna go see Auntie?"

"Ah-bee!" Lori said.

*

Heather equally disliked every class, pretty much. Maybe not Math, not all the time, but doing all that homework when she already knew how to solve the problems was annoying. Choir *should* have been fun because she could sing. But somehow she'd never caught on to whether it was cool to like to sing or cool to just pretend to sing and only be in Choir because it was the easy A. She was always wrong no matter what, but she stayed in Choir anyway. It *was* an easy A.

Jenny was bad at Math, bad at English, didn't take Choir. Even her rock collection for Science class was pretty bad, and who couldn't collect rocks and label them? But she was good at Art. From the sixth grade on, she'd been in the eighth grade Art class because the teacher wanted to "challenge" her. So while Heather and the other sixth graders were drawing with cray-pas and making clay-coil pots, Jenny got to use exact-o knives and plaster castings and batik frames and all kinds of other stuff. She never brought anything home to work on; Lori could get into anything and ruin it. Jenny was always allowed to bring her Art work into study hall so that she could get it done on time or to go to the Art room and work on it there.

Even if Jenny didn't have anything to work on for class, she'd take a piece of paper and sketch something out for Heather, maybe just dark eyes with smudgy-looking makeup drawn around them, maybe flowers, maybe just "Heather" in the middle of a page with swirls and squiggles bursting out from the letters. The day after Mike Sirola dumped an entire shake on Heather's head at lunch and the whole lunchroom laughed at her while she ran out, crying, to try to wash her hair in the bathroom sink, Jenny drew her a picture of Mike as a baby, bawling and wearing diapers and picking his nose. Heather had it taped up above her desk at home.

The Art class was doing collages this fall. Jenny loved it, talked about it all the time, was always looking through magazines for pictures. Jenny's parents had tons of old magazines stored away, plus Heather brought Jenny all her old copies of *Sassy* and stacks of Dad's old *National Geographics*.

When Jenny's collage was done, she brought Heather to the Art room after school to see.

"You're the first one I've shown it to," Jenny said.

Heather couldn't say anything, just stared at the far wall. The collage was nearly five feet across. Colors started bright at the edges and faded and darkened as they reached inward. There

were hundreds of faces: laughing celebrities, arrogant models, snarling athletes, angelic babies. All the eyes pointed toward the middle, toward a school picture with cut-outs of hands pasted over the eyes and mouth.

Jenny fidgeted. "Do you like it?"

"It's... wow."

She smiled down at the floor. "I hoped you'd like it."

Heather stepped closer. "Whose hands are those?"

"Oh, I forget where I got those."

"Whose school picture is that? It's hard to tell with the hands covering it."

"It's mine from last year. I mean, I don't want it to look like mine. I just wanted that image, you know? Doesn't matter whose picture it is. I just liked the idea."

Heather liked it, too, even if it made her feel strange. "It's kinda creepy. But it's really good. You going to keep it?"

"The teacher says she wants to. She said maybe they'll put it up in the library or something. It'd be better than taking it home. Lori would just tear it down if I put it up somewhere."

"I suppose. I wish you could put it up, though. It's really cool. I bet your parents would like it."

Jenny shrugged. "I guess." She picked up her bag, punched Heather on the shoulder. "C'mon. Let's get out of here. Let's go to the truckyard or something."

*

Tim came to the service and it made Heather want to scream. At least Tiffany stayed away—it was the one nice thing Tiffany would probably ever do. Tim had no right to be there, none of the other kids did. If Jenny were here, she'd slump down in her seat and let her hair hang over her face.

Heather sat in a cold metal chair and watched Tim shuffle through the line toward Mr. and Mrs. Ferrin, looking sad and getting ready to say that he was sorry for their loss. His parents stood behind him. They would make him say it, and Heather would sit and watch him say it.

People filed past and shook Mr. Ferrin's hand, hugged Mrs. Ferrin. Heather wondered if maybe they didn't hug Mr. Ferrin because he smelled like the foundry even in his gray suit. He didn't look at anyone who spoke to him, just kept his eyes fixed on the far wall and pumped once, twice, then dropped the hand. Mrs. Ferrin cried. She'd been crying the whole day, but she didn't seem to know it. Every few moments she'd swipe at her eyes like tears were crumbs and only annoying. Lori watched Barney in a little side-room. Heather heard her singing along. Jenny's collage, in a brand-new custom frame, stood on an easel in the corner along with a sign-in book. She watched Tim sign his name in the book and made a mental note to go over later and scratch the name out.

Heather sat where her parents led her and did her best to ignore the minister's voice. She didn't want to cry in front of all these people. She fought it for as long as she could. She did all right for a while, distracting herself by admiring all the flowers that surrounded the casket. She wondered if Jenny could have drawn them like that. Maybe Heather could go through some magazines and find pictures of flowers, cut them out, arrange them like that. That would be cool. It'd be like a bouquet but done Jenny-style.

Heather had nearly got the bouquet done in her mind and was thinking about whether she

might really want to keep Jenny's collage after all when Lori called out.

"Ah-bee! Ah-bee!"

Everyone turned to look. Mr. Ferrin held onto Lori. She fought to get free. "Ah-bee! AH-BEE!"

Mr. Ferrin stood up to carry Lori away, maybe to that little room to watch more Barney. One of Lori's feet, clad in hard patent-leather shoes, caught him in the stomach. He grunted in surprise and dropped her. She got up and ran to the casket, climbed up the little steps so she could see Jenny's mannequin-head displayed inside.

"AH-BEE! AH-BEEEEEE!"

Heather got up, went to Lori, picked her up. She could pick her up now.

"Ah-bee," Lori said.

"I know," Heather told her.

Lori put her head against Heather's shoulder and wailed. Heather walked back to her seat, still carrying Lori. Everyone watched her do it. She kissed Lori on the top of the head and went back to thinking about collages and where she could find the best pictures of flowers. Maybe craft magazines. Maybe the encyclopedias in the school library. Lori sobbed against Heather's shoulder while the minister finished the sermon. She could feel everyone's eyes on her. She didn't care. Lori fell asleep.

*

They passed the foundry on the way home. They passed by the truckyard and Heather tried not to remember all the Fridays she and Jenny spent sitting on the bumper of a random trailer, smoking

cigarettes and hanging out, or sprinting from truck to truck, breathlessly playing hide-and-seek from a driver who had spotted them and who would catch them and holler at them about being places they shouldn't be. It was hard to block it out. Harder still not to think about Jenny darting out from between two trailers in the dark and getting hit by a truck as it rumbled out of the lot after dropping its shipment. "They found alcohol in Jenny's system," her mom told her. "Did you know Jenny drank?" No, Heather had said. She had sounded bewildered, and she was. It was the truth, sort of. She hadn't known Jenny drank by herself.

Tim would forget the funeral. Maybe she would have peace until Spring, but maybe not even that long. Soon enough his teeth would come to points again and he'd need to bite. Tiffany would join in, then everybody else. They might punch the seat again and scream about dirty underwear again, or maybe think up something new. They never get sick of it, Jenny said. What I don't know is why, Jenny said.

She turned up the volume. *Can't snuff the rooster, you know we ain't gonna die.* She wished it were true. *Oh God, please, won't you help me make it through.*

Jenny was right, and Heather had to get on that bus tomorrow, and the next day. The sound in her ears grew sour; the batteries were dying. Heather dug frantically in her pocket for fresh ones.

"We're home," Mom said.

It was an accident, Heather decided.

Author's Notes for an Important Story about Heartbreak

Setting:

Not here. Setting it here prevents it from having a sense of place. One takes for granted so much of one's own surroundings and insists upon using the particular to establish the general, i.e. using The Lakeside Café for a setting in which the protagonist and her beau/antagonist meet when that has no resonance with the reader. Why Lakeside Café? Nothing inherently interesting or poignant about fluorescent lights, light blue coffee cups, peanut butter fudge pie with two forks. Readers have not gone on dates there, or floated through pancake breakfasts sitting across from the man responsible for that warm flushed feeling in the skin and those big, goony lovestruck grins that the waitresses always smiled at.

Potential settings: Chicago (for the Big, Midwestern City feel), California (increased opportunities for pathetic fallacy, i.e. sunshine and flowers, then earthquakes and/or mudslides), New York (I've been watching too many Woody Allen movies this past week, clearly), Paris (for ironic counterpoint to the way romances are supposed to go; a romantic setting for a mundane pathetic little ending to a romance).

*

Characters:

Trish. The victim, but not *a* victim. She is the jilted one. The difficulty is not so much intuiting what to imbue her character with but how to make that character more universal than I am perhaps able to do at the moment. (Me/Not-me.) Use the particular to establish the general;

character of character, so to speak, emerges from immediate scene details. She is of indeterminate physical appearance, but because I do not declare her ugly, she will be established as average-to-attractive. Character attributes include steadfastness, even temper, gentle sense of humor, fidelity, honesty.

Jay. The villain of the piece. Physically as close to "dashing" as I am able to make him while avoiding cliché; readers do not believe villains who are *too* good-looking. No glittering green eyes, no strong, smooth shoulders, no aquiline nose. No warm arms wrapped around Trish, no gentle breath against her neck at night. Lawyer. [However, profession as character is a weak construction.] Over-fond of sleek, low-profile electronics and leather furniture.

~*Babygurl*~. Owner of profile on quickmeet.com. Poster of videos, fucker of live-in-boyfriends. Known only by username, profile full of misspellings and emoticons, and pictures highlighting an admittedly impressive collection of swimwear. Username changed to something even more frivolous to show the reader a shallow girl, a step-down girl, a ridiculous giggly lozenge of a girl coated in a pink candy shell for [Jay] to consume. Frequent poster of videos, most importantly "The Piña Colada Song."

*

Opening line:

Must grab attention. Each word selected to contain multiplicities of meaning. Convey information; the particular for the general, the general for you:

Jay's smell had probably changed long before he'd actually cheated on her.

[Begin the story *in scene*.]

The fizz dewing Trish's nose each time she raised her glass only reminded her of that. That metaphysical perfume around his collar, something other than and in place of the usual warm breadly smell of him, something overripe, synthetic. The sort of smell that reminded you that smells were mostly fake; perfume had a lot more to do with D&C red number 5 and the imitation blueberries in the pancakes your beau made the morning after (sort of burned, but that added to the charm), and that the memories you link to smells—the strongest, if you believed the research, and Trish believed the research—were probably as manufactured as a serial bodice-ripper novel. Memories, stories, feelings. All bullshit when you burrow into your boyfriend's neck and can't find the smell that takes you home.

[This segues into exposition. Avoid.]

The bar wasn't dark, only dim. The music was hip, but not loud. Otis Redding and the Dandy Warhols swaddled in muted speakers. The food pretentious enough to seem classier than bar food—mozzarella sticks with garlic aioli instead of cold pizza sauce. False advertising of a downtown cool good time, but everything was false when you stripped it down, and anyway it was false advertising of a smarter sort than Jay's ridiculous online profile. All those trumped-up claims of his (played lacrosse semi-professionally? Oh, *honey*), those photos from three years ago when he went on a cruise with his boys after they'd taken the Bar exam. Plus a Vegas pic, nothing says "I'm a fun guy" in language simple enough for the Babygurls of the word to understand like a Vegas pic.

He must've Photoshopped out the strippers that she'd seen bracketing all the Vegas pics.

So she's downtown, where the smells, the feelings, the stories, are just as much made-up bullshit, but at least they're *new* bullshit. And if that's the best Trish can hope for, then she'll make it the palate-cleansing she needs it to be. Wash away Jay, Jay's newly sour-smelling skin

that's been rubbing up against some girl's spray tan, Jay's lowbrow East Side pub obsession, Jay's tallboys of Old 47 to chase shots of whisky while the jukebox screamed something ridiculous like "Welcome to the Jungle."

[Song titles can carry significance. Settings are indexes of character.]

Tonight, her drink is at least perfect. It's the first one only and she hasn't had time yet to think she's thought of fucking the bartender or waiting at home to claw Jay's smug lawyerly face take his cellphone throw it against the wall take a kitchen knife slash the couch cushions swing a frying pan, the big one, the cast iron, into his stupid sleek iMac with Babygurl lurking in the browser history. First drink, so she's just dancing her finger along the glass rim and thinking how nice it is that lime, mint, and sugar can come together so well muddled. If you don't muddle well, the sugar doesn't dissolve. It grates against the soft parts of the mouth like sand. That cruise after Jay and his meathead lawyer friends took the Bar (two of five of them failed it, oh *dear*), had he maybe fucked a tan, giggly little thing like Babygurl? Maybe he had. Trish liked the idea of Jay getting rubbed raw from sand on the beach in Cozumel or Montego Bay. Maybe he'd banged some slut in the sand that had been a tourist brat's castle one tide ago. Trish smiled into the depths of her drink at the thought of grit smashed between Jay's thumping hips and some girl's eagerly-spread thighs.

Maybe he'd take Babygurl on a cruise. They'd "get away" from all their troubles. They'd dance in the tropic sunset moonlight. Love and steel drums and and poetry in the air. Jay would have to be responsible for the poetry; Trish wasn't sure what poetry you could extract from Babygurl's comments on Jay's profile. "U are amazingggg, babe!" or "OMG when is tuesday I CAN'T WAITTTTT" or "hey huny thank u for the pick-me-up :-)"

But she had a romantic soul, Babygurl. Her heartfelt sentiment best expressed by an

embedded video for "The Piña Colada Song" followed by a series of twinkling, animated hearts. Babygurl was far too young for that song, but she'd found it somewhere, decided it was perfect for her and her *huny*. Two fun, beachy people. That was it, then, Jay and Babygurl, sipping Piña Coladas and making love at midnight on the dunes of the cape. That post was the last straw--no more worrying about whether she was jealous or violating his privacy. Trish had started clicking. She had lost herself then, dumbfounded by what Jay had been hiding from her and what she ought to have figured out long before.

*

On "The Piña Colada Song":

That's the one that starts out with the upbeat synth and the drum-machine hi-hats that give you that a second or two of hope that you're about to hear some late-70s Billy Joel. Something soft to make the slow creep along the Interstate to Mom and Dad's a little easier. Maybe even something ironic and satisfying, "you had to be a big shot, didn't cha." But no, it's that song about two idiots who make plans to screw around based upon the incredibly unique mutual interest in "not [being] into health food" and being "into champagne." Because fuck knows that the world in general is not aware of the delights of junk food, champagne, getting caught in the rain, or that it's okay to sneak around behind your significant other's back because you're *sick* of her.

A song that is on the radio too often when you can't afford to get the CD player fixed. A song that soothes, that says, with fake drums and fake sentiments, that it's okay to contemplate leaving your lovely lady in the lurch because you want to get caught in the rain with someone

new because I'm just not good enough for you any more, because I've worn out my welcome with you. Well, I smashed your fucking iMac, so how's that? There's not enough steel drum bands in the world to take it back now. How's Babygurl gonna soothe you through *that*, Piña Colada boy?

*

She shook herself out of it; unproductive thoughts lead to unproductive acts. She dug in her purse for her cigarettes. Babygurl didn't smoke, her profile said so. Jay didn't smoke either. So Trish had picked up a pack of Marlboros at the corner store and smoked them in the apartment while Jay was working late (working late? oh, *baby*), just to see if he'd notice when he was home. He hadn't, but his clothes had been coming home from late nights at work smelling like bars for a while now and he maybe wasn't as tuned in to the smell of bad behavior as she was. The reek of it.

[Use the five senses; render the scene for the reader.]

The cigarette felt good in her hands, in her mouth. The bartender lit her up. He was bald—dealbreaker—but she gave him the good smile anyway. And what the hell, who cared about dealbreaking? She could look. She wouldn't touch. The last thing she really wanted was another suitable boy to become a suitable problem, another dick-led moron like Jay. Jay, who preferred the company of some suburban twat who wore gym shorts in her profile picture and who probably had French tips on her toenails. Well, who could blame him? What excitement was there in the woman at home who did his laundry, cooked his eggs the way he liked them, and watched his ridiculous Chuck Norris movies without complaining? Could a worn-out woman at

home compete with superficial praise of Jay's smile, his gym muscles, his taste in funk music?

[Too many rhetorical questions have an adverse effect; they interrogate the reader, when the goal is to acclimate the reader, to soothe him/her so that a message can be more easily imparted.]

"Haven't seen you here before, I don't think," the bartender said. He leaned an elbow on the bar next to her hand. "You come downtown a lot?"

The Eagles flashed in her mind, she's going to the cheatin' side of town. A song she'd heard too often on the radio. She felt the good smile turn a little sour at the tips. "Not much, no. I just felt like mixing it up a little tonight."

*

On developing empathy:

I have to get into his head. Unpleasant, yes, but necessary. I need to in order to maintain neutrality and not indulge in sophomoric levels of wish-fulfillment. Smashing a computer screen vs. smashing a windshield—consider the depth of difference.

But characterization draws strength from more than details. He has a heart; it is my responsibility to mine that heart and bring everything I can to the page. He needs to be on the page. What is on the page? What material do I have?

I didn't think about my lady

I know that sounds kinda mean

but me and my old lady

had fallen into the same old dull routine

Babygurl is thinner than Trish. She has nicer hair. Trish could tell by the picture, the one that started it all, that had come up on Jay's computer when I logged on to check my email real quick.

Trish had come home from downtown around midnight (after making the cab stop a few times so she could be sick in the gutter, too much of a good muddle) and smashed Jay's computer, had screamed and swung and destroyed, then fell, exhausted, into the bed she shared with Jay. She had meant to leave and hadn't. Jay came home that night to a dark jagged hole in his computer screen. He had to have smelled the fried circuits, the spent adrenaline. He must have known that the jig was up, the browser history uncleared. Perhaps he had looked down at Trish, taken in the rumpled going-out clothes, the absinthe-green stain on the inside edge of her lower lip, the eyelashes stuck shut with matted mascara and tears.

*

On using secondary characters:

Trish watched for the door to the storeroom to re-open and coiled herself for when it did. Three over her regular limit (plus the shot of absinthe, of course) and God, the tingling in her legs, the heat. Bald was no dealbreaker.

The door opened and she unfurled, off the stool and straight in his direction on the pretense, not that there was anyone still left in the bar that required a show of pretense, but it helped somehow, that she had to use the restroom next to the storeroom. She stepped into his arms. He had a bottle in each hand to re-stock the bar but he kissed her, they didn't speak at all, he kissed her and she heard the bottles in his hands clink together as his arms came up and around her. She pushed on his chest with tented fingers and moved him, not gently, back into the

storeroom.

She pulled back for a second. "Put the bottles down."

He set them on a wall shelf and came back to her, his hands reaching for her thighs and pushing her skirt up. She let him, she wanted him to, she leaned back against the door and spread her legs so he could press up against her, as much as he could. He pulled at her blouse and yanked her skirt up and panties down and bra off with one skilled flick and his hands, his mouth, she didn't have to do anything but hold on to the doorhandle and it was good, so good—

*

On vomiting:

It's not allowed in a story. It loses power in writing. The reader will not be impressed that a character has been so moved as to have occur a body-wide rigor, a unified rejection of circumstance. The metaphor fails. No one wants to see (or hear) you blow your groceries because Babygurl left you, that was quickmeet, that's what it was for, and Trish left you, and your computer's been busted up by a motherfucking cast iron pan and tonight you couldn't stop at just a couple whisky shots. So your body says *nah*, your body says *too much*, your body says *no thanks*, and then the clichéed alchemy is underway: external stimuli become a metaphysical sustenance which must be ejected. You have yark your life out.

It doesn't make a good story. Puke is funny, puke stories are funny, but only when the stimulus is too many Jagerbombs and the audience is a handful of pals sitting around the pub table: folks, we're all friends here, please enjoy my lighthearted anecdote about the time I totally ralphed. But as a commentary on Things As They Are, regurgitation is out. Never mind that it is

a powerful, immediate expellant motion, the rare bodily function that overtakes someone like Jay, sends him plunging through a jangle of heavy metal and into the bathroom of his favorite greasy dive, or that for a few seconds he belongs entirely to the feeling. I am sure he cannot think about Babygurl's clumsy but enthusiastic blowjobs or the look of water snaking down Trish's spine in the shower. He drops, he cracks his kneecaps on the tile.

And for God's sake don't describe it. Nothing more repellant than the image, the only iceberg tip that shows in the Arctic Ocean that is your memory of this night [that's a bad metaphor, unless you mean the mind is the Titanic and your memories lurk waiting to sink you—sink you where? you're not a boat]: gummy strings of bile hanging from both ends of your mouth and framing your vision in an almost iridescent shimmer as you regard the freshly-overturned contents of your stomach. The liquor is there, and the bar pretzels, now reduced to spongy tan patties that float on the water's surface. The mozzarella sticks are settling, slowly, to the bottom. They leave trails as they sink, little runners of white not unlike the appealing gooey cheese stretched in the photograph on the menu at Lakeside Café and you have time to think *some things never change* before you heave again and destroy this little toilet-bowl microcosm, this metaphor, this hot steaming mess that is a perfect copy of the hot steaming mess of your night, your week, your goddam *life*.

Vomit is not significant; it is a regurgitated pile of material, the nature of which was significant to you, but not to anyone else. No one has patience for theories about how the pretzels are Trish and the mozzarella sticks are Babygurl, how some things blend better with liquor (Jay) but how too many cooks spoil the puke or whatever that saying is, oh God, why are you thinking this? Why are you writing it? Why are you *sharing* it?

*

Setting:

Use fall. Fall has significance; it is a time of decay made beautiful, a slow rot that people ooh and ahh over. People praise the crisp, clear air of fall as if it was a good thing that the air has no substance to it. Air that leaves you gasping, air so clear it magnifies you and lets the world see your flaws in shocking perfection.

*

Trish sat at the counter at the Lakeside Café.

[Doesn't resonate; consider changing location. Paris? The Village?]

She played with her food, dawdling, as if peanut butter fudge pie was a plate of Brussels sprouts. Or medicine she didn't want to take. But I've lost weight, so the pie is necessary; people have been making comments like "you've lost some weight, haven't you? I can see it in your face," as if losing weight in the *face* was ever anyone's goal. So, peanut butter fudge pie and she was alternately choking on it and dragging the tines of her fork through the swirl of chocolate-flavored syrup on the plate.

Her cellphone sat on the countertop. Six messages since she'd gotten up and washed the absinthe crust off her lips, packed a bag, and crawled back to Mom and Dad's a week ago. Each message was essentially the same: I fucked up, I love you, please come back. The messages either arrived at lunchtime, during Jay's Chinese takeout time at the office, or at bar close, when he got home and the bed lay cold and uninviting in front of him like it had for her all those nights he'd been working late, except with a Trish-shaped space open next to the wall instead of a Jay-

shaped space gaping open with no Jay to spoon up against. He lay awake, facing out, refusing to look over to where no Trish was beside him. She knew he did this. She knew him. She clearly didn't *understand* him, but three years was enough time to know someone, to know their habits, to know that after a few more minutes of her soldiering through a hunk of sugary butter-flavored chocolate-flavored weight maintenance, her phone's call-screen would light. Jay would try to reach out and touch something that knew him better than the Styrofoam box full of Triple Delight in front of him.

Cut a triangle of pie from what remains of the piece. Spear it with the fork. Drag it through the syrup, lift it up, admire the black sparkle and thread-thin trails leading back down to the plate. Eat it. It tastes like cotton, but everything tastes like cotton to Trish now. Stupid Babygurl and her stupid profile on stupid quickmeet.com. Use the tongue to smash the pie against the roof of the mouth, to break the crust apart in chunks to slide down the throat and become the fat that has recently fallen off her already hollow cheeks. She hadn't been eating well for months, really. Maybe some of her had known about Jay's sudden realization that they'd been together too long, like a worn-out recording of a favorite song.

Trish caressed her cellphone with the tip of her finger and smiled. It was bitter and greased with pie, but it was the first smile in what felt like a long time.

The smile cracked as she realized what had been playing overhead for most of her pie-eating task. The Eagles, of course. The cheatin' side of town. And here were the tears, ridiculous knee-jerk tears for what Jay had done to her and what she'd done in response. You can't hide your lying eyes.

She flipped the phone open and called Jay.

*

On the use of the objective correlative:

Do you know what The Piña Colada Song is even *about*, Babygurl? Of course you don't. After I found your profile I couldn't stop logging on over and over and reading you and I can tell you're one ignorant little piece of ass. The Piña Colada Song is about more than making love at midnight; it's about sneaking around on your partner in order to discover, to your delight, that your partner had been sneaking around, too. As far as the song's faulty moral compass is concerned, both partner's slates are wiped clean at the discovery of mutual infidelity, and the couple is able to achieve a stronger bond (and, it is implied, transcendently good sex on the dunes of the cape).

Do you get it, Babygurl? That the tropical fake-steel-drum-band temptress, the boyfriend-stealing chippie, she's the same dull old lady in the song. Followed through to its conclusion in the lyrics, the conceit of the piece is that the man in question is cheating on me *with me*.

But you are not me. You are *not*. I will make sure of it. Fiction presents truth, carefully constructed. You are not like me. I am not like you.

*

They meet for lunch at Lakeside to "talk it over." He touches her hand and she lets him. His clothes look rumpled and he has lost the put-together-ness he always seemed to have. She fusses with her face too much, uses her powder compact at least three times over the course of the conversation.

[Telling details create a foregone conclusion.]

He eats nothing; she orders pie she is unable to eat, which he pays for. He opens the door of the Café for her and walks her to her car. She opens her car door intending to get in and only wave goodbye from behind a rolled-up window, but she looks back toward him. The empty fall air is so clear, the sun so bright, that she can see all the new lines in his face. Probably he hasn't been sleeping.

"Please let me back into your life," he says. It is simple, a naked plea. It moves her enough for her to let herself be pulled close when he reaches. He presses his face into her hair and she feels a tiny sting, one little tear. She does not react to this, but it moves her.

Possible Outcomes:

1. She will take him back.
- 2.

VITA

Denise Dirks was born in Neenah, Wisconsin, and completed her B.A. in English at the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh. She has earned a Master of Arts in English at the University of New Orleans. She has worked as a college instructor, a tutor, a phone bank operator, a forklift driver, a bartender, a secretary, and a fast-food server, none of which has been influenced by academic achievements. Denise is a resident of New Orleans.