

No Easy Answer

Six Short Stories for Teens

by **Will Weaver**

Brief Story Summaries

1. “World In A Stump”

You are fourteen. You’ve been deer hunting. But this season you learn a big lesson in patience, and understand that hunting is not all about killing something.

2. “Stealing For Girls”

You are fourteen. Some kinds of theft are good—like a “steal” in basketball. It’s just part of the game. But your younger brother is way better than you at hoops. This is not good.

3. “Marked For Death”

You are a thirteen-year-old girl who misses your father, who works away. The new kid in school, a pimply-faced loser, attaches himself to you. His main goal in life is to go hunting. Maybe with you and your father? Just one time?

4. “Up The River”

You are sixteen, and a math whiz. Naturally, you are good at poker. You play online poker (your parents don’t know). There’s easy money to be made, and how you win it is your little secret. The world is full of losers, and you’re not one of them.

5. “Bootleg Summer”

You are sixteen. It is 1928 in the rural Midwest, and you wanted to get away from the farm. But not in this way. And not this far.

6. “Bad Blood”

You are sixteen. You come from a long line of crooks and thieves. Your parents love you and you love them, but stealing is stealing. And it’s in your blood.

7. “WWJD”

You are a sixteen-year-old girl in a new school. You have a bully named Eddie. He has made you his life’s work. He will stop at nothing.

The World In A Stump

A short story

"Sit long enough in one place, and the whole world will pass by." (Chinese philosopher.)

It was the opening morning of deer season. My father and I stepped out of the house into black darkness. No stars. He paused to puff out a breath, like a smoker exhaling into the chilly November air. "South breeze," he murmured, "perfect for your stand."

I couldn't wait to get going. I had shot my first deer last year, when I was thirteen, but this season was different. I had earned the right to hunt by myself. Well, not entirely by myself. But at least I wouldn't have to sit in a stand with my father; he would be just down the trail and over a hill.

We rode in the pickup a mile beyond our farm to my grandfather's big woods. My father extinguished the headlights well before we stopped. Getting out of the truck, I eased shut my door with a muffled click. I carefully uncased my rifle, then shouldered my canvas Duluth pack, which contained lunch for all day.

"Ready?" my father whispered.

I quickly nodded, then followed his blaze-orange shape down the trail.

After fifteen minutes, he halted at a fork in the logging trail. He turned to face me.

"Well, here we are," he whispered.

"OK! See you!" I replied. I was in a hurry to get to my stand. His teeth gleamed white; he was smiling.

"Remember: sunup to sundown. If you can last the whole day on your stand, you'll see a buck."

I nodded impatiently.

"Think you can stick it out that long?" he asked. There was faint teasing — and also a challenge in his voice.

"Sure," I said, annoyed.

He put a finger to his lips. "OK. I won't come for you unless I hear you shoot — and I don't expect to see you either."

I quickly headed down the path. In my mind, I was already a mighty hunter. In summer, pesky ground squirrels, the kind that left dangerous holes in my father's cow pasture, disappeared when I showed up with my little .22 rifle. In October, ruffed grouse, or partridge, were fair game behind our farm on the trails among aspen trees. Carrying a sandwich and my stubby twenty-gauge shotgun, I ranged for miles across farm fields,

around sloughs, and down logging trails. I was always on the move, always alert. Nothing escaped my eyes -- especially deer sign.

My goal this season was to bag a giant buck. I had a great spot — thirty yards from a deer trail, muddy and torn up with use. The "stand" was a ground blind, a tree stump actually, with a half-circle of brush in front to keep me hidden from any passing deer.

Quickly I put down my seat cushion and placed my Duluth pack within reach. Checking the safety on my rifle, I turned to face the blue-black woods. Six a.m. Not legal shooting time for another half hour. I sat rock still, as did the forest critters: they knew a stranger was in their midst. As long minutes passed, my heartbeat slowed, and the forest gradually came alive. A squirrel's feet skittered on oak bark. An invisible flock of diver ducks arrowed overhead, wings whistling. A partridge thrummed down from his night roost; the thwappity-thwap of his wings marked the path of his invisible glide through small poplars and brush.

At 6:20 a.m. blue darkness drained away. I could now see the deer trail, a darker ribbon through the woods. I shifted my boots — and beneath them a twig snapped. A deer crashed away behind me! My heartbeat raced to high speed. The deer had either been there all along — bedded down and listening to me — or else it had been coming along the trail. I couldn't believe my bad luck. In the distance, too far away to be my father's rifle, gunshots boomed here and there.

By the time I got over feeling sorry for myself, the woods began to open its curtains. Rusty-brown color seeped into the oak leaves. The grayness lifted — which meant that best half-hour for hunting was over. Disappointed, I leaned back on my stump. At nine a.m. I was shivering cold and had to stand up. The woods were brighter now, and quiet. Even the squirrels had stopped chattering and chasing each other. I drank a cup of hot cocoa. Old hunters joke that a sure way to see a deer is put down your rifle in order eat lunch or take a pee. I tried both tricks. Neither worked.

After a snack, my short night of sleep caught up with me. Leaning back against a heavy limb, I blinked and blinked to stay awake. Once, my head slumped. The trail tilted and the oak trees tipped sideways; I shook my head to clear it. Then I let my eyes droop shut for just a second. When I opened them, there was drool on my chin. Several minutes had passed. My heartbeat raced again — but luckily there was no monster buck waving his white tail at me.

By noon I was restless. I considered walking up trail to check for fresh tracks — maybe a buck had passed during my nap — but I fought off the urge. I considered making up some excuse to check on my father. Instead, I occupied myself by doing housekeeping on my ground blind. I made sure that there were no twigs anywhere near my boots. I rearranged its branches just right. This took all of ten minutes.

At one p.m. I stood up to stretch. My seat cushion fell off the stump, which gave me something new to do: count the tree rings. As wide as a kitchen chair, the big pine

stump had 83 rings, one for each year. The rings expanded outward, like a galaxy, like a universe. Ring number twelve had a dent — some old injury to the tree — perhaps a buck's scrape when the tree was small. I sat down again and refocused my eyes on the trail.

By three p.m. I was stir-crazy. What would it hurt if I got up and did some walking, some sneak-hunting? Maybe I could push a deer past my father's stand. How about a quick trek back to the truck to check out the field? Any place had to be better than here. But a promise was a promise. I stood up and did toe-raises until my calves hurt.

A few minutes after four p.m., something happened. The light was suddenly flatter, duller. The air felt heavier and still. A chickadee pecked and fluttered behind me, landing on my cap for a moment before moving on. The woods were waking up again. A partridge fluttered somewhere close. Squirrels scampered limb to limb. The trees stood straighter, more erect. As the fading light flattened to grays and blues, my hearing expanded. I heard the faintest sounds of a mouse in the grass. What I couldn't see or hear, I felt.

At about 4:30 p.m. (I didn't dare look down at my watch for fear that I'd miss something), I turned my head slowly to the left. A deer materialized, as I knew it would! A small doe nibbled her way along, bobbing her head, twitching her tail. She was too small to take on the first day of the season. And anyway, I wanted to wait for a monster buck. But I was thrilled. It was enough to have been looking in the right direction — to have been ready.

But the day was ending. Light faded, pushed up the tree trunks and into the graying sky. Darkness gathered at ground level. For a few short minutes — the tipping point between light and dark — anything felt possible.

The big buck never came. Shooting light was suddenly gone. I unloaded my rifle, secured the clip. Only a couple minutes later, my father appeared, a blob of orange coming toward me in the growing darkness. I stood to meet him, and waved like a kid, though I no longer felt like one.

-the end-

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“Stealing For Girls”

A Short Story

It’s a free country, right? I choose my clothes, I choose my shoes, I choose my playlist, I choose my friends (you know who you are). If I were an adult (which I’m not, I’m a fourteen-year-old, eighth grade girl named Sunny) I could vote, choose my car and my career. Like I said, a free country, right?

Wrong.

Quiz time: what’s the biggest thing in your life that you *can’t* choose? The answer is: Your parents. And your brother and sisters. No matter how free you think you are, the one thing nobody can choose is her own family. So being born is like arriving at a restaurant where your food is waiting for you. There are no waiters and no menus. Your table is set, your meal is already there. It might be shrimp, it might be steak, it might be cheesy macs, it might be only broccoli—for some kids there might be no food at all on the table.

Me? I was fairly lucky. My parents are (1) there, and (2) fairly cool . My Dad’s an accountant and my mom’s a college professor (English, if you haven’t guessed from my writing—thank you very much). Both are in their middle forties, physically fit and usually un-embarrassing in public. My Dad still has a good jump shot, which he has been trying to show me since elementary school, but I’ve got dead hands and a short vertical jump—though both seem to be improving, so that’s not my gripe. My gripe is the old basic one for girls: My father spends way more time on sports with my brother, Luke, than with me.

Luke is in sixth grade, is already taller than me, and can pound me at basketball. At ping-pong. At any sport. You name it, he crushes me. I want to say right here I’m not a klutz. I’m nearly five feet six and have at least average coordination; on our basketball team I’m third off the bench, which is not that shabby considering that our school, Hawk Bend, is a basketball power in central Minnesota. But I won’t play one-on-one with him anymore. No way. Who likes to lose every time? It’s not like he’s mean or wants to humiliate me—he’s actually a pretty decent for a twerpy sixth grade boy—it’s just that he’s a natural athlete and I’m not.

I am thinking these thoughts as I sit next to my parents watching Luke’s team play Lakeland. Luke just made a nifty spin move (of course he’s the starting point guard) and drove the lane for a layup. My mother, who comes to most games, stares at Luke with her usual astounded look. She murmurs to my father (who comes to all our games), “How did he *do* that?”

“Head fake right, plant pivot foot, big swing with leading leg and bingo—he’s by,” my dad says. A quiet but intense guy with salt-and-pepper hair, Dad speaks softly from the side of his mouth; we are surrounded by parents of other sixth-graders.

“He amazes me,” my mother murmurs. She has not taken her eyes off Luke. I hate to agree, but she’s right— all of which clouds further my normal “sunny” disposition. I remember Dad and Luke working last winter in the basement on that very move. I went downstairs to see what was going on, and they both looked up at me like I was an alien from a *Weekly World News* article. My father soon enough bounced the ball to me, and I gave it a try, but never could get my spin dribble to rotate quickly enough and in a straight line to the basket. Not like you-know -who.

But at least it’s the third quarter of the game and Luke already has a lot of points and his team is ahead by twenty, so the coach will take him out soon—though not soon enough for Lakeland. At the other end of the court Luke’s loose, skinny-legged body topped by flopping yellow hair darts forward—like a stroke of heat lightning—and deflects the ball.

“Go, Luke!” my father shouts, leaping to his feet.

Luke is already gone, gathering up the ball on a break-away, finishing with a soft lay-up high off the board. People clap wildly.

I clap slowly. Briefly. Politely. My mother just shakes her head. “How does he *do* that?” she murmurs.

“Ask *him*,” I mutter.

“Pardon?” my mom says abstractedly.

“Nothing.” I check the scoreboard, then my own watch. I’ve seen enough. Below, at floor level, some friends are passing. “I think I’ll go hang with Tara and Rochelle,” I say to my parents.

“Sure,” my mother says absently.

My Dad doesn’t see or hear me leave.

As I clump down the bleachers there is more cheering but I prefer not to look.

‘Sunny.’ What a stupid name. I was born on a Sunday, a day when the sun was particularly bright, or so my parents maintain. I seriously doubt their version (some day I’m going to look up the actual weather report on my birthday). I’m sure it was a Monday; either that or I was probably switched at the hospital. Or maybe it was Luke— one of us, definitely, was switched.

Rochelle, actually looking once or twice at the game, says right off, “Say, wasn’t that your little brother?”

“I have no brother,” I say.

“He’s a smooth little dude,” Tara says, glancing over her shoulder. “Kinda cute, actually.”

“Can I have some popcorn or what?” I say.

“Or what,” Rochelle says, covering her bag.

They giggle hysterically.

“When’s your next game?” Tara says to me, relenting, giving me three whole kernels.

“The last one is Tuesday night,” I answer. “A make-up game with Big Falls.”

“Here or away?”

“Here.”

“With your record, maybe you could get your little brother to play for your team.”

“Yeah--a little eye shadow, a training bra,” adds Rochelle, “everyone would think he was you!”

I growl something unprintable to my friends and go buy my own bag of popcorn.

At supper that night Luke and I stare at each other during grace, our usual game--see who will blink first. Tonight it is me. I glare down to my broccoli and fish; I can feel him grinning.

“And thank you, God, for bouncing the ball our way once again,” my father finishes, “Amen.” If God doesn’t understand sports metaphors, our family is in huge trouble.

“Well,” my father says, looking at Luke expectantly.

“A deep subject,” Luke says, reaching for his milk.

Both of them are smiling, trying not to be the first one to talk about the game.

“How was your day, Sunny?” my mother says.

“I hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?” my mother says.

“It’s condescending,” I add.

“What is condescending?” she protests.

“Asking me about my day when the thing on everybody’s mind is Luke’s usual great game. Why not just say it: ‘So, Luke, how many points this time?’”

There is silence; I see Luke cast an uncertain glance toward my father.

“That’s not at all what I meant.”

“Sunny has something there,” my father begins.

“So how many points *did* you get?” I say to Luke, clanking the broccoli spoon back into the dish, holding it in front of his face; he hates broccoli.

He shrugs, mumbles, “Not sure, really.”

“How many?” I press.

“I dunno. Fifteen or so.” But he can’t help himself: he bites his lip, tries to scowl, fakes a cough, but the smile is too strong. My father is beginning to grin also.

“How *many*?” I demand.

“Maybe it was twenty,” he murmurs.

I pick up a large clump of broccoli and aim it at his head.

“Sunny!” my mother exclaims.

Luke’s eyes widen. “Twenty-six!” he confesses in a squeaky voice.

“There. That wasn’t so difficult, was it?” I say, biting the head off the green stalk.

Luke lets out a breath, begins to eat. There is a silence for awhile.

“By the way—nice steal there at the end,” I say to him as I pass the fish to father. Luke looks up at me from the top of his eyes. “Thanks,” he says warily.

“It’s something I should work on,” I add.

“I’ll help you!” Luke says instantly, and sincerely. “Right after supper!”

My parents coo inwardly at this warm, cooperative family exchange, and dinner proceeds smoothly.

Later, during dessert, when my father and Luke have finally debriefed themselves, quarter by quarter, play by play, on the game, I wait for Dad’s usual, ‘Well, who’s next on the schedule?’ He doesn’t disappoint me.

“Clearville I think,” Luke says.

“What’s the word on them?”—Dad is the kind of guy who does not believe in basking in victory—at least not for more than a couple of hours. Part of that is about avoiding excessive pride; the other part is from his basic competitive nature—which is likely where Luke gets his intensity. Me? I’m genetically good with words but have never stolen a ball and made a breakaway lay-up in my life. Luke averages twenty; I average 5.8.

“Clearville has that big center plus a smooth point guard. They beat us by six last time,” Luke continues.

“Big game, then, yes,” my father remarks, his fingers beginning to drum on the table. “You’ll have to box out—keep that big guy off the boards. And if their point guards penetrates, collapse inside—make him prove he can hit the jumper.”

“He can’t hit no jumper,” Luke says through a large bite of desert (cake). “He shoots bricks. I’m going to shut him down like a bike-lock.”

“Huh?” I say.

“What!?” Luke says. “What’d I say now?”

“First, it’s ‘any’ jumper. And second, how do you shut someone down ‘like a bike lock’?”

“Actually, it’s not a bad simile,” my mother murmurs. “If this fellow is a ‘smooth’ so, in a way, is a bicycle, the way it rolls and turns, and a bike lock, well . . .” she trails off, looking apologetically at me.

I shrug and stare down at my fish. It has not been a good day for either of us.

“And who does *your* team play next, Sunny?” my father asks cheerfully.

“Big Falls. Tuesday night,” I say. I look up and watch his face carefully.

“Tuesday night, isn’t that?” he begins.

“I’m afraid I’ll miss it, honey,” my mother interjects, “I have that teacher’s-education conference in Minneapolis, remember?”

“Sure, Mom, no problem.” I keep my eyes on my father; on Luke, who’s thinking. I am waiting for the light bulb (20 watts, maximum) to go on in his brain.

“Hey—Tuesday night is my game, too,” Luke says suddenly.

“Yes, I thought so,” my father murmurs; the males in the family have finally put two and two together.

“What time are your games?” my mother asks.

“Seven,” Luke and I say simultaneously.

My father looks to me, then to Luke. He’s frowning. Suddenly his gaze lightens. “By any chance are they both at the high school? In the adjoining gyms?”

“Middle School,” Luke says.

“High School,” I follow.

“Dang,” my father finishes. “They ought to take whoever schedules sporting events in this school system and–.”

“I’m sure it couldn’t be helped, Dear,” my mother says. “Sunny’s is a make-up game after all.”

“And the last one of the season,” I add.

My father looks to Luke. “So is yours, right? The last one of the season?”

Luke nods. He and I look at each other. I smile. I love moral dilemmas, especially when they don’t involve me.

My father looks to my mother.

“Sorry,” she says to him, “I’m delivering a paper. There’s no way I can miss.”

“Well,” my father says, rattling his cup in his saucer and frowning, “I’ll have to think this one through, won’t I?”

Amazingly, Luke does keep his promise, and after dinner we work on stealing. It is chilly outside in March, with patches of leftover snow banks along the north side of the garage (this is Minnesota, remember), but the asphalt is clear.

“There are two main types of steals,” Luke says, dribbling, pretending he’s their guard. “First is the most basic, ‘the unprotected ball’. As your man is dribbling, he is not shielding the ball with his body, and so you go for it.”

I lunge for the deflection but Luke instantly back-dribbles. I miss.

“It’s all in the timing,” he says, “all in when you start your move. Don’t start when the ball is coming back up to my hand—begin your move just when the ball *leaves* my hand—just as it’s released and heading downward.”

I track him, waiting—then try it: I actually knock the ball away.

“See?” Luke says. “That gives you the maximum of time for your reach-in.”

We practice this a few more times.

“Be sure reach with your outside hand,” Luke cautions, “or else you might get called for a reach-in foul.”

We keep working for quite a while. I start to get every third one but I’m still not very good at it.

“It’s coming,” Luke says, then holds the ball. I kick away a pebble, which clatters against garage door.

“The second type of steal is called the ‘wrap-around.’ It’s when your man is dribbling and you reach way around behind, almost wrapping your arm around him, and knock the ball away from behind.” He flips me the ball, has me dribble, and snakes loose the ball two out of three times. Then he takes the ball back, and we work on this one for a while. I get one out of ten at best. I am panting.

“The wrap-around is the toughest one,” Luke says, trying to be kind. “Ah . . . maybe you need longer arms or something.”

At the window I see my father watching us. “Again,” I say crabbily to Luke. Soon I am stumbling tired and getting no wrap-around deflections or steals at all.

“Hey, it’ll come,” Luke says, bouncing the ball to me. I slam the ball hard onto the cold asphalt and back into my hands.

“Yeah. Like in 2030 maybe.” I say something unprintable.

“Maybe I’ll go have some more cake,” Luke says.

“Fine,” I say. He heads off.

“By the way,” I call to him, “what Coach taught you those stealing moves?” The middle-school coaches rotate between girls and boys teams. I am always on the look out for school coaches who treat boys and girls differently. None of them ever highlighted ‘the two types of steals’ to me.

“Who taught me? Coach Dad,” Luke says. He smiles.

I don’t. I glare at Luke, then to the window, which is empty.

“What?!” Luke says. “What did I say now?”

“Nothing.” I turn away, take the ball and begin to bank hard shots off the backboard, none of which fall.

That night, my father, who has amazing radar, stops me as I’m heading up the stairs to bed. “Everything okay, Sunny?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Sure sure?”

I shrug.

He sits on the stairs, pats a space beside him. I flop down, put my chin in my hands and stare off across the living room.

“So what is it?” he asks, draping an arm over my shoulders.

“How come you taught Luke those two types of steals and not me?” I turn to him. My eyes feel glassy and spilly; they are about to dump water down my cheeks.

He stares. “Steals? Oh, you mean. . . . Yes, well” He trails off and stares at some empty space in front of him, thinking. Then he turns to me. “I guess I don’t know why,” he murmurs. “Parents get into habit of teaching different things to different kids. Things they think are important to know.”

“Well I play basketball and I need to know those things, too!” I say. I try to be hardboiled about it but a large tear rolls down my cheek.

He stares at me, then moves imperceptibly, as if to come forward to take me into his arms. But accountants are accountants because most of them are not good with other things—like feelings. With a confused look on his face, my father retreats from my room.

In the morning when I wake up, there is a note taped to my door. “Dear Sunny: There is a third type of steal. . . .”

That Saturday, when Luke is gone to hockey practice, my father appears in the den carry his tennis shoes. “‘Stealing for Girls’, a sports clinic presented by yours truly, begins in fifteen minutes, garage-side.”

I grab the remote and shoot the TV dead.

Before we go outside, my father pauses at the kitchen table. “Let’s call it the ‘prediction pass steal,’” he says, drawing X’s and O’s on a napkin. “And it works best with a zone defense.”

“Got it,” I say. On my team we have been learning the zone, and zone traps, though we haven’t used them much.

“A half-court zone defense forces the team on offense to work the ball around the perimeter.”

I nod as he draws rapid lines in a large half circle.

“The faster the ball movement, the tougher it is for the defense to shift accordingly.”

I nod. I know all this.

“The offensive point guard will sooner or later get into what you might call the ‘automatic’ pass mode—he receives a pass from, say, his right side, and automatically turns to pass to his left.”

“Okay.”

“That’s when the smart defensive man can start to think about a prediction steal.”

“The defensive point guard?”

“No,” my father says, smiling deviously. “The offensive point guard is used to that. He’s been conditioned to watch out for that kind of steal. What he’s not expecting is the weak-side, defensive guard or even the forward break up and across, slanting through the lane toward the key and picking off the pass. A lot of small, quick college teams use it.”

“Show me,” I say.

He grabs a fresh napkin and begins to draw. “Imagine a basic zone defense that’s shifting to the ball.”

I close my eyes. “Got it,” I say.

“If the offense is moving the ball sharply, the defensive point guard has the toughest job. He usually can’t keep up with the ball movement.”

I nod. I keep my eyes closed.

“So the passing out front becomes a ‘gimme’, it’s not contested.”

I nod again.

“And after awhile, the offensive point guard gets sloppy.”

I smile.

“And it’s then that one of the defensive players down low can make his move. He flashes all the way up, comes out of nowhere for the steal.”

I smiled and open my eyes. Look at the lines and arrows.

“Keep in mind it will only work once or twice,” my father cautions, “and the timing has to be perfect or else the defense will get burned.”

I look down to his drawing, see the open hole left by the steal attempt.

“Burned bad,” he adds, “but hey, if works—bingo—he’s gone for an easy lay-up.”

I correct him: “*She’s* gone.”

Out side, for want of five offensive players, my father presses into service a saw-horse, three garbage cans and my mother. “I just love my team,” she says wryly.

“This won’t take long,” my Dad says cheerfully. Mom shivers; the weather is cloudy with rain forecast.

“Sunny, you’re the weak-side defensive guard,” he directs. I position myself, back to the basket. “Dear, you’re our offensive point guard,” he says to my mother.

“I’ve never been a point guard; I’ve never been a guard of any kind,” she protests.

“First time for everything,” my Dad retorts.

Actually, I can tell that they’re both having fun.

“Now,” he says to my Mom, “imagine you have just received a pass from the sawhorse, and in turn you’ll be passing to me.”

My mother, the orange ball looking very large in her hands, says, “Thanks, sawhorse,” and turns and passes to my Dad.

“Now—Sunny!” he calls, but I break up way too late.

“Again,” my father says.

This time I break up too soon, and my mother stops her pass.

“Again,” my father says.

I trot back to my position and try it again. On the sixth try I time it perfectly: I catch her pass chest-high and am gone for an imaginary lay-up.

“Excellent!” my father calls. “Again.”

We practice until we are glowing in the chilly March morning, until an icy rain starts spattering down and the ball becomes too slick to hold.

Afterwards, we are sitting at the kitchen table drinking hot chocolate when outside a car door slams—Luke’s ride—and then Luke himself thumps into the house. “Hey,” he says, pointing over his shoulder, “what’s with the garbage cans and the sawhorse?”

For the next several days, my father and I obsess on the ‘prediction pass.’ We relent and let Luke join us, garage-side, though mainly because we need another passer. The weather remains lousy, and my mother freezes her butt off, and Luke complains about not getting to try it himself, but my father misses all of that. He is too busy fine-tuning my timing, my break-aways.

And, suddenly, it is Tuesday morning of game day.

Both games.

“Huge day, big games,” my father says, first thing, at breakfast. He is drumming his fingers and smiling.

Luke glares at me. He is not happy about this week and his role as perpetual passer, garage-side. “So I guess I know which game *you’re* going to,” he mumbles to my father.

Dad says nothing.

Warming up with the team, I have the usual butterflies. The Big Falls girls look like their name—big, with huge hair tied back and bouncing as they do their lay-ups. I try not to look at them, but can’t help but hear their chatter, the thud and squeak of their shoes. Even their feet seem huge.

I look around the gym. No family. No Dad. I miss my lay-up.

Just before tip-off, from my spot on the bench, I look around one last time. No family. No father. I sigh and focus on the game.

Which is going to be a tough one all the way. The teams are well matched at every position and the score stays close—bad news for me. I ride the pine all the way through the first quarter.

We do our “Hawk Bend Fliers!” send-off whoop to start the second quarter, and as I head back to the bench I scan the crowd (small). No father. But it’s just as well, I think gloomily as I settle onto the bench. At least at Luke’s game he’s seeing Luke play.

Watching, chin in hands, that second quarter, with a sparse, quiet crowd giving neither team much support, I begin to think gloomy but true thoughts: that really, in the end, each of us is alone. That each of us, by what we choose to do, is responsible for how we feel about ourselves. That—.

“Sunny. Sunny!” An elbow, Jenny’s, jabs me in the ribs: the Coach is calling for me.

“Sunny, check in for Rachel at forward,” he adds, giving me a fleeting, get-your-head-in-the-game glance.

I have to ask Rachel who she’s guarding. Tired, irritated at having to pause on her way off the floor, she looks around and finally points to a hefty, five foot ten, forward with major pimples on her shoulders and neck. I trot up close.

“What are you staring at?” the sweaty, Big Falls forward says straight off; she leans close to me and glares.

“There’s a new soap that might clear those up,” I say, letting my eyes fall to her neck and shoulders.

“Listen you little shit,” she says but the horn drowns out the rest.

Then ball is in play, quickly around to my man, who puts her shoulder down and drives the lane. I keep my feet planted and draw the charging foul.

“Way to go, Sunny!” my team calls as we head up the floor; my mood lightens considerably.

In my two minutes of play while Rachel is out I make one lucky basket and draw one foul—a reach-in steal attempt. I try to remember that timing is everything. I also see that our team is quicker, but they are stronger inside. Pimple-shoulders muscles me out of the way like I was a third-grader; she outweighs me by eighty pounds, minimum.

At the next time out Rachel comes back in and I end up sitting next to the Coach. I watch us get beat, inside, by some teeth jarring picks, and the score gradually tilt in favor of Big Falls. At the half we are down 21-28.

In the locker room the first five players lay red-faced and flat on their backs on the benches. “They’re shoving underneath,” Rachel complains.

“No, they’re out-muscling us,” the Coach retorts. “Position! We’ve got to get position and stay planted. Like Sunny did right away when she came in—get planted and draw the foul.”

I play it very cool and do not change expressions.

The Coach heads to the chalkboard and begins to draw X’s and O’s. “They might be big but they’re slow. In the third quarter I want to us run, run, run—fast-break them until their butts are dragging.”

“Or ours,” Rachel mutters.

“You don’t want to play hard, we’ve got people who do!” the Coach barks.

Rachel zips her lip, stares the ceiling.

During the half-time shoot I scan the crowd. Still nobody. I feel something inside me harden, center itself; I get a flash of what life will be like when I go away to college, when I’ll truly be on my own. Just me. No family whatsoever. Just me schlumping through life.

On the bench as the third quarter begins I am completely focused. I sit next to the coach and call out encouragement. Our fast-break works. After they score, Rachel rips the ball to one side or the other while, Jenny, our point guard, breaks up the center. She takes the pass at the half-court line, then does her thing—either driving the lane or dishing off to the trailers. We miss some easy lay-ups, but still pull within one point.

Big Falls calls time out. Our team is ecstatic, but I see the Coach’s concern. The starting five stand bent over, hands on knees; he knows we can’t continue to run like this.

“Let’s stick it out to end this quarter,” he says, “and then we’ll figure out something else.”

Our starters manage a weak, “Go Fliers!” and walk back onto the floor still panting.

In the final two minutes of the third quarter I watch as Big Fork shuts down the fast break like . . . a bicycle lock. Simple really: just some pressure on the first pass, plus coverage on the sides, and we do not score again. But I have been watching them on offense. Watching the big girls work inside, watching the guards, who have taken very few shots from the outside-and no three-pointers.

“Zone,” I say to myself. “In the fourth quarter we should go zone.”

Coach Brown looks to me. Then back to the action. He strokes his chin.

At the final quarter break he kneels on the floor. "Take a load off," he commands, and the starting five slump into chairs. He points, one by one, to the next five, and we check in. Back in the huddle, Coach Brown has drawn some scrawling maps of X's and O's. "Zone defense," he says, with a wink to me. "Let's collapse inside and make them shoot from the perimeter. Make them prove they can hit the jumpers. But box out and get that rebound," he adds. "We've got to have the ball to score."

We fire up and trot onto the floor. For some reason I look to the middle of the bleachers –and see my father. His briefcase rests beside him and his gray suit coat is folded neatly over it.

"Zone! Box and one!" the Big Falls point guard calls out immediately, and begins to move the ball crisply side to front to side. It's clear they've had a zone thrown at them before. Still bench-stiff, we have trouble keeping up with the passes, and their point guard takes an uncontested shot from within the key - but bricks it. Wendy rips off the rebound and we move the ball cautiously up-court. Our second-team guards have no future with the Harlem Globetrotters in terms of ball handling, but we do know how to pick-and-roll.

I fake to the baseline, then break up and set a screen for Shanna. She rubs off her girl - who hits me, blindside, hard - as I roll to the inside. I'm looking for the ball, and suddenly, thanks to a nifty bounce pass, it's right at my chest. I clamp on it, take one dribble, brace for a hammer blow from Pimple Shoulder, and go up for the lay-in. I feel the oncoming air rush of a large-body (the image of a 757 jetliner on a crash course with a seagull flashes through my mind) but don't alter my flight path. The ball feels good off my fingertips. As my feet touch down and I open my eyes, the ball is settling through the net and Pimple Shoulders is skidding along the hardwood runway and there is major cheering from our bench. Me? I am just happy to be heading up-court with all my feathers intact.

The Big Falls outside shooting continues to bang hard off the rim, and we continue to box out and get the rebound play and score on basic pick-and-rolls. We go up 42-38, and our bench is screaming and bouncing up and down in their chairs.

But Big Falls gets smart: They throw a zone defense at us. Not great passers, and worse outside shooters, we turn the ball over three times; barely fifty seconds later, Big Falls is up by two, 44-42, and Coach Brown is screaming for a time-out. By the time the ref stops the clock there is less than three minutes left in the game.

"Okay, good job, second team," he calls, pointing for the first team to check back in. "Stay with the zone defense, but let's run the fast break."

We all clap once, together, and send the starters back onto the floor.

"Nice work out there," the coach says to me, and motions for me to sit by him. "Stay ready."

The first team, refreshed, runs a fast break for a quick bucket and knots the score at 44 all. The teams trade baskets, then settle into solid defense, and suddenly there is less than one minute to play. Both the score and my gut are knotted. The Big Falls point guard launches a three-pointer, which goes through, but we come back with a fast break on which Rachel does some kind of wild, falling, 180-degree, dipsy-do finger-roll shot—which falls! We are down by one point, but Rachel is down, too, with a turned ankle. There are thirty seconds left.

We help her off the court. Done for the day, she cries with pain and anger.

"Sunny! Check in and go to forward," the coach says.

As I pause at the scorer's table, everything seems exaggeratedly clear, as if magnified: the black and white zebra stripes of the officials, the seams of the yellow wood floor, the orange rim worn to bare, shiny metal on the inside. I stare at the ball the ref is holding and can imagine its warm, tight sphere in my hands. I want that ball. For the first time in my basketball career I want the ball, bad.

The Big Falls girls are slapping high fives like the game is over; after all, they have possession with a one-point lead. The ref calls time-in, and Big Falls bounces the ball inbounds handily and pushes it quickly up the floor. There they spread the offense and begin to work the ball around the perimeter: side to front to side to front. It's too early for us to foul, so we stay with our zone defense. Their point guard, still jazzed from making the three-point basket, is loose and smart-mouthed. As she receives the ball she automatically passes it to the opposite side.

Which is when I suddenly see not Big Falls players but garbage cans and a sawhorse. To the side, on the bench, I see Coach Brown rising to signal it's time to foul, but I have been counting off another kind of time: the Big Falls passing rhythm. On the far side, away from the ball, when orange is flashing halfway to the point guard, I begin my break. Smart Mouth receives the ball, turns, and passes it. Her eyes bug out as I arrow into view; she tries to halt her pass but it's too late. I catch the ball and am gone. There is only open floor in front and sudden cheering from the sides, and, overly excited, I launch my layup at about the free throw line—but the ball goes in anyway. The Hawk Bend crowd goes crazy.

Down by one point, Big Falls calls a frantic time-out at the five-second mark. Our players are delirious, but Coach Brown is not. "Watch for the long pass, the long pass!" he rants. "They have a set play. Don't foul—especially on the three-point shot."

But we're only eighth-graders; we don't listen well.

Sure enough, Big Falls screens on the inbound pass, which Pimple Shoulders fires full court. There the point guard takes an off-balance shot – and is fouled by Shanna as time runs out.

Shanna looks paralyzed. She can't believe she did it.

"Three-point attempt –three foul shots!" the ref calls.

We clear off the free throw line and watch her miss the first two– and make the third to tie. The game goes into overtime.

Back in the huddle we try to get pumped again, but I can tell it's not going to happen. We are stunned and flat. We lose in overtime by four points.

At home we have a late supper: broccoli, fish sticks, and rice. I stare at my plate as my father finishes grace. Then he looks up. "Well," he says.

"A very deep subject," Luke replies, grabbing the bread. His team won, of course, by twenty-some points.

I just sit there, slumped and staring.

"You should have seen it," my father begins, speaking to Luke. "We're down by one and your sister is low on the weak side. The Big Falls point guard is not paying attention. . ." Slowly I look up. I listen as my father tells the story of my one and only career steal. He re-creates it so well that Luke stops eating and his mouth drops open slightly. "Wow!" Luke says at the finish, then asks me more about my game. I shrug, but end up giving him a virtual play-by-play of the last two minutes.

When I am done, Luke lets out a breath and looks squarely at me. "Man I wish I could have been there!"

I stop to stare at him.

"What? What'd I say?" Luke says, getting ready to duck.

I just smile, and pass my little brother the broccoli.

(the end)

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“Marked for Death”

A short story

When I walked into Gun Safety class, some of the boys laughed, their thirteen year-old voices croaking like tree toads.

"Hey, " a pimply-faced one said, "ain't you in the wrong room?"

I pretended to check my registration sheet. "No, I'm in the right room—but the dermatologist is just down the hall."

A few other boys snickered, and not at me. Pizza Face, aka "Tanner" (we had to wear stick-on name tags) looked at me dumbly. "Forget it," I said. I glanced around, then took a desk near the front; since I was the only girl, I might as well be a cliché.

The instructor, Mr. Johnson, soon came into the room. "Good Saturday morning, class!" he said. He was a school industrial arts teacher, but today wore a camo cap, a dorks unlimited shooting vest, and carried two long guns plus a bunch of hand-outs.

"Don't be afraid, they're only guns," Tanner said.

I glanced at them. "Looks like a .22 rifle and a twenty-gauge shotgun," I replied. "Though I prefer a sixteen-gauge myself. The dram load is a little light for ducks and geese, but it's perfect for partridge hunting—wouldn't you agree?"

"Huh?" he said to me. He was staring at the guns, this undersized, scruffy kid with all the wrong clothes.

"Well, well, well!" Mr. Johnson said, his eyes lighting up as he saw me. "If it's not Miss Samantha Carlson."

"Sam," I said. Please. Spare me.

"Samantha's father happens to be a professional hunting guide and one of the top shooters in the Midwest," the instructor said loudly. "If she's anything like her father, you boys don't stand a chance."

There were a few uncertain chuckles.

"Maybe you could just turn a big spotlight on me?" I muttered.

This got a big laugh from the boys; Mr. Johnson drew back, cleared his throat, and moved to a different spot in the room.

I checked my watch. I had to pass this class in order to get my gun safety permit, which meant I could go deer hunting—real hunting, as in carrying my own gun. For Mid-western kids, this is a big deal. The even bigger deal was this: I'd be hunting with my father. Just me and him. He wasn't around much; right now he was guiding in Kodiak, Alaska—fish in the spring and summer, big game in the fall—but we had been planning this for years. "When you turn thirteen, it's just me and you, honey," he always said. My brothers, Jake, Ben and Andrew, had their turn; now it was mine.

First, however, I had to get through this day. Stuck inside a school classroom on a hot August Saturday (the last one before school started) was bad enough, but most of

my friends from La Crosse were off to the Mall of America in Minneapolis on one last shopping trip for school clothes. Growing up with three brothers, I constantly worried about becoming Jo March from *Little Women*. On the other hand, I wasn't a full time girly-girl like most of my friends. To be honest, my life in that area was kind of a mess.

"Today's class will cover the basic principles of fire arms operation and hunting safety," Mr. Johnson droned as he distributed hand-outs. I sighed again. My family lives in Wisconsin, in the countryside north of La Crosse, and we target shoot right in our back yard. My father got me started with a BB gun when I was about five. I wish he could have seen me smoke 24 of 25 sporting clays the other day with the Browning twenty gauge he bought me last Christmas, but these days he's gone almost all the time. My parents seem kind of married, kind of not. I don't ask. I only know that my mother has made a big deal of me knowing how to do all the stuff my brothers can do, such as ride a horse, clean fish, and use cables to jump-start a car with a dead car battery. She's a real outdoors woman herself; after deer hunting season, she always gets a manicure because deer blood chaps her hands, her cuticles especially (a beauty tip you won't get from reading *Teen Beat* or *Glamour*).

"There will be a test at the end of the day," Mr. Johnson said, "so pay attention—unless you think you know it all."

He glanced sideways at me; I pretended to study the hand-outs, which anyway were easier on the eyes than a room full of thirteen year old males. After the teacher moved on, I sneaked another look around. The boys had all been dropped as babies. Some had noses and ears way too large for their faces; some had no chin, or too much jaw; some were tall, some (like Tanner) were small in their desks; some had patches of whisker fuzz and croaky voices while others sounded like canaries. Or maybe I was at a thoroughly modern, politically correct zoo where all the animals shared the same large pen. Not a pretty sight. Tanner had drawn something rude on his desk, and was trying to get the kid next to him to look at it.

"We'll start with the fundamental, number one issue of handling a gun: muzzle safety," the instructor said. He held up the small rifle. "If the bore, or 'business end' of a gun is never pointed at a person, no can ever be shot accidentally." Then he took ten minutes saying the same thing ten different ways. *We get it, we get it!* I checked my watch again to make the sure its battery wasn't dead.

After muzzle safety, it was on to more bonehead facts and information, including a filmstrip (I thought they went out with the last century) on moving safely through the field while carrying a gun. "Always be sure of your target, and never, *ever*, run with a gun."

Yawn.

"The next part of our class contains graphic images," the instructor said as he set up his slide projector.

"All right!" Tanner said to anyone who would listen.

"These photographs were taken at the scene of actual hunting accidents"

"Even better!" Tanner whispered.

Everybody ignored him. If Tanner were a character in an action movie, he would be marked for death—you know, the swimmer who paddles away from the others in a shark flick, or the camper who wanders into the woods at night in a slasher film.

"Fair warning: some of these slides are explicit, or, as you youngsters might say, 'gross'," Mr. Johnson said.

No one said anything.

"Their purpose is to shock you," he continued, taking his time, making us wait (clearly this was his best stuff). "I want you to see the effect of a rifle bullet or a shotgun blast on human flesh."

I got ready by squinting my eyes. The first slide was of a hunter face down in brown leaves with a big black splotch on the back of his blaze orange jacket; compared to the computer games that Jake, Ben and Andrew played, it was pretty tame.

"That's what he looked like in the field," the instructor said. The next slide flashed onto the screen—I looked away but not in time—and there was a sucking in of breath around the room. "This is what he looked like in the coroner's office."

A stainless steel table. A totally naked guy lying on his stomach with a huge, *Little Shop of Horrors* flower growing on his back: white fatty petals at the edges, bulging red stuff in the middle, things that looked like black tongues. I felt my breakfast Cheerios move in my stomach.

The slides continued. I watched the next one from the very corner of the side of my eye: an arm blown away just below the elbow, flaps of skin hanging like a fringed skirt on a doll. "This hunter bled to death," the instructor announced.

Two dead hunters were enough. We got the picture—at least I got the picture—and while the boys watched the rest of the freak show, I watched them: it was a great moment to observe the species. With each new image, Tanner's jaw dropped a degree farther until I could hear him breathing through his mouth.

"Okay, that should be enough," the instructor finally said. He shut down the projector and turned on the lights. There were exhalations and murmuring and thumping about in the desks. After another short film strip on target shooting and safety, at last it was lunch time.

Even better, we got to go outside.

On the elementary school playground we took our bag lunches toward some grass. Tanner carried only a twenty-ounce Mountain Dew. "Hey everybody, did you see that dead guy's butt?" he said. Everybody ignored him. We sat down. Tanner kept looking for a group to join, but nobody would let him in; being a sucker for birds and chipmunks fallen from nests, I was just about to give in and make room for him, when he raced across to the swing set. He took a swing and began to pump himself higher and higher.

Gradually we turned to watch him. Soon, at high arc, the chains began to slack and he free-fell with harder and harder jerks. "Hey everybody, higher?" he called.

"Yeah— way higher!" several boys called, and snickered.

"What a jerk," one of them said, and turned away.

Tanner stood up in the swing and pumped. I held my breath.

"Anybody, want to see me jump?"

"Yeah—for sure!" several guys called; the boys turned as one to get a good look at Tanner breaking his neck. I'd had enough; I ran over to the swing set and grabbed at the chains as they flashed by. "Tanner, cut it out! You're gonna get hurt!"

His head jerked sideways and he stared down at me. Then he looked at all the boys, and I realized I'd just made things worse for him. Luckily for all of us, Mr. Johnson stepped through the door. "The bus is here," he called; in an instant, the boys abandoned race off, leave me with Tanner.

"Hey everybody, wait up!" Tanner shouted.

I waited as he braked himself in a cloud of dust, and then jumped. He did a running flip, and landed on his back with a thud. For second his mouth went fish-lips as he sucked at the air, and soon he sat up, gasping.

"See, what did I tell you?" I said. "Those guys just wanted to see you get hurt."

He looked at me, and for a second his eyes were not crazy and jumpy. It was like there was a normal kid buried somewhere inside his head. But really deep inside.

"Race you to the bus!" he said.

The yellow school bus took us to the local target range for actual shooting—in other words, the fun part of the day.

"I've never shot a gun before," Tanner said; of course he had to sit by me.

The boys all looked at one another, then rolled their eyes.

"Does it kick?" he asked me.

"Some," I said, "but just keep the butt of the stock tight against your shoulder. That and your cheek tight on the wood." I thought for sure he'd make some lame joke about 'butt' and 'cheek.'

"I'll try to remember that," Tanner said. I looked twice at him. Tanner was possibly the only thirteen-year-old boy in the world who didn't mind taking directions from a thirteen-year-old girl. The boys rolled their eyes again; however, as the shooting range approached, they all began to stare out the bus windows. I got the feeling that many of them had not shot a gun.

First, everyone shot the little .22 caliber, single shot rifle. Three shots in the three main positions: prone, sitting and standing (off-hand). The first boy couldn't figure out the sitting position, that is, which elbow to place on which knee. When my turn came I took time to get my breathing right—it's best to squeeze in that dead moment just after exhaling—and put all three shots, in all three positions, in the bull's eye black. "What did I tell you, boys," Mr. Johnson said.

Soon we moved to the shotgun and clay pigeons. Mr. Johnson let me “demonstrate” by going first. I figured he’d try something sneaky, and from the corner of my amber shooting glasses saw him adjust the bench-mounted thrower to “rabbit”, meaning a ground-skipping clay.

“Ready?” he asked

I nodded. “Pull!” The clay came out low and fast, but I lead it right—and puffed it—just before it flew out of range. By the end of the day I had twenty new friends, Tanner in particular, plus my Hunting and Gun Safety certificate and badge.

For the boys the big question was where to sew on their badge: cap or hunting jacket? They even included Tanner in that debate. I slipped mine in my pocket and got out of there.

"How'd it go?" my mother asked. Her name is Amy, and she was waiting for me in the parking lot beside our Jeep. Tanned and lean with a sandy brown pony tail, she wore her usual Saturday outfit: jeans, dusty cowboy boots, and the leathery, soapy smell of Penny, our horse.

"She can shoot like heck!" Tanner called across to my mother. "She's cool!"

I shrugged. "Tanner, my new very best friend."

My mother smiled. "Thatta girl." She put her arm around me right there in the open.

"Please mother," I said.

"Sorry," she said, and let go.

I watched the other boys head off with their fathers, all except for Tanner, who got on a battered bicycle with a wobbly back tire. My mother started the car and we drove away. I kept looking back.

“What?” she asked.

I was silent.

"You miss your Dad," she said.

I shrugged. "Do you?"

She paused a moment too long. "He'll be home for awhile real soon."

She drove on and we were both silent. We never talked much about him; there was lots of unsaid stuff about him being gone. I think she thought I blamed her, and maybe in some ways I did.

When I got home I left my father a voice-mail message about passing the gun safety class; he hardly ever answered his cell phone, but then again if you're a hunting guide, the last thing you need is your phone to start beeping. Sometimes I called his number just to hear his voice message.

The first day of school was a disaster. Everybody except me had grown a foot taller and several bra sizes bigger; I was wearing bright new Aididas when all the girls in the Tara-Melanie group were wearing strappy sandals (how come I didn't hear about that?). And

the bad news didn't stop there. I was standing with Tara and Melanie, in the eighth grade hallway, when a loud voice called, "Sam–hey Sam!"

I looked over my shoulder. I froze.

Tanner came rushing up. His pimples were some better, and he had on a clean shirt, but he was wearing old, busted out tennis shoes and ratty jeans and his hair needed a major washing. The girls around me drew back.

"It's me, Tanner! Remember? From Gun Safety class?"

"Oh yeah," I said. I checked my watch.

"Hey Sam, I was thinking–maybe we can go hunting some day!"

I felt my ears began to burn, and could only imagine their new color. "We'll see. Actually, I gotta go to class," I said.

"Okay, see you around, Sam," Tanner said cheerfully, and turned away.

"Who was *that*?" the girls said in unison.

"Just this. . . kid," I said, and felt my face turn really red.

As school continued that first week, Tanner ricocheted from group to group. Nobody wanted anything to do with him, so I ended up talking to him a couple of times. From his line-up of mostly special classes, I could tell he was a "consonant kid" (I once heard a teacher use that phrase)–hyperactivity disorder (HD), behaviorally and socially challenged (BSC), etc. The only conversation he could really stay with was about hunting. Going hunting. Someday even owning a hunting gun. I tried to be nice to him but he was like a stray dog: feed him and he only comes back more often; chase him away and you feel like dirt. One day I asked him about his parents.

"My foster parents or my dead ones?" he said.

I swallowed. "Whichever."

"My foster parents are okay. But my real parents died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry."

"My father, that is," he added. "My mother's in California in this drug treatment place."

I tried to think of something to say.

"Actually, it's a prison," he added. "She's in prison." He looked straight at me. "Usually I lie about her."

"Well I'm glad you didn't," was all I could think to say, but with Tanner that was enough. He smiled like he was the happiest kid in the world.

After that, Tanner attached himself to me like a wood tick. Like a leech. Like a lamprey. I swear he was sucking my blood, and he certainly didn't help my hall life. Tanner and the fact that my father was never around. Once Tara asked, "Is your mother, like, a single mom?"

I laughed as if that were the funniest thing I'd ever heard; none of the Mary Kate and Ashley group (as I sometimes thought of them) laughed with me.

As October rolled around, and with it the opening of small game season, Tanner pestered me daily about going hunting. "Mr. Johnson said he's going to find someone to take me grouse hunting," he said. "When we go, want to come with?"

"We'll see," I said.

"You could show me how to wing shoot and stuff like that."

"We'll see," I muttered. It was the only answer that worked with Tanner, the only response that made him go away. Not yes, not no. 'We'll see.'

Then the leaves turned yellow and red and brown, geese honked high overhead as they flew south for the winter—and my father blew home with them. Suddenly one day there he was in his dusty black Ford Explorer, waiting for me after school right there in front of the busses and everybody.

"Daddy," I shrieked. I raced into his arms. I didn't care if anybody saw me. In fact, I hoped they did.

"Sam, honey!" he said, and lifted me off the ground and swung me around. He smelled like cigar and leaves and wood; his trimmed beard had flecks of snow in it, a speckled whiteness that I never noticed before. There were also new, fine wrinkles around his eyes, which were tired, and a little sad, as if he'd been working too hard or had lost something important. "I'm home to do some scouting for deer season," he said, flashing his old smile and holding me tight with one strong arm. "Hope you haven't forgotten our date."

I began to cry.

"Honey, honey, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, rubbing away my tears.

"Well I certainly hope not," he said.

"Hey is that your Dad?" a loud voice said.

Tanner. Tanner lurched up beside us.

"Hello there young man," my father began.

"Go away!" I said suddenly to Tanner.

Tanner flinched as if I had kicked him. My father looked at me with disappointment—which only made the moment worse. I rushed into the Ford and slammed the door. My father came around and settled into the driver's seat.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Just . . . this . . . boy," I blubbered.

My father smiled and started the engine. "Oh, that," he said.

"No—you don't understand," I said, even more annoyed. I looked out the window; Tanner was still standing there, staring after us with his mouth-open-deer-in-the-headlights look.

For the rest of that week, the one before deer season, my father picked me up everyday after school. And everyday, Tanner found some excuse to be there. "What's the deal with Tanner?" my father said.

I shrugged. "I met him in gun safety class this summer. He just sort of attached himself to me."

"He's new in school?"

I nodded.

"Does he have any friends?"

"I'm it," I said sarcastically.

My father looked in his rear view mirror at Tanner, then across to me. "I'm proud of you, honey."

On Wednesday afternoon, when I came to meet my Dad, I saw the Gun Safety class instructor, Mr. Johnson, talking with my father. When I approached, their voices dropped to a murmur, then became hearty and false.

"Hello Sam," Mr. Johnson said way too cheerfully.

"Sam, Sam, guess what?!" Tanner shouted as he raced up behind me.

"What," I said flatly.

"Mr. Johnson says I might get to go deer hunting with you and your father! Isn't that right, Mr. Carlson?"

On the way home I sat as far as I could from my father and stared out my window. I wouldn't let him see my face.

"It's not like that, Sam," my father said again. "And anyway, what could I do? Bob Johnson tells me this kid's story—how he's bounced around foster homes all his life, how he came to the gun safety class all on his own. The one thing the kid wants to do is go deer hunting. What could I say?"

"Like, 'No?'"

My father sucked in a breath. "I considered that. But sometimes we have to . . . share what we have. Share the luck. Share the gifts. Think about it: this kid has no one. For starters, you've got two parents."

"Sort of," I said.

My father fell silent.

I glanced over at him. His eyes had a hurt look, and they stared straight down the road.

"I'm sorry," I said. I felt my own eyes burning again.

"It's okay, Baby," he murmured, and touched my hair.

"It's just that you always said—" I began, but my voice broke.

"I know, I know: 'just you and me.' But it will still be almost like that. I've got it figured out. I'm going to make a blind for Tanner that's way away from us. You and I will take the tree stand, and I'll check on him once in awhile. It will all work out, okay?"

I bit my lip. I didn't say anything.

On Thursday night after school, my father took Tanner and me to the shooting range. "I just want to make sure he knows what he's doing," my father said to me. I made

my statement by staying in the truck. And anyway, my gun, a twenty gauge shotgun set up for deer-hunting was long-since targeted in. Tanner was using one of my brother Andrew's old, a single-shot "starter" twenty gauge. The range was busy with last minute shooters; guns boomed and crashed. Tanner's first screw-up was to wave the muzzle sideways across the line of bench shooters—including my father. I sucked in a breath. A couple of hunters drew back and glared, and my father snatched the muzzle downward. I flashed on the dead hunter on the autopsy table. But the gun was not loaded, and I saw my father mouthing stern words to Tanner—who hung his head. Then my father got Tanner situated at the bench, and the gun pointed in the right direction. At first Tanner flinched and jerked each time he fired. Dust kicked up yards below the target, but gradually he began to lean more tightly into the stock, and keep his cheek on the wood when he squeezed the trigger. My father glanced at me; I looked away. When the round of firing stopped, and hunters walked forward to check their targets, Tanner raced wildly down range and came rushing back against traffic waving the target.

"Look, Sam, I hit it three times!" Tanner shouted.

"Great," I said without expression. He had shot at it ten times.

"Not that bad your first time with a new gun," my father said, as they returned to the truck.

Still holding the gun, its muzzle waving, Tanner hopped up and down with excitement. My father quickly took the shotgun from Tanner. "What did I tell you? Never jump or run with gun!"

"Sorry," Tanner said with that instant kicked-dog look in his eyes. My father glanced at me.

"But you did all right today," my father added. "Saturday morning, if you promise to be safe and remember what you learned, we'll go hunting."

"I promise, I promise!. Oh man, I can't wait!" Tanner said.

My father smiled, but something in my stomach clenched, and it had something to do with my father. But he was pro. He had worked with hunters of all kinds. He had to know what he was doing.

We dropped Tanner off at his foster parents' place, a double-wide trailer with several battered plastic tricycles lying about.

"What time will you pick me up Saturday morning?" Tanner asked.

"Let's say 5:00 a.m."

"I could be ready earlier," Tanner said.

My father patted Tanner on the back and shooed him out of the pickup. "Five a.m. I'll be here."

Tanner raced up the double-wide. At the door he braked and brought up his hand as if to knock. Then he changed his mind and rushed inside, slamming the door so hard the wall quivered.

My father stared after him. Then he looked at me. I looked out my window.

"Hey, you want to get a Dairy Queen or something?" my father asked. "Just you and me?"

On opening morning we drove into town to get Tanner. It was chilly and pitch black outside, and the streetlights were bright as we entered La Crosse. In the trailer park with its curving streets, Tanner was the only moving thing. He stood outside, stamping his feet up and down against the cold, and puffing frosty breaths.

"Wow am I glad to see you!" he said, leaping into the truck. He shuddered with cold, and there was frost on his eyelashes.

"How long you been waiting?" my father said, turning up the heater fan.

"Not that long," Tanner shrugged.

North of town, at the dark edge of the woods we owned and would hunt, my father let the truck coast to a stop. "It's very important to enter the woods quietly," my father said to Tanner. "I'll take you to your stand."

Tanner nodded continuously. He could not stop grinning. "I can't believe this," he said to me.

"Shhhhhh," my father said. "Deer have great hearing. They're already listening to us."

Tanner looked at the dark woods.

"Remember, you'll stay there until I come for you," my father said to him. "It takes patience to wait for a deer."

"Why can't I, like, track them and sneak up on them?"

"That comes later, with more experience," my father said. "Most hunters start out on the stand, or a blind."

Tanner nodded with some disappointment.

"Sam and I will take the tree stand. Whistle if you need help of any kind, all right?"

Tanner nodded, and then the two of them headed off into the darkness. My father's little flashlight bobbed along the trail like a firefly. It became a little speck, then went dark. I sucked in another breath.

After ten minutes or more, my father's bobbing light reappeared, and I began to relax. My father and I went to our stand. It was a platform about six feet off the ground, sort of like a tree house two chairs. It had a tiny little heater if we needed it, and a railing on which to rest our guns. We settled in, and after we were quiet, the forest gradually came alive: invisible ducks whistled overhead; an owl went "who-who"; there was a sharp skittering sound in the leaves below.

I tensed and gripped my rifle.

"Squirrel," my father whispered.

Gradually the light came. First to appear were the silhouettes of spruce trees, then a broad duskiness spread downward from their points. The grayness softened and slipped

closer to the ground, like a giant scrim curtain being raised; soon we could see the deer trail that ran parallel to our stand. My father checked his watch. "It's legal shooting time," he whispered. And almost on cue I heard soft steps coming down the trail.

"Get ready," my father said softly.

I clicked off the safety.

The shape of a deer appeared; at walking speed, it was moving right toward us.

"Let's see what it is first," my father whispered.

The deer was not large, but there was a pale flash of horn.

"Spike buck," my father murmured. "Let's let him pass."

As we watched, the buck stopped to paw for some acorns, then dipped his head for a mouthful; he chewed audibly—a muffled crunching— as he looked around. His erect ears pivoted like pointed radar dishes. Then his tail flickered white, and he moved on, disappearing as if absorbed the bushes and trees.

"A good sign," my father said. We settled back to wait for a bigger and better deer. My pulse was rushing in my ears.

By ten a.m. we had seen nothing but chickadees, a Pileated Woodpecker that chipped popsicle stick chips of wood from a dead pine tree, and at least a dozen gray squirrels. By noon, with full light, the woods went gradually quiet. Dead. It was like everything—all the birds and critters were taking their nap. We relaxed, too, and my father told me stories about his job as a guide, how some people were great but others were total slobs and jerks.

"Same with school," I said. I was about to tell him about my friends—at least I thought they were my friends—when "Boom!" went Tanner's gun.

My father and I looked at each other; then we heard Tanner's whistle.

"I'd better go check," my father said quickly.

"Be careful!" I said suddenly.

"Don't worry, honey, I'll be right back."

I waited alone in the stand. I could hardly get my breath; I kept having this terrible feeling, but soon enough my father's orange cap and coat blossomed on the gray trail. He climbed back into our stand shaking his head and smiling.

"He says he saw a deer of some kind, and had a good shot. But we looked all over and couldn't find blood. I'm sure he missed him cleanly."

We settled back into our chairs. The sun was out now, though still low (it was November), and by two p.m. the woods slowly lost its brightness. Began, like the tide going out, to grow dusky again. My father dozed for a little while; it was nice waiting there, holding my gun while he napped: it was like I was on guard for him.

When he woke up, we continued talking, about my friends this time, about boys I liked. I was surprised to be telling him stuff.

He nodded. "When I was a junior in high school I was dating this really hot senior girl," he said. "She sort of picked me, you could say. Anyway, we went to her senior

prom, and then parking in my Chevy afterward. She wanted to go all the way that night, but I wasn't ready, so we didn't." He glanced sideways at me.

"So, Dad, is that my lecture on abstinence?"

He said nothing but I saw the smile in his eyes. We turned to stare out at the forest in comfortable silence.

Suddenly there was a scattering, crunching sound on the trail; it was grayer now, and the air colder—the woods were coming alive again.

"Get ready!" my father whispered.

Two does bounded along with their brown and white tails erect.

"There must be a buck close behind," my father whispered.

Hot on their tracks came a buck with tall antlers—at least eight points. He was moving too fast for a good shot, and in a couple of seconds went out of sight in Tanner's direction. I let out a disappointed breath and lowered my muzzle.

"That's okay, honey. You didn't have a clean shot. Who knows—we might see him again."

Or not. "Boom!" went Tanner's gun.

My father looked at me. Then we heard Tanner's voice calling for us. "I hit him, I hit him," he shouted faintly.

"Wait here," my father said. "I'll go check."

"Be really careful, Daddy!" I said again.

He looked at me oddly. "Sure honey," he said. And left.

I watched him disappear down the trail.

Several minutes passed; nothing in the forest moved. I could hardly breathe.

"There he is," Tanner suddenly shouted. "I see him!" His voice was to the east now, and moving; he was running through the woods.

Then "Boom!" again.

And a hoarse scream; a wailing.

"Daddy!" I shouted. Dropping my gun, I leaped to the ground and raced through the loud leaves underfoot, past the slapping, stinging branches. "Daddy!" I kept crying.

"Over here, Sam!" my father called. His voice sounded terrible—as if he couldn't breathe.

I rushed into a clearing. Beside a fallen, mossy log, my father was slumped over—slumped over Tanner, who lay on his back in the brown leaves.

"Look, Sam! I got him!" Tanner said to me, struggling to sit up. He pointed. Twenty yards away a large buck lay brown on the brown leaves; an antler curved up darkly.

Tanner held his other hand over his stomach. His face was bone pale and his eyes white and sort of pop-eyed. My father said, "Sam—we have a shooting accident here. I want you to run back to the stand—my cell phone is in my backpack. Call 911."

"I'm sorry!" Tanner said to us. He started to cry. "I reloaded, then I was running, I tripped. . . ."

"Go, Sam!" my father said.

I ran as fast as I ever have—made the call—then rushed back up the trail toward Tanner, now following the blood on the leaves. The deer's blood or his blood, I couldn't tell. So much blood, spatters of it on the cup brown hands and fingers of the oak leaves.

My father met me before I could see Tanner again. He blocked my view. "Sam, I want you to go back to the truck," he said slowly. "Wait for the ambulance, then show them way here. I'll wait with" Then his voice broke, and he drew me fiercely into his arms and held me tight.

At Tanner's funeral, we put the deer's antlers on his coffin. Melanie and Tara and some of their friends from school attended; at first I was pleased, and we all hugged, but later I saw Tara whisper something, then giggle under her breath at the others, who cried continuously, as if Tanner were their best friend. For a second I hated them, but then let go of it.

The preacher was bald and had a voice like the teacher on the Simpson's (twice he called Tanner 'Tyler'). The eulogy was mainly clichés about "the less fortunate among us" and life as a "flickering candle." Tanner's foster parents were there, but their baby began to wail, then throw up, and they had to leave. Quickly the service was over. Tanner's body was to be shipped somewhere, Minneapolis I think so there was no trip to the cemetery, no burial. After the church service there was punch, coffee and cake in the chilly church basement. The lunch was hosted by a flock of blue-haired old ladies who chattered cheerfully among themselves in the kitchen. There were more church ladies than people who actually came for Tanner.

I stayed close to father, as did my mother. I hadn't seen them together, dressed up, forever. They held hands, too. Mr. Johnson, the gun safety teacher, came up to us. "Well, Tanner got his deer," he said.

I realized one thing about funerals: adults say incredibly stupid things.

"He wasn't ready," my father said, staring across room. "I should have known that."

"It's all he wanted to do—go hunting just one time," Mr. Johnson said.

"Excuse me," my father said; I could see the deep pain in his eyes.

"Let's go, Daddy," I said.

He nodded and let me take him by the arm and out the door. My mother followed. It was bright now, the sun breaking through patchy clouds, and the three of us drove home in silence.

At home we all ate dinner in more silence. My brothers used their best manners.

"I've been thinking," my father said. "I have an offer to manage a sporting goods store in here in La Crosse."

My mother looked up quickly.
He swallowed. "I'm thinking of taking it."
We all stared at him.
"The owner wants to sell eventually, and I've got some ideas on new sports lines,
new gear."
My oldest brother, Ben, perked up. "Hey, you could hire us!"
"And go broke immediately," my father replied.
Ben's shoulders heaved with silent laughter.
"But seriously, what do you think?" my father said, turning to my mother.
"Could you stand being inside a store all day?" she asked.
"I'd do some Midwest guiding on the side—if I could find good help for the store."
Andrew, Ben and Jared took their cue and began to poke and laugh at each other.
"I think I'll take the offer," my father said suddenly. He looked at me. "Life's too
short."
I looked down; my eyes felt hot and then they spilled over.
"Hey, what's a matter with her?" Andrew called.
"Nothing's the matter with her," my father said, and under the table took my
hand. I held on tight, and kept crying; my brothers, after glances between themselves,
went back to eating. Maybe crying is a girly kind of thing, but I was home and it felt right
and nobody minded. Soon enough I needed to dry my eyes, which meant I had to let go
of my father's hand. There's an art to hand-holding, even if it's with your dad; someone
has to let go first, but tonight neither of us were in any hurry.

(the end)

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“Up the River”

A short story

It was important to lose once in a while. The online poker security geeks needed to see that Riverboy24 was only human. That would be Seth Parker, sixteen-year-old, blonde-haired, blue-eyed “Mr. Everything” at La Crosse High School. A few grand in the hole was no big deal because, with his new system, he could win it back any time he wanted.

Tonight he was getting low on chips, but building himself a table image. “IdahoSpud” was scared of him, but the more aggressive “HotchaGotcha” kept calling him down, forcing Riverboy to show his hand. Like the time Riverboy raised on the river with nothing but a king high, and HotchGotcha called him with pocket deuces.

Just like that—kaz-zing—he was down 300 bucks and now close to three grand of real money on his Visa and Master cards. Enough success for one night. He logged off and went downstairs for a 2 a.m. glass of milk and some cookies.

“Calc done?” his mother murmured sleepily from the couch. She was a night owl like him, and in the dark living room was reading by the light a small lamp; the TV whispered across from her. She never seemed to watch it, but liked having it on while she read. His father was an early-to-bed guy.

“In the bag,” he answered. Calculus was his excuse for staying up all hours, but there was a lot of math in poker—statistics, actually—if one were serious about the game, and so it was not a total lie. He bent over and kissed the top of her head—and in the lamp’s light saw a distinct line of pure white roots below her auburn hair. He drew back. His mother colored her hair? How come he never knew that?

“Thanks, dear,” she said, patting his arm; her eyes stayed on her book.

He headed to the kitchen.

“Anything going at school tomorrow?” she asked in her parent-on-automatic-pilot voice.

“Champagne brunch after history class, then meth lab all afternoon.”

“Good dear,” she murmured. “Have your snack, then get to bed.”

As he passed by the television, a tidy, handsome guy stood before a chart. Some infomercial. Make Big Money By Working At Home! You, Too, Can Supplement Your Income by 500, even one thousand dollars a month the chart read. “I know, because I did,” the man said. “Call now. Operators are standing by.”

“What, dear?” his mother asked.

“Nothing.”

“You laughed.”

“Did I? Must be the calc. It always feels so good to be done.”

“That’s nice dear,” she said.

Seth soon thumped up the stairs two at a time. His life was all good. There ought to be a law against a life like his. Parents who left him alone. Sweet SAT scores. Junior class president. College apps in with a lock on Madison, and Stanford not out of reach. Captain of the golf team. Plus his “night job” making money the fun way, playing poker; if his parents only knew how easy it was.

Online poker, thanks to Riverboy and his very special friend, Musclebound690, was like a license to print money. In his darkened bedroom the two buddies sat side by side pulsing their wallpaper, ready for action. RiverBoy’s screen had a quiet stream flowing through a meadow; Musclebound had a big Dodge truck overflowing with bikini-clad bimbos (it was important, online, to have two, distinct personas). “Sorry boys—no more action tonight,” he said sternly. “You two are spending too much time together. People will talk.”

He lay in bed but couldn’t sleep. Something about his mother’s white hair freaked him out—not so much that her hair was turning gray but that he should have known that she colored it. That it had sneaked up and blind-sided him. He prided himself on avoiding surprises.

To clear his head he got up and let Musclebound out for some exercise. A few hands on Pokerhead.com. It was important that Musclebound and Riverboy play alone on occasion; that they not always be online simultaneously. As a player Musclebound was a crap shooter who took crazy chances on occasion. Tonight, for example, Musclebound was playing no-limit and decided to go all-in four hands in a row with garbage cards. It worked the first three times, but then he got called by a guy named Clancy, who had an ace-king. That one had cost Musclebound two hundred bucks.

Seth reloaded and won most of it back, ending up with a reasonable loss of forty bucks, a good night for meathead like Musclebound, then logged off. Yes he was down 2,800 dollars, but had been up as high as 6,000. Bankrolling was all about long term strategy. His goal was 10,000 bucks, at which point he would cash out and wait ten days for the check in the mail. Or not cash out; maybe he’d shoot for twenty grand. A car, college money—it was all possible as long as he stayed on plan. Which included a losing streak once in awhile.

At school the next morning, Shane Jackson, a senior wrestler, blocked his path. Seth braced himself for pain of some kind. But Shane, his breath rank from Mountain Dew and chew, said, “Hey Golden Boy, wanna play some poker tonight?”

“Me?” Seth said.

“Yeah you, numb-nuts. I hear you’re pretty good.”

“I get lucky once in awhile,” Seth replied in his best, male double entendre if-you-know-what-I-mean voice. He could muster that shit when he had to.

“Me too. You should check out that new, short blonde chick, Sara, from 10th grade.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Seth said gamely.

“Anyway, a few of us boys are meeting in the equipment room after practice. Coaches are gone, we’re going to play a little Hold’em. Be there, okay?”

“Ummm. Maybe. I’ll see. I’ll try.”

“Try hard. I’m expecting you,” Shane said and rocked Seth’s chest with a ‘friendly’ fist-thump.

Seth coughed, rubbed the sore spot on his chest, and made his way through the crowd to his locker. As a rule, he did not play poker with idiots and fools. There were plenty of those games to be had with LaCrosse high schoolers, or drunken college kids in the dorms at the nearby state college. They were easy marks but the stakes were too low plus he couldn’t take the conversation. “That new girl, the red-haired skank, Jade? I bet she’s easy.”

Or: “Chevies are squat. You want a real truck, get a Ford 250.”

Or: “I had the dry heaves for 24 hours—I’m not kidding.”

Why did guys who played poker think swearing, spit cups for their chew plus backward caps and sunglasses were written into the rules of Texas Hold-em? College guys were worse, with their pizza farts and incessant remarks about chicks they had scored with, chicks who were a “sure thing” (so why were they all jammed into a methane-filled dorm room playing cards with other boys?). On the other hand, a few hands of live poker with knuckleheads couldn’t hurt—in fact it might keep him sharp for his real game.

He had always liked cards and was always online, so why not poker online? He started last winter, but took it slowly. Did his research. Began as a silent railbird, then got his sea legs in play-money games. Within a couple of weeks he got used to the “shkkk-shkkk” of the electronic shuffle; the tiny digital chips zipping across the little green table; the cartoon-like, seated characters calling, betting and folding without moving a digital muscle. It was like real poker but without the cigarette smoke, without the lame conversation and the farts. Don’t like a player’s chat? Drop the cursor on his head and mute him. Online poker was a tidy, faster, more efficient game.

After he got comfortable with the online poker game he took a deep breath late one night and threw down his “Junior” MasterCard. Made a deposit on Pokerhead.com. His card had a \$500 dollar credit line (“for emergencies only” his parents had said); he bought fifty bucks worth of real-money chips, receiving ten dollars of “bonus chips.” His first real-money action was in a limit game with a maximum bet of fifty cents, where, after two hours, he was up ten bucks. Delivering pizzas paid better, but this was fun.

Once he found that there were the same idiots and fools online as there were in real life, he moved ahead into \$1/2 games. Then \$3/6, which brought his hourly “pay” (he kept track) to over ten dollars an hour. Any time he wanted it. Moving to \$5/\$10 games felt like a big jump, but he was a by-the-numbers player who folded six or seven times out of ten, and he stayed in the black—and then some. So it felt perfectly natural for him to

start playing no-limit. At the end of his first full month he had a bank roll of over \$300 bucks, by the end of three months, he was \$1500 to the good.

His reality check came very late one night when he caught a pocket aces in a no-limit game and raised twenty bucks. "HosACanUC", holding a piece-of-crap K-J (he would learn later), called. The flop was 3-Q-10. Seth bet a hundred bucks—best to take the pot down right away, he figured. HosA now had four cards to a straight (K-Q-J-10). HosA thought for a few seconds, the timer on the screen ticking down, then raised all-in for \$1387—enough to put Seth all-in.

Seth called; after all, he had bullets, he was flying with American Airlines—AA—which should have been his first clue: all the airlines were going bankrupt.

Since there could be no more betting, both hands were revealed. Seth still liked his hand. HosA was a big dog to win—but on the river, HosA caught a nine and his straight beat Seth's pocket rockets with a straight. All in all, a horrible bad beat—his pocket aces cracked by some donkey playing a king-jack off-suit.

Just like that his bankroll disappeared. Pissed off, flushed and sweaty, he bought another \$300 on credit and lost again. After two more hands, it was clear he was on tilt. Getting a grip, he pulled the plug and went to bed. Lay there waiting for his heartbeat to slow. Suddenly he had close to \$500 racked up on his credit card.

Not that his parents monitored his credit card. After all, he was junior class prez and good at math and went to church and visited his Granny and was able to handle his own affairs. But it was the principle of the thing. He was not in this to lose money, certainly not to some dumb-shit lucky lone ranger out there. Bottom line: he wanted his money back. Plus it wasn't like his family was rich. His parents didn't know anything about money, which is why they never really had any, and now he was following suit. Which only made him more angry. A little shame, a little rage was the mother of invention, and it suddenly came to him: why not help himself out?

He had heard about online cheating. Two friends sharing hole cards on the phone or through instant messaging: Collusion was the technical term. The idiot players at high school all talked about how easy it was to make money by cheating at online poker. Like anything—like math—it was a matter problem-solving in clear, logical steps .

Two computers, two internet connections, two credit cards, two separate addresses. That was his epiphany. It was easy for the online goons to trace multiple accounts to the same the computer, the same internet provider address. But what if everything was totally separate? How were they to know?

This took some thought and a few minor fibs—okay, a couple of lies— to get set up, but his parents (father an English professor, mother a musician) were easy to work around. He was the "baby" of three kids, had never caused them any trouble; right now they were full blown middle-aged clichés, always on-the-go, the kind of parents you see on television commercials, caught up in trying to stay "active". "Yes, dear," they could see the need for a new laptop "for school" and the logic of keeping the old one for data

back-up. The Swansons, bonehead next-door neighbor family, had unencrypted home wireless humming fifty feet outside his bedroom window, which solved his need for a second IP address. And his dear old Gran, Sarah Perkins (S. Perkins) lived in Havenwood, an assisted living joint on the other side of town, which solved that pesky issue of the separate street address for his other credit card. Technically the Visa was in her name, a new account, but he was scrupulous about not using that one—at least not very often.

After school, he made his way down the worn, white-granite steps, descending in the lower ring of gymnasium hell. He followed his nose to the locker room—one of his least favorite places. Not that he didn't dig athletics; he was just not a grabbing, tackling-kind of male athlete. Guys with excessive testosterone annoyed him, and here they were, gathered in the rank-smelling football equipment room. Shane, Darren, Jaiden, Lance, Trevor, Sam—all wrestlers— plus several hangers-on. Musclebound himself, if he had a real body, would fit in well here.

“Thought you got lost, golf-boy,” Shane said, glancing up briefly from his cards. A few dollar bills lay on the table along with small scatters of chips.

I just followed the smell. “Sorry, guys. Had to count my balls after practice.”

There was appreciative grunting around the table.

“Darren's lost his for sure,” Shane said. “All in, dude.”

“She-it,” Darren drawled, and folded.

Seth wedged himself in between Jaiden and Lance. They were playing no-limit holdem. He bought five dollars worth of chips and waited for the next hand.

His first two hole cards were seven-deuce—the worst possible starting cards; he laughed. The other players sat silent and stony-faced. Trevor wore sunglasses and cap pulled low, Sam wore wrap-around, mirrored glasses. Clearly they'd been watching too many poker tournaments on television.

“Something funny?” Shane said.

“My cards,” Seth replied.

“Funny ha-ha or funny bye-bye.”

“We'll see, won't we?” Seth said.

He decided to make it interesting by betting his entire five bucks before the flop.

“Dude!” Shane said. “Slow down!”

“Got to bet my monster,” Seth said.

Everybody folded, and Seth showed them the crap cards he'd bet on.

Now they were sure to call him down every time he bet. What he should have done was sit back and wait for some really good cards, but winning was not what he wanted. If he won, these guys would take it out him in some other way, possibly involving blood and fractured bones. So Seth kept right on playing like an idiot, making sure to lose it all toward the end.

“I heard you were way better than that,” Shane said, raking in the scattering of chips.

“Bad night. Everybody has them,” Seth said, and shrugged.

“Bring more money next time,” Shane said.

There was laughter at Seth’s expense—all good in his mind—and finally, blessedly, he escaped up the stairs to sunlight and fresh air. As much as he hated live poker with jocks, he could always come back to this game and pay off his debts.

That night he excused himself early from the dinner table. “I’ve got a long night of it,” he said, mustering a pained expression.

“Math?” his father said. “Not like I could help.” He was a balding, middle-sized man with wire-rimmed glasses, a man who would have been first to die in the Donner Party. A cruel thought, yes, but Seth had always felt distant from his dad; he was a man with no edge, no discernable dark side, no capacity for risk—and certainly no way to ever make any more money than his teacher’s salary.

“Yes, lots of calc,” Seth said. He could feel Riverboy and Musclebound, upstairs, poised like runners at the blocks, waiting for action. “Gotta go.”

He locked his door, cracked his knuckles and positioned himself between his two boys. Took a mouse in each hand.

First he logged in Riverboy. Waited a tasteful minute or two before signing in Musclebound. His combined credit card debt, Master Card and Visa, was \$2800, but tonight was comeback time. No rush, just a nice steady grind for the next couple of weeks. According to his personal spreadsheet, by month’s he should be up six or seven thousand.

With Riverboy seated at the table, Musclebound took the most distant chair—which is when his computers froze. Not just one IP, but both. He swore, then looked over his shoulder at his door. No response from his parents.

Then his cursors came back but the games didn’t. His screen filled with large font text underneath:

Pokerhead.com requests a photocopy of a government-issued ID or its equivalent, in order to verify the Player's identification. Player is temporarily suspended and account frozen until ID verification is completed. We look forward to your continued business. Sincerely, Pokerhead.com.

This same message for both Riverboy and Musclebound. Plus directions on where to send the photocopies.

Seth swallowed. His hands went clammy. He leaned back from the screens. He logged off, waited a minute, then tried to log on again. Same message.

Downstairs, his parents looked up, surprised to see him. “I thought I’d take a break and drive over and see Gran,” he said. “Haven’t seen her in awhile.”

“She’d love that,” his mom said. “You’re so nice to her.” She tousled his blond hair.

“I agree,” his father said, and tossed him the car keys. “All work and no play—you know the rest of it, son.”

“Sure. Thanks. Great,” Seth said distractedly, and headed out. Havenwood had three wings outside, and an overly clean smell inside. Like exploded air fresheners. Air fresheners gone wild. What smells they were covering up, he didn’t want to know.

“Hey—it’s my Buddy!” his Gran exclaimed. She looked up from some kind of needlework.

“Hi Gran.” He bent to hug her, careful not to squeeze too hard; she was a slim woman whose very brown hair was done up in tight curls. Her pale skull showed through the thin curls. “You usually come on the fifteenth of the month,” she said.

“Really?” Seth answered. His hands went clammy again; was it that obvious?

“Yes. I keep track,” she said, turning to her wall calendar, touching its tiny notes with a finger. The skin of her hand was papery thin; he could see every vein, tiny and blue, and the five cords, like little wires, to her fingers. Her eyes, however, were bright and lively. “One has to have something to do besides these ridiculous projects they give us,” she said, turning back to him.

Seth helped her set the knitting aside. “Anything you need, Gran? Any mail that needs looking after?” he said.

She frowned. “Yes. You can sort through some of those credit card letters. I get more and more of these offers and ‘free checks’. I worry that somebody will steal them.”

“No problem, Gran. I’ll take them home and get rid of them.”

“Plus I’ve been getting these calls lately.”

“Calls?” Seth said as he surreptitiously scanned the mail.

“Just today, someone asking me about poker.”

“Poker?” Seth replied. The word came out thin and raspy, like from an old man’s voice, but Gran didn’t notice.

“Yes. Do I play poker, they asked. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. They asked me all these questions, and finally I just had to hang up on him. They’ve called twice now.”

The room shrank. Walls lurched closer. He smelled the smell behind the disinfectant, but it was not the odor of old people: it was his armpits.

“Poker? That’s strange.” He manufactured a short laugh. “Probably some telemarketer of some kind. It’s best to not say anything to them—just hang up.”

“You’re probably right,” she murmured, her pale forehead creased with worry.

“Really, Gran. Don’t think a thing about those calls or the credit card stuff. I’ll take care of everything.”

A smile broke across her face like the sun coming up; something inside Seth shriveled up.

But not all the way.

After all, he thought as he left Havenwood, it was not like he was actually stealing from your own grandmother. He was just borrowing. Borrowing her address. Borrowing her driver's license, which he had sneaked from her bedside drawer before he left. It was not like she was going to drive anywhere.

On the way back home he stopped at a copy shop and photo-copied her license, then his. According to Pokerhead.com instructions, he signed her name (he knew her crampy little signature) on one affidavit, then his name on the other. Then, in separate envelopes, and after driving across town to different post office branches, he mailed them to Pokerhead's business office.

When he got home, his parents were pleased to see him and asked him the usual questions about Gran—when the phone rang. Neither parent made a move to answer it.

"I'm sure it's for you," his mother said. "Something about poker? I had no idea what they wanted. Told them to call back when you'd be home."

The phone rang again, louder than he had ever heard it. Seth made no move to answer it. "Must have the wrong house," he said with a shrug. "Or a some clever telemarketer. Don't answer it; they'll go away," he said, and made silky smooth transition to his report on Gran.

"Is that her mail?" his mother said.

"Just some credit card stuff I told her I'd shred. She worries about everything."

"One has to be cautious," his father said. "There's that whole identity-theft thing one reads about."

No one could steal your identity, Dad, because you don't have one. "I suppose you're right; I'll get rid of these right now." With that, Seth escaped to his room.

Just in case this was all a mistake, he tried to log on to Pokerhead. But the same message—Identify Confirmation Alert—came up. He turned to Gran's mail. Several new credit card applications, but pay-dirt in the pile: Zero percent interest checks from Visa: Use these checks to take advantage of Super Low Rates! Write a check to yourself, make home improvements, go on a well-deserved vacation. First check zero percent interest (fixed APR for limited duration), the second and third check only 4.99 percent until balance is paid in full).

To cover his Visa card balance, he wrote a check from Gran's card; it was, after all, only temporary until he could get back online.

He did not sleep well the next three nights. Felt edgy from not playing. He found a couple of games after school and won twenty bucks, but it was not the same rush as playing online. Several times a night he tried Pokerhead.com, but the same message came up; he was sure they had received the photo ID's by now.

Then, eureka, a new message from Pokerhead: Please resume play. We look forward to your continued business.

"Wake up boys, we're back in the saddle!" he said—then lowered his voice. He busted a brief wild jig about the room, cleared his desk of school work, and got down to

business. He logged both computers on, found empty seats at a no-limit table with blind bets of \$2 and \$4, and got down to business.

Online collusion is almost as much of an art as poker itself. The trick is to wait for a big hand, then whipsaw some poor sucker into putting way more money into the pot than he normally would.

It takes patience, waiting for just the right situation to appear.

That night, Seth and his two colluding avatars played for an hour before finding an opportunity. Musclebound had a three-eight—a garbage hand. Riverboy had pocket kings. Riverboy called the \$4 blind, a guy named Finkster called behind him, and Musclebound put in the minimum raise. The idea was to build the pot a little before the flop, give Finkster something substantial to lust after.

Both Finkster and Riverboy just called Musclebound's raise.

The flop came ace-king-trey. Ka-ching! Trip kings—this was perfect! Seth crossed his fingers, hoping that Finkster had an ace in his hand. If he did, his pair of aces would cost him plenty.

Riverboy checked.

Finkster made a bet about size of the pot. Musclebound, with his worthless three-eight, smooth-called.

Riverboy raised it twenty-five dollars, just a little raise—not so much as to scare Finkster out of the pot. Finkster called.

Musclebound raised another twenty-five.

Riverboy raised twenty-five more.

It would cost Finkster \$50 to call, but there was more than \$200 in the pot now. He wouldn't be able to resist.

Finkster called.

Time to set the hook

Musclebound raised another \$50. Riverboy raised all-in.

Finkster thought for almost his entire allotted thirty seconds, then called with his last \$187.

Musclebound folded. Seth did not want Musclebound to have to show down his three-eight—if Finkster knew the Musclebound had been betting with nothing he'd have known he was being cheated.

Because they were both all-in, Riverboy's and Finkster's cards were turned face up. Finkster had an Ace-king. He was drawing dead—no way for him to win. Seth gave himself a high five. . . which is when his computer screens went stiff. Froze like a winter lake in Superior. Same message, both screens:

Security and integrity of Pokerhead.com is foremost. Computer monitoring tracks IP addresses, surveys suspicious betting, automatically calls up all hand histories and cross references with all other online gaming sites. Violations herewith suggest collusion between Riverboy 24 (Seth Parker, Lacrosse, Wisconsin) and Musclebound 690 (Sarah

Parker, Lacrosse, Wisconsin). Both accounts are hereby closed; all assets/bonus chips declared null and void; all addresses banned from this and participating online poker sites. Have a nice day.

Much later, he went downstairs for a snack. His mother was reading by her small lamp, and, as usual he went over– forced himself–and gave her a quick kiss on the hair. But she sensed something–something in his silence, his walk– and looked up.

“Is everything all right, honey?”

“Sure.”

“You look pale. Really tired and white, actually.”

“Haven’t been sleeping well lately,” he said with a shrug. He let himself sag into a chair.

“What’s on your mind. Anything we should talk about?”

Here was the moment, the tipping point; it was almost funny how they came so unexpectedly in life. Here was the moment when he should have said Yes, yes actually there is, then sat down and told his mother everything. But his mind was humming, clicking through the options, scanning the moves left to him. No problem was insurmountable–and certainly not this one. He had heard, for example, that there was serious poker in Minneapolis at the Canterbury Park-pony track; it would take some driving, and he’d have to put up with actual people, cigar smoke and sunglasses. But with a steady, by-the-book, disciplined game–and hey, why not some luck–he could get back in the black and nobody would be the wiser. And once he had done that, once he had paid off his and Gran’s credit cards, he would be done with poker for good.

“I think I just need some sleep,” he said.

“I’d certainly agree,” his mother said. After his snack, he could feel her eyes on him as he mounted the stairs.

In bed he tried to sleep, but his mind played imaginary hands. One after another, he was on a streak, on a roll. Nobody could touch him. He was that lucky, he was that good.

(the end)

©Will Weaver. “Up The River” was first published in *Full House* , edited by Pete Hautman (Putnam Publishers, 2007).

“Bootleg Summer”

A short story

(Inspired by Sherwood Anderson’s story, “I Want To Know Why” published in 1921)

“We have become a gangsters’ mecca, and the rules are simple: check in on arrival, pay off the officials, and commit no crimes within the city limits. Some of gangsters are reputed to have bought lake homes in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota to be closer to the Canadian border. Life in the north allows gangsters to escape the heat—in more ways than one!” *Minneapolis Tribune editorial, “The Saint Paul Layover” (1925)*

Dead dragonflies and grasshoppers litter the road. Them and a run-over garter snake split open and dried like a strip of jerky. But I don’t deserve better company: I am the lowest thing that ever lived.

Oh sure, I look normal. Drive up behind me and you’ll see a young fella with yellow hair thick as a shock of Minnesota wheat and a knapsack over his shoulder. I’m wearing dungarees and boots, and I’m passably clean—I don’t look criminal. But don’t stop to give me a ride. Pass me by in a cloud of dust, swear at me, pitch a rotten tomato at me—I don’t care. What I done this summer, I wouldn’t even stop to give myself a ride.

But sure enough, a horn toots and a big Packard slows alongside. It’s a free country; I can’t stop the fool from offering me a seat up front.

“How far you going, son?” the driver asks.

“Minneapolis, St. Paul, it don’t matter,” I mutter.

“The Twin Cities! That’s a mighty long way.”

“The farther away the better,” I answer bitterly.

“Had enough of the farm, then?” He chuckles as he swings open the door.

I take a closer look at him as I get in. He’s a middle-aged man with a cheap Fedora that’s shiny around the brim—he’s probably a drummer of some kind, which is another word for traveling salesman. Or he could be a tinker looking to repair pots and pans. He’s got two trunks in the backseat but I can’t tell what’s in ‘em. Anyway, dime a dozen, his type. Every month some salesman like him came to our farm selling Watkins’ products, or salves and lotions, or “miracle cures” of some kind. But I never seen a salesman drive a car this nice.

“Every week I see farm boys on the road,” he says as he motors us back onto the pavement, “and I always give them a rid ‘cause I grew up on a farm myself. Let me tell you, there’s easier ways to make a buck than shoveling cow dung.” He shakes tobacco out of his Bull Durham pouch and begins rolling a cigarette with one hand (a guy driving a car this nice ought to be smoking a big stogie, I think). “Me, I couldn’t wait to get to the

big city where they had electric lights and movies,” he continues. “Heck, now they got movies that talk and girls that dance the Lindy hop and Speakeasies on every corner.”

“I don’t much care about that stuff,” I mutter.

He gives me a sideways glance. “Then what you leaving home for?”

I don’t answer him. I can’t talk about it ‘cause the words bunch up in my throat like a hairball. I might even bawl like a baby.

“Quiet type, eh? Well, suit yourself,” the salesman says. He starts talking about all the driving he does; about all the strange ducks he has given rides to; about all the interesting accidents he’s seen. This goes on for nearly a half-hour—until I can’t stand it anymore.

“I left home ‘cause I killed two men,” I blurt.

The Packard swerves and his cigarette pitches out the window, and suddenly he’s got a crowbar in his hand. “Don’t you try anything with me, kid!”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t kill them with my own hands,” I say, looking off across the fields. “But I might as well have.”

The car slows but keeps rolling. “Kid, you ain’t on the lam or anything, are you? I don’t need no problems with the law.” His eyes flicker to the back seat.

“I ain’t on the lam,” I say. *Except maybe from my own self*, I think.

“Well if you want to keep riding with me, you better spill the beans.”

Spill the beans. I realize that’s what I been wanting to do ever since things came to a head, which was four days ago.

“You ain’t fully wrong about the farm,” I begin. “My father raised hogs, and to me they never stunk until this year. That’s probably because everybody I knew always smelled like some kind of livestock, especially in grade school. But last year I had to start high school in town—’m sixteen, if you want to know—and on my first day of school, Melinda Anderson—she’s the banker’s daughter—wrinkled up her nose at me and called out, “Sooooo-wee! I smell hogs!””

The drummer clucks his tongue in sympathy.

“Everybody laughed,” I continue. “When I got home that afternoon it was like my nose came unstuffed for the first time in my life. I couldn’t stand the smell of hogs after that, which was a problem, because hogs pay the bills on our farm.”

“But you still up and left,” he says, rolling a fresh cigarette.

“No s^sir, not right away. I wouldn’t do that to my Daddy. He ain’t the worst father in the world. I did a little sniffing around town, then I talked to my mother. I told her that the PureOil Station on Main Street was looking for a part-time man to fix tires and do mechanic work. I told her that if I got the job, I could pay for a farm hand— someone to replace me—from my wages. What I didn’t tell her, was I’d already landed the job and was supposed to start soon as I could.”

“Plenty of work around nowadays,” the salesman says with a nod, “never seen things so good as they are this year. But what’d your old man have to say about things?”

“He was for me working off the farm like frost in July, like teats on a boar. But my mother, she’s a reader and she’s good with words. She told him that there was more to the world for young men than slopping the hogs and breaking land. And for that matter, there was more to the world for women than butchering chickens and canning corn and carrying water and darning socks by lantern light. She said that in town at least people had power and light. Houses had a lightbulb in every room; people had clothes washers with motor-driven paddles and power wringers—they even had electric ice boxes and radios. She said compared to that, the kerosene lamp in our living room cast a mighty small circle of light.”

The salesman was silent for a spell. “What’d she mean by that?”

“I ain’t sure, but it made my father stop and think, too.” I pause. “Gosh, I’ll miss them,” I blurt out.

“Sure, kid, sure,” he says. “But who was it that got killed?”

For some reason I don’t want to rush my story. I want to tell everything exactly how it happened.

“Anyway, I went to work at the PureOil Station that same week,” I continue.

“They gave me a shirt with my name on it, and after a month, I got my own PureOil cap, white with blue pinstripes.” I was so proud of that uniform—prouder than of anything I’d ever owned.

The drummer flicks his cigarette ash impatiently. Funny how I wanted to go on about that uniform.

“Anyway, the owner, Mr. Stevens, he was an all-right man. And the manager, Bob, he was mostly okay, though he made me stay in the back room and do the dirty work while he ran the gas pumps and talked to people.”

“Go on,” the drummer says.

“Except for this one day when I heard a horn toot, and suddenly Bob comes rushing into the back room all pasty-faced, like he’s seen a ghost. He says to me, ‘Kid—catch the drive! There’s a man out there wants gas and you’d damn well better give it to him.’

“So I jump up real quick and head out to the drive. And what a car for my first time! Big chrome headlamps, the hood as long as a boat deck, the upright windshield and the square, gray roof and the window curtains in back—I’d never seen a real car like it, but I knew what it was right away: a 1927 Pierce-Arrow four-passenger Coach.”

“Car that nice, why would the manager want some kid like you—no offense—to wait on it?”

“I’ll get to that,” I say, and continue at my own good speed. “First thing I did was stop at the outside washbasin and wash my hands with Lava soap. The car was so shiny I

didn't want to get any fingerprints on it."

"Who was driving it?"

"A stocky fellow wearing a black Dutch-boy cap and fine, black leather gloves."

"A chauffeur?" the drummer says.

"That's right, a shofer. The shofer gets out right away and sort of inspects me. Then finally he says, 'Ten gallons of high-test, kid, and be careful about it.'"

"'Yessir,' I say. He takes the gas cap off himself, which is helpful because my hands are a little shaky. But soon enough I get the gas running. He don't seem to mind that we got the brand-new kind of pumps where you can't see the actual gasoline anymore; you got to trust the dial. It's the old farmers who still want to see that big glass jar fill up on top the pump with their ten gallons and then watch it empty into their tanks."

"Sure, kid, sure," the drummer sighs. "I been at a few gas stations in my life."

"Anyway, as I'm working I smell cigar smoke coming from the backseat of the car. There's somebody inside smoking the finest stogie I ever smelled, except I can't see him because of the window curtains. So I crane my neck to get a better look, and the shofer says, 'What you rubbernecking at, kid?' 'Nothing, sir,' I say, and hunker back down. Which is when my eyes fall to the left rear tire. There's something small and glinty on the face of it. I take a closer look; it's the head of a nail—looks to be at least a sixteen-penny—which means that tire's gonna go flat sometime real soon."

"And then what?" the drummer asks quickly. I realize we been driving for quite a few miles already now. Funny how a story makes the time pass.

"So I say, 'Sir, there might be a problem with your left rear tire.'

"'I'll be the judge of that,' he growls, and grabs me by the collar. I almost wished I hadn't said anything, but that was my job, right?"

"Sure, kid, sure."

"So I show him the nail head. He bends down, gives it a good look, then swears a blue streak. 'Is it through into the tube?' he asks. I spit on a finger, then dab a nice clear gob around the valve stem, and sure enough, little air bubbles start to pop. The shofer swears louder this time, which is when the window rolls down, and another voice says, 'Something wrong, Jimmy?'

I look up and see the man smoking the cigar. He has brown eyes and wears a round, porkpie hat. His hat and his cigar cost more than most peoples' cars.

"'The kid here spotted a nail in the tire,' the shofer said. 'Woulda gone flat just down the road.'

"The door swings open, and the man's shoes come out—leather shined black as oiled walnut. Then his pants cuffs, ironed sharp as a carpenter's square. Gold watch fob on a white shirt. A silk tie. The man was about my father's age, but he was dressed better than Calvin Coolidge himself. He smelled good, too, kinda like mint or toilet water cologne. 'Nice work, son,' he says to me. He pulls out a roll of greenbacks thick enough

to choke a horse, then peels off a sawbuck and tucks it into my shirt pocket. I couldn't believe it: ten whole bucks just for spotting a nail."

"Big spender," the salesman murmurs.

"Can we make it back home on that tire, Jimmy?" the boss man says to the shofer. At the same time he's checking the gold pocket watch. You got the feeling here's a man who don't like surprises.

"I don't think so, Mr. K," the shofer says, and turns to me. He gives me another look up and down. 'You ever fixed a Pierce-Arrow tire, kid?' he says.

"No sir, I say, 'but a tire's a tire. Yours is a thirty-two by five-point-two by seventy-seven inch balloon size."

"So you think you can handle it?" Mr. K asks me directly.

"I swallow. 'Yessir, I say.

"Behind me, from the back room, I hear Bob let out a groan, and then the back door slams. I'm on my own now.

"I don't want no cheap cold patch,' the shofer growls. 'This ain't no bicycle tire.'

"Hot-patch Vulcanize,' I say. 'It's the only way to fix a tire, sir.'

"The shofer looks to his boss, who nods. "'Go ahead, son,' the boss man says."

"And?" the salesman says impatiently.

"I'm a little nervous, I'll tell you, jacking up the axle and getting the lug nuts off the wheel without rounding off the heads or scratching the fender—the shofer watches me like a vulture—but after I get the tire into the back room, I feel more at home. I lube the bead all around, then slip a pry-bar under it and spin off the tire. I turn the inside cords up to the light bulb. 'There it is,' I say, pointing to the sharp end of the nail. Sometimes I feel kind of like a doctor or scientist or someone like that when I'm fixing a tire. You know what I mean?"

"Kind of, kid, kind of," the salesman mutters.

"Anyway, I dry off the tube, rough up the puncture area with my hand rasp, then get ready with my glue, patch, and matches. The clear glue goes on first; then I crack off the head of a stick match with one thumbnail and touch the flame to the glue. I like that part, how the flame flares up yellow, then dies down to a low blue flicker—which is when I quick lay on the rubber boot with the other hand, then lean on it with a roller to make sure there ain't no air pockets under the rubber."

"Gees, kid, everybody knows how to boot a tire!" the salesman says.

"But some people are better at it than others," I say, and give him a look.

He shrugs and keeps driving.

"Anyway, when I finished putting the tire back together, I put it in the dunk tank and turn it around and around in the water: no air bubble shows. Jimmy the shofer says, 'Nice work, kid.' He turned to his boss, who had been leaning in the doorway all the while, smoking and watching. 'The kid's all right,' Jimmy said.

"The boss nodded. 'And you keep a nice back room, too, son,' he says.

“‘Thank you sir,’ I said. And it was true. You could eat dinner off my tool bench. The PureOil Station had the cleanest back room in town.”

“Anyway,” the drummer prods.

“Well. After they drive off, me with a second saw-buck tucked in my pocket, Bob comes slinking back into the station. I’m mad as all get-out for him leaving me in the lurch, but what can I say? He’s the boss. ‘Do you know who that was?’ he says. ‘Do you know whose tire you just fixed?’

“‘No,’ I mutter.

“‘That was Kid Cann Langenfeld.’”

The drummer sits up straighter all at once—but doesn’t say anything.

“‘Who’s Kid Cann Langenfeld?’ I say to my boss.

“‘Don’t you know anything?’ my boss says to me, beginning to laugh like crazy. ‘Kid Cann is a gangster.’

“‘A gangster!’ I say. It was like he had punched me in the gut.

“‘Big-time bootlegger. He’s killed many a man in Chicago,’ my boss adds.

“‘Well, what’s a gangster doing way up north in Minnesota?’ I say. I’m kinda shaky.

“‘My boss is laughing now like I’m the dumbest cluck in the coop. ‘He’s got a lake place north of town. Big estate, all fenced. Everybody knows about it. It ain’t like Kid Cann’s on the most-wanted list or nothing—at least for now. He just pays people off, and when the heat is on, he skedaddles over the border into old Canady.’”

—“I hear they do that,” the salesman murmurs; he glances in his rearview mirror, then takes a long draw on his cigarette.

“‘Anyway, I say kinda stubborn-like, ‘Mr. Langenfeld seemed nice enough to me.’ That’s ‘cause my Daddy always taught me to give a person a chance until he proves you wrong, and—”

“‘Sure, kid, but you still ain’t said—”

“‘That’s where it all started!’” I say suddenly to myself. “‘If I hadn’t spotted that nail!’”

“‘Lordy,’” the drummer says, exasperated-like. But I don’t care. This is my story, not his.

“‘Anyway, a week later I’m slaving away in the back room fixing a truck tire—the old kind, with a tube—when a horn toots. Bob comes back and says to me, ‘Kid, you better hope that Pierce-Arrow tire you fixed didn’t go flat.’ Then he goes twenty-three skiddo out the back door. I take a peek. Sure enough, it’s the Pierce-Arrow. As I walk to the pumps, I’m so shaky I can hardly put one boot ahead of the next. Jimmy the shofer says, ‘Was hoping you were on duty, kid.’ My throat is so closed up that all I can squeak is, ‘PureOil gas today?’

“‘Naw, that ain’t why I’m here,’ Jimmy says, friendly-like. ‘Mr. K wanted me to ask you something.’

“‘Me?’ I say. My mouth goes as dry as steel wool.

“‘Mr. K. took a shine to you,’ Jimmy says. ‘He’s looking for a part-time man to do some car work—mainly tires and the like—at his place on the lake. Mr. K. is in the wholesale business and has several vehicles. He don’t like to come to town all the time, and so he’s offering you a job.’

“‘But I got my job here at the PureOil,’ I say.

“‘No problem,’ Jimmy says. ‘This would be after hours. A Saturday here, an evening there.’

“‘I don’t know,’ I say.

“‘Mr. K. will pay triple what you make here.’”

“‘Triple! Did you take him up on it?’” the salesman asks.

I look out across the fields for a brief spell. “‘Thing of it is, I was up =and =coming then. That’s how I saw myself, then. And the money—well, I’d had this wild idea for some time of putting any extra aside toward getting an electrical line run to the farm. A surprise for my folks. Lots of farmers were doing that, paying for a branch line themselves so they could finally have the juice. Can’t you imagine the look on my folks’ faces when they realized that power and light was coming?’”

“‘Sure kid, sure,’” the salesman mutters. “‘But did you take the job?’”

“‘And that gangster business? How was I to know if it was true? Like I say, you gotta give people a chance. I started the next Saturday afternoon. I didn’t tell my folks about the extra job—I didn’t want my ma to worry—and besides, I wanted that power line to be a surprise. So I just told her I was on extra duty at the PureOil.’”

“‘What was his place like? Kind of a mansion, or what?’” the salesman says, real interested now. I notice also that the more interested he gets, the faster he drives. We’ve been buzzing through small towns like a bumblebee through a pumpkin patch on the Fourth of July.

“‘Not really a mansion,’” I say. “‘Just a nice big old log home and bunch of garages. ‘Course, at first all I saw was a tall wooden fence; you couldn’t see anything, even from the lake. That fence gave me a shaky =feeling, I can tell you. Jimmy musta noticed, cause he said, ‘Mr. K likes his privacy.’”

“‘Yessir,’ I said.

“‘Working for Mr. K means you respect that privacy,’ Jimmy said as he swung open the iron gate.

“‘Yessir,’ I said.

“‘That means you do your work and that’s that,’ he said. ‘Anybody poking their nose into Mr. K’s business, you tell me and I’ll deal with them. Got that?’

“‘Yessir,’ I said. And I went to work right away. First I had to clean up the main shop, which had been let go real bad. There were plenty of mechanic’s tools and equipment around, almost as much as at the PureOil station, ‘cept it was scattered all over everywhere. Took me two Saturdays to get the shop shined up and in working order.

Jimmy the shofer, he was happy to have me around. ‘Myself, I’d sure rather drive a car than work on it,’ he said more than once. Mr. Langenfeld had a lot of vehicles, and soon enough I was changing tires and spark plugs and adjusting carburetors and all what -not.”

“What kind of cars and how many?” the salesman interrupts.

“Six, give or take a couple,” I said.

“What kind?”

“All the same, basic Model A’s, including a couple of trucks.”

“Trucks,” the salesman says, sly-like. “So what was in them trucks?”

“Nothing,” I say right back to him. “No car or truck I worked on ever had anything in them.” I didn’t say that the Model A’s—the trucks in particular—smelled kind of strong in back, like green silage juice or sour corn mash for the hogs. But maybe it was vinegar, or turpentine, I told myself. And besides, what business was it of mine? “So I just did my job,” I continue. “Mr. Langenfeld paid me even better than Jimmy said. The extra money was building up real nice. Things were just fine—until the new sheriff came nosing around.”

“New sheriff, you say?” the drummer asked. Funny how certain things seemed to interest him.

“Younger guy named Jones, Randall Jones. Beat out Sheriff Anderson in the election last year; said he wasn’t tough enough on Prohibition. Found a whiskey still in somebody’s barn and made a big enough fuss about it to win the election.”

“Lot of them do-gooders around these days,” the salesman mutters.

I give him a look.

“Course, it all depends on what you think about Prohibition, I guess, don’t it?” the salesman says.

I shrug. “My folks don’t drink and neither do I. So Prohibition don’t matter one way or another to me.”

“Well, it matters to a lot of people,” the salesman says, giving me a sideways look.

“That’s kinda what Mr. Langenfeld said,” I continue. “One day he came out into the garage to finish his stogie. When I was working he did that quite a bit, actually. At first I got nervous when he just sat there watching me and smoking, but then I realized he kinda liked the shop the way I ran it, all sharp and tidy. And maybe he needed the company, too; I never saw his wife or kids, though Jimmy said he had a family back East somewhere. So I’d work and we’d talk some—mainly him talking and me listening.”

“Well, what’d he have to say?” the salesman asks, leaning toward me slightly.

“One time Mr. Langenfeld asked me the same question—what I thought about Prohibition—and I told him pretty much the same thing: It didn’t matter one way or another to me. I told him what my Pa said—if people wanted to take a drink on occasion, and if they didn’t get drunk and run over someone or burn down their own house and family, then they ought to be left alone. That set him off on a talking jag. He said that it

was funny how adult politicians seemed to get stupid when they got in office—that the country would be better off with farmers like my father running the country. He asked me just how it was the politicians and coppers thought they could change human nature?”

“Human nature?” the salesman murmurs.

“He said that people have been drinking and gambling and the like ever since Adam and Eve.” He was really wound up by then—his cigar was puffing like a steam tractor. ‘And no laws will change human nature, which is why Prohibition is bound to fail,’ he said.”

“He’s got a point there,” the salesman says.

“Politicians are two-faced on Prohibition anyway,’ Mr. K said. ‘They never did pass any laws against *using* alcohol, just making and selling it.”

“True again, kid,” the salesman observes.

“‘And after Prohibition ends, a few years down the road something else will come along, something on the order of alcohol but maybe worse,’ Mr. Langenfeld said, ‘and then we’ll go through some other kind of Prohibition all over again.’”

We both think about that for a spell as the Packard speeds along.

“He ain’t stupid, Kid Cann,” the driver murmurs.

I never thought so either, which makes me feel even worse for what happened.

“So tell me about that sheriff?”

I watch a few fence posts pass; I realize I’m getting to the sad part of my story. “One day the new sheriff comes around the PureOil station. Comes right into the back room and wants to talk to me. ‘What about?’ I say. He says, ‘I been watching some of our local citizens, and that includes you, kid.’ He’s giving me the evil eye by then, and I’m starting to go cotton-mouthed even though I ain’t done anything wrong. He says, ‘I know you been working out at Kid Cann’s place, ‘cause I seen that shofer pick you up here at the station.’

“‘So? It’s a free country,’ I said right back. Which was a mistake, because he got all puffed up. ‘I also know that your folks don’t know about your second job,’ he said. ‘Do you think they’d like to hear their son is working for a known gangster?’

“Hard-boiled!” the salesman murmured.

“‘So what do you do for Kid Cann, mow lawns?’ the sheriff said.

“‘I do car work,’ I said right back.

“‘Car work, I see,’ the sheriff says. Then I realize I shouldn’t have said anything because that’s when the sheriff puts the heat on me. He says he’s dead certain that Kid Cann is bootlegging whiskey, and if anyone was ever man enough to arrest him, that I could be charged with being an accomplice—hat I could go to the State Pen along with Kid Cann just for working on his cars.’”

The salesman whistles under his breath.

“I got the shakes then,” I say. “The sheriff kept after me for a whole hour until I agreed to help him.”

“Help him how?”

“By spying on Mr. Langenfeld,” I say bitterly.

The driver looks at me and shakes his head sad-like. “And?”

Truly, my eyes are starting to burn and well up, and I have to watch a full mile of fence posts wing by before I can speak. “Anyway, me and Mr. Langenfeld were getting to be friends by then—at the same time as I’m ratting on him.”

“Tough,” the salesman says.

“Finally I couldn’t take any more. I told Mr. Langenfeld that my grades in school were slipping, and that since I wanted to go to college, I needed those extra hours to study, and that I had to quit.” I let out a sharp breath. “What a lie that was.”

“And then?” the salesman says.

“Here’s the worst part,” I said. “Mr. Langenfeld had a going-away party for me. A big shindig in the main house. Jimmy and some of the other drivers and their gals—everybody was there. They all agreed I was going to make something of myself someday. There was even a cake with my name on it, and jazz music on a Victrola record player, plus a champagne toast—apple cider for me, because Mr. Langenfeld didn’t want me to learn any bad habits.” My voice breaks.

“It’s all right kid. Just get to the punch line,” the salesman says.

I gather my wits. “The whole time, and I swear to God I didn’t know this, the Sheriff and his deputies are sneaking up on the house.”

“Gees!” the salesman says.

“And right when they were all singing, ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow,’ that’s when—”

But suddenly the salesman curses. “Shut up, kid,” he says as he slows the Packard and stares into the rear view mirror. I look behind. There’s a police car with a flashing red light; then we both hear the siren. “Listen up,” the salesman says rapidly as he brakes to a stop. “I got stuff in them trunks in the back seat that could get me—and maybe you, too—in a heap of trouble. There’s a sawbuck in it for you if you pretend you’re my son.”

“Your son!”

“Shut up and listen. Here’s our story: you’re a college boy. We’re taking you back to the University in Minneapolis. You been home for a few days, and you need to get back to study for a big test tomorrow. That’s why we were speeding—you got that?”

I don’t have time to reply; by then a cop is walking up to the Packard.

The salesman rolls down his window and smiles. “Afternoon, Officer. What seems to be the trouble?”

“I don’t have any trouble, but you sure do. You was going way too fast through town back there. I clocked you at over fifty miles per hour in the city limits.”

“Well, I’ll be,” the salesman says. “Me and my boy, here—he’s in college now—we were just talking up a blue streak because he don’t get home that often.”

The cop gives me a good looking-over.

“In fact, he’s got a big test tomorrow, and has to get into the library before it closes,” the salesman says.

“Zat so?” the cop says.

I nod. “Yessir,” I say. What else could I do?

The copper’s eyes fall to the trunks in the backseat. “What’s in the trunks?”

There is silence. The salesman gives me a sharp kick with his shoe.

“Just my stuff, sir,” I say. “Some food. And some winter clothes.”

“Well, it’s nice you get home to see your folks,” the cop says, warming up now, “but we still don’t want cars going through our town at high speed.”

By then the salesman has pulled out a paper card. “Here’s my driver’s license, if that’s any use to you,” he says. As he handed it over to the policeman, I saw a flash of greenback underneath it.

The policeman takes the license, turns away to write something down, then leans back into the window. “Just take it a little a slower next time.” He hands back the license—minus the greenback—and salutes.

“Yessir, I’ll take it slower next time,” the salesman says. He tucks the license back into his shirt pocket, and we drive on.

As the cop and his car recedes behind the salesman turns to me. “Nice work kid. You saved my butt. Here.” He pushes a five-dollar bill across the seat.

“I don’t want your damn money,” I say suddenly. I set my jaw and stare down the road.

“Hey, you might need it,” the salesman says. “See what a little cash did for that cop? He let me off. It’s a lesson you gotta learn, kid: Grease the wheels, and the world turns your way.”

“Let me out.”

“What?”

“I said let me out here, I want to walk.”

“Here? There is no here.” He gestures to the open fields and fences stretching out of sight ahead.

“I don’t care, I want to walk.”

He shrugs and pulls over. I get out. “Well, at least let me give you something. In case you get cold later, this will warm you up.” He chuckles as he reaches in the backseat under the blanket and pulls out a brown, narrow bottle. “Here!”

I catch it, out of instinct, so the glass doesn’t break. And then with a scatter of pebbles and dust, the Packard heads off—but only for a few yards. He brakes suddenly, then backs up. “Hey, you never did tell me who got killed.”

“It’s none of your beeswax!” I shout at him. I’m suddenly so mad that I haul back that bottle to pitch it at him. The Packard speeds for good this time.

I stand there in the dust, my arm cocked to throw, but I don’t. I lower the bottle, unscrew its cap. I take a whiff. Whew! It’s the same sharp smell as in Mr. Langenfeld’s

truck. Liquor. Sure enough. I guess I suspected deep down that those vehicles I worked on all hauled bootleg booze.

Since I am already the scum of the earth, I put the bottle to my lips and take a swig—then spew it out and cough like crazy. It's the vilest stuff I've ever tasted. I can't imagine how adults actually drink this. I let that whiskey *glug-glug* onto the dirt, then pitch the flask hard into the ditch. It shatters into a thousand pieces.

I walk on down the empty road. I keep seeing Jimmy, how he drew a pistol when the door caved forward and the sheriff's boys stormed the place; how he got off a wild shot but took a shotgun blast square in the chest. The noise, the screaming, people diving under tables, and things breaking—it was terrible. The Sheriff kept hollering, "Don't shoot the boy—he's our pigeon, he's our pigeon!"

And then suddenly it was quiet.

Except for Jimmy's moaning and gurgling. He died right there on the floor.

The cops went for Mr. Langenfeld and didn't even bother with Jimmy. Almost worse than hearing Jimmy die was the look on Mr. Langenfeld's face—the way he stared at Jimmy and then at me. It wasn't anger, but sadness in his eyes. He tried to say something to me, but they wrestled him out the door before he could finish.

And I'll never know what it was he tried to say. On the way to jail, Mr. Langenfeld got killed, too. An escape attempt, the lawmen said. Drew a hidden pistol, they said.

But I don't believe it.

In fact, I don't believe in much of anything these days. Which is why I'm on the road. If you see a fella passing through your town, walking alone all dusty and downcast, that's me. If you can spare a dime for a bowl of soup, I thank you. But if you've got some answers as to why people do the things they do to each other, all the better. I'm listening. I'm all ears.

-the end

© Will Weaver. "Bootleg Summer" was first published in *Time Capsule: Short Stories about Teenagers Throughout the 20th Century*, edited by Donald R. Gallo (Delacorte Press, 1999).

“Bad Blood”

A Short Story

I knocked on the door.

Waited.

Inside the farmhouse I heard a radio go quiet, then shuffling sounds. I had a good feeling about this place; it was set well off the road, and the old lady appeared to live alone.

She opened the door partway. “Yes?” Her voice was thin and croaky from lack of use.

“Good morning, ma’am,” I chirped. “My name’s Jared Righetti and I’m looking for summer work. Painting, lawn mowing, odd jobs?” One good thing about being an undersized sixteen-year-old is that I can pass for thirteen. I try to see beyond her, into the house.

“No, nothing for you,” she said, and stepped back from the screen door. The shades were half-drawn—what is it with old people and daylight?—so I couldn’t see much. However, it smelled like an old person’s house—stale, fruity, soggy tea bags, flowers, cats, all of it mixed together like the odor of old carpet.

“Okay, ma’am,” I said. I flashed her my winning smile (learned from my old man). “Sorry to bother you.” I headed down her porch steps and pedaled off with my lawn mower in tow—except that I went only a short way before turning back.

“What is it now?” she said. She was still at the screen door. “I told you I have no work for you.”

“I understand, ma’am,” I said. “But I’m in the Boy Scouts, and we get pins for doing volunteer work. I’m wondering if you’d mind if I mowed your lawn for free? It won’t take me long. It’s part of the Boy Scout oath—to do volunteer work.”

She was silent, then cleared her throat with a raspy sound. “Okay. But just that front part.”

“Thank you, ma’am!” I said, and saluted.

Boy Scouts. Ha.

As I started up my mower, I felt her gaze on me. When I began to move back and forth across the shaggy lawn, her white head peeped from behind the window. Her fuzzy white hair looked like the dandelion seed globes that my mower scattered in the wind.

I had spotted this place when my family first landed in this lame, white-bread Ohio town. I almost said Iowa; we’ve moved around so much, sometimes I forget where we are. Anyway, I was riding my bike, casing the town—which I had to admit looked perfect for us. My father was a genius in choosing places such as Oakville, population 7,500. Here people left their car windows open, left their garage doors up in the daytime,

and left their kids' bikes lying on lawns. It was one of those little towns that the real world hadn't caught up to yet—a petty thief's dream.

Trouble was, my father had drummed into me that we were not petty thieves. Thieves, all right, but not small-timers. "The dollar bill is lying on the table, and all you have to do is reach over and pick it up. But it's not the dollar you want, or the ten-spot, or even the whole wallet. Set your sights higher, son." But stealing was in my blood. I didn't see a woman shopping; I saw her purse loosely slung over her shoulder. I didn't see a man walking down the street; I saw his wallet peeking from his hip pocket. I didn't see a photographer shooting a sundown scene; I saw his camera bag unattended. It was genetic.

Anyway, back to the old lady. That first week here I had bike all the way to city limits and a little beyond—which was scary. All that open space, all those cornfields with tall, tight, shadowy rows. My parents had warned me about Midwestern cornfields, about kids getting lost in them and never found. Big fields and open horizons gave me the creeps—give me honking taxis and narrow streets any day (also probably genetic). So just as I was about to pedal like mad back to town, I saw a narrow driveway, and beyond—back off the road at least a block—an old white farmhouse. Saggy barn. Tall hay shed, along with various cribs and coops. And a lawn in major need of mowing. Elmer A. Anderson, the mailbox read.

Even as I looked, this little white-haired lady shuffled onto her porch to water some red flowers in a window box. I sank low in the ditch so she wouldn't see me and I watched her for quite a while. I got the feeling there was no Elmer around. At age sixteen I already had a nose for lonely old widows; sometimes I amazed and disgusted myself at the same time.

Today when I finished mowing, I rattled my mower back to my bike. On Mrs. Anderson's porch steps sat a tall glass of iced tea. "I wouldn't feel right without giving you something for your trouble," she said from behind the screen.

"Whew! It's hot—thank you so much, Mrs. Anderson," I exclaimed.

"How'd you know my name?" she said suspiciously.

"The mailbox?" I answered.

She was silent.

I took my time with the iced tea, but finally finished the last, long, cold swallow. I approached the screen door with the empty glass.

"Just set it on the porch," she said.

"Thank you. Bye, Mrs. Anderson," I called cheerfully over my shoulder. Through her watery little eyes I imagined seeing myself: a smallish brown-haired kid on his bike, heading down the driveway towing his lawn mower on a rope. The image should be a Norman Rockwell painting. Summer Job would be the title. That or Honest, Hard-working Young Man.

However, as far as I could see, there hadn't been any honest, hard-working men in my family for generations. My great-grandfather, whose last name was unpronounceable

(it had several Z's and Y's), was some kind of King of the Gypsies back in immigrant days in New York City. His pick-pocketing skills bordered on magic and what's called the dark arts. People not only didn't miss their wallets or coin purses; they forgot they ever had them. (My father knows the moves but won't teach them to me—his own son. “They'll just get you in trouble, and besides, son, you've got to set your sights high in this world.” If I hear that one more time, I swear I'll become an actual nice, honest young man just to punish him.) My grandfather, Alphonse Szymoro, founded the so-called Travelers, the world's largest fly-by-night roofing and home repair company. It's based on Skokie, Illinois. Don't believe me? Sixty Minutes did an investigative report on the Travelers but all CBS got were some blurry long-distance photos of white Ford F-150 pickup trucks carrying ladders and cans of roofing tar. Most of the segment was interviews with geezers all weepy about paying thousands of dollars for roof repairs and still needing rain buckets in their living rooms. When Mike Wallace began to talk about money—how the Travelers wives all drove Cadillacs—my mother gave my old man the evil eye. “Always said we should have stayed with the family,” she said. (Her family was eEastern European as well—thick as thieves, you might say.)

“Nonsense,” my father said. He was a tidy, dark-haired man with brown eyes and an open, likeable face and a sense of humor that tended to one-liners. His favorite: “America's biggest problem is that it's overrun with private property.” (It is sort of funny, considering.) Anyway, now he continued, “You don't see Sixty Minutes peeking in our windows, do you? The bigger you get, the bigger target you make. The three of us—we're on nobody's radar, and every penny we make, we keep.”

“Right,” I muttered sarcastically. I happened to know that my old man had been drummed out of the larger clan for cheating them. In other words, not only was my father a crook, he was a dishonest crook. But he was a great father. Hey—you can't have everything.

My mother had nothing more to say about her imaginary Cadillac, because in many ways my old man was right. Here we were in a nice rented home, a three-bedroom rambler, with a green lawn and bright flower beds. We had settled quietly into this neighborhood, and now were just another family on East Maple Drive. Okay, slightly darker skinned, and brown-eyed rather than blue, and a foot shorter than most of the corn-fed Swedish and German stock around here. But we passed for Italian (Righetti was my favorite name so far), and Italians get a pass in the Midwest because they are associated with Italian restaurants. Nobody eats more than Midwesterners do; it's why they're so fat.

Anyway, there was always the question of jobs—how my family supported itself—but as usual my father had that covered. My mother was an interior decorator (the perfect job for casing houses) and my father was a wholesaler involved in supplying olive oil to Italian pizza joints across the Midwest. I didn't know exactly what scam he had

going right now, but he was very cheerful of late, and I got the feeling he was closing in on something big.

But then again, so was I.

The next part I'll skip through, because it's as boring as a public television documentary on life in the Midwest. See me mowing Mrs. Anderson's lawn, front and back, the next time. See me returning once a week to Mrs. Anderson's farm. See me trimming the hedge. See me painting the porch railing. See me trying to get a look into the outbuildings, but see her always watching me from her chair on the porch. See me raking her leaves in the fall. See me shoveling snow in the winter. See me working in her garden the next spring. See me waiting for my chance—at what I didn't know. See me inside her gloomy house, having my snack, politely munching a sugar cookie and sipping my iced tea. See me checking drawers in the kitchen, desks in the living room the first time she leaves me alone. See me notice, one day, through the parlor doors (never opened quite this far) a photo on display on the wall—like a shrine in a church—except this was a shrine to a soldier.

“That man on the wall, is that your husband?”

Mrs. Anderson stiffened. “No,” she said abruptly, and hurried to shut the parlor door.

Next week when I arrived to work, I knocked and knocked. It wasn't locked, so I stepped inside. Mrs. Anderson was in the parlor, just sitting, staring at the soldier on the wall. It's like she hadn't moved for an entire week.

“Hello? It's me, Jared,” I called.

She turned slowly; it was as if she didn't recognize me.

“I'm going to start on the garage today,” I said cheerfully. “Scraping and painting.”

“It's his birthday,” she murmured.

I stepped forward to the parlor entrance. For the first time I got a good look around. It was like a museum filled with antiques—valuable antiques.

“His birthday?” I said.

“Garry,” she said to the wall. Creepy-like, as if she was talking to Garry.

I looked closer at the shrine. There were several photos of Garry, one with helicopters and a jungle in the background.

“Garry, my son,” she murmured, as if calling out to him.

There was a framed and yellowed newspaper clipping. “Local Marin Garrett Anderson Killed in Vietnam.” I got it: her dead son.

“He would be fifty today,” she whispered. “Fifty years old. Isn't that amazing.”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed as I made a note of the antiques: some great old lamps, a lion's head rocking chair, an actual wind-up Victrola phonograph, plus an eight-track tape deck and a shelf of clunky, oversized eight-track tapes: Bob Dylan; Crosby, Stills,

Nash and Young; the Byrds; others with faded daisy-like and psychedelic designs. Eight-tracks were worth a lot of money nowadays; people collected them.

Mrs. Anderson blinked; she seemed surprised to see me standing there. “I’m starting on the garage today,” I said again. Loudly, cheerfully. As always.

She didn’t seem to hear me and turned back to look at the soldier on the wall. Which gave me the opportunity — at last — to case the outbuildings without her spying on me.

The garage was gloomy and full of spiders. It looked like a museum of rusty tools and shovels, not a hundred bucks’ worth of goods. So I slipped over into the barn.

The door creaked and pigeons clattered out of the hayloft. My heart pounded; the damned birds scared me. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the light, which revealed a long row of rusty, which were cow stalls, and a few old shovels and forks lying here and there. *Zilch. Zero.*

Coming out of the barn, I looked around. The only other building was a hay shed: a metal roof supported by tall poles, and open sides. I still don’t know why I walked over to it, and certainly can’t explain why I walked around back, behind it. The thief in my, I guess.

A few bales had sagged and spilled out to the ground. They were black and rotted. I kicked at them. Just when I was about to give up on finding anything of value, I spotted a different kind of green in the haystack. Some kind of canvas or tarp. I tugged loose a couple of bales and looked closer. The canvas, mouse-chewed so badly it looked shot by a machine gun, was draped over some kind of wooden frame. Beams, heavy ones. Some kind of secret garage.

I got down and dug out some bottom bales until I could slip underneath the canvas. Inside the canvas enclosure it was dark except for the bullet holes. Standing up, I hit my head on something hard; suddenly I had plenty of light — as in stars — little arcing pinwheels of white.

To steady myself I reached out and felt curving metal sticky with some kind of grease. “Ack,” I muttered, and wiped my hand on the scratchy hay.

I needed more light so I crawled backward out of there and began to remove more bales. Soon I had a double doorway-sized area clear, and found a corner of the canvas. It was nailed to the bottom of the wooden frame. I glanced around; seeing or hearing no one, I yanked it upward.

With a ripping sound, the canvas came loose; light spilled into the secret garage. Inside was a car.

A small car covered in grease.

A small, squat car with lines and curves that anyone would instantly recognize: an old Corvette.

I sucked in a breath. It’s not the dollar bill or the ten-spot or even the whole wallet! Peeking around the hay shed toward the house, and seeing nothing of old lady

Anderson, I stepped inside the secret garage and tried the car door. Grease, everything coated with grease, as if painted or broomed on, but the door opened. The low cockpit sat empty, its stick shift with its little round knob sticking upright between the seats. I wiped dust from the dashboard, the gauges. The odometer read 562 miles. The bumpa-bumpa of my heart echoed louder inside the dim cab. A classic Corvette with less than a thousand miles on it. The car had to be worth forty or fifty grand.

In the glove box were some papers. A faded green title sheet with all the information. Make: Chev. Year: 1964. Model: Coupé (Stingray). Owner: Garrett Elmer Anderson. One other paper, a yellow sheet of tablet paper, fell out of the title papers.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Take care of my 'Ray. When we win this war, which shouldn't take long, I'll come home and I'll drive you down Main Street in the Fourth of July parade.

I promise.

Love, Garry

The rest of that afternoon I loudly and cheerfully scraped window trim on the garage. I whistled while I worked, and kept one eye on the house. Finally the old lady came out on the porch. She seemed older in just two hours and walked bent over as if she carried a hundred pounds on her bony shoulders.

I thought she'd never bring out an iced tea, but finally she remembered. I joined her on the porch. We sat there in silence.

"Hot one today," I said. "Whew."

She was silent.

"But I'm happy for the work," I said.

She stared off across the fields. Her eyes were cloudy today.

"I'm saving money for college, you know."

She had nothing to say.

I took a deep breath. "That and a car."

No response.

"If I had a car, I could drive out here anytime you needed me," I added.

She blinked, seemed to consider that. "Garry had an old car," she murmured, still looking across the fields. "Funny little thing, it was. He worked summers at the gas station to buy that car. Was so proud of it."

Then I took a chance, a big chance. "There's a little old car in the hay shed," I said. "Would that be it?"

"Car in the hay shed?" she repeated. "You mean a tractor?"

"No, a little old car," I replied as if I was uninterested—as if this were the most boring topic in the world.

"I don't know what Garry did with his little car," she murmured. "So hard to remember everything."

“Just a little old car in the hay shed,” I drawled and pretended to check some paint chips under my fingernails.

She looked through the parlor at the soldier on the wall, then around her house. “I hardly drive my Pontiac, then around her house. “I hardly drive my Pontiac anymore,” she said. “I certainly don’t need two cars.”

I felt a little shaky; things were happening fast; things were coming together. It was a major adrenaline rush—and I suddenly understood why the men in my family could never hold straight jobs.

“Why don’t you take it, Jared?” she said.

“The little car in the hay shed?” I asked. My voice was suddenly as thin and shaky as hers.

“Why would I need two cars? I hardly drive the Pontiac anymore.”

I swallowed, then took a gamble. “No, Mrs. Anderson, I couldn’t do that. You’ve been awfully nice to me too, and while the car probably isn’t worth much, I just couldn’t accept a gift like that.”

“Why, you’re always helping out around here,” she continued, like she hadn’t heard me. She actually came over and patted me on the head—it was the first time we had touched. “This place would have fallen down without you. Such a nice young fellow. I think you should take it. Why would I need two cars? I hardly drive the Pontiac anymore.”

“I’ll . . . think about it,” I said. I was so excited that I almost tipped my glass. “Right now I’d better get back to work.”

“I hardly drive the Pontiac anymore,” she murmured as I left.

Outside, I let out a deep breath. I hurried back into the secret garage and examined the title page again: it was clear that if I could get her signature in a couple of places, the corvette was mine. I couldn’t believe my luck. I did a crazy little victory dance—wait till my old man saw this car.

Then I heard a sound and peeked back around the hay shed; I saw her shuffling across her porch, so I stuffed the title papers inside my shirt and resumed work on the garage. I watched her lift a watering can to her petunias. Her arms shook so badly that she spilled most of the water. I turned away—I couldn’t watch.

That night, at home, my father asked, “So how’s the old lady?” He had come to be a little puzzled at my loyalty to Mrs. Anderson. I think he worried that I was turning into a nice young honest fellow.

“Better and better,” I said, trying to sound sly. In truth, I had this weird mix of emotions swirling in my head.

“Great,” my father answered. He flashed a white-toothed smile (sometimes I swear he could pass for Omar Sharif and be in the movies.) “Anything you’ll need help with?”

“If I do, I’ll let you know.” I was suddenly crabby.

He nodded. “Remember, son—” he began.

“I know, I know. Nothing illegal, nothing I can’t walk away from, don’t get greedy, blah blah.” I’d heard all that one too many times.

“That’s right,” he said gently. “Good luck.”

I shrugged. It was difficult to stay angry at him. “Anyway, it’s in the bag,” I said.

He patted me on the head. “I’m proud of you, son.”

Later, in bed, I lay in the dark with my eyes closed. I saw myself cruising in Garry Anderson’s Corvette. At first it was just me, then me and a girl—a blond college coed. Then I must have drifted off, because I was in college, studying to be a doctor or an astronaut—something all-American—and it was clear that the blond girl and I would be married and have two perfect children, and I would take my family for Sunday afternoon drives in the Corvette, and when we passed, people would look up and remark, “Such a nice family.”

The next night I had another Corvette dream. It started out with the blond girl again, but then it was me at the wheel, and Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were in the back seat. People were gathering for a parade. Firecrackers and fireworks kept going off, in loud booms and sharp machine-gun-like rattles, then the parade began. It was the Fourth of July, and I was driving proudly down the street, wearing a Boy Scout’s uniform and saluting all the people waving and clapping—except in the crowd I kept seeing flashes of this ragged-looking soldier. He was burned or injured somehow, and he just kept staring at me. From this dream I woke up with a start; my heart was pounding.

The third night I had a dream that made no sense. I was in this health club, in the weight room with all these bodybuilders. Me, an undersized, pencil-necked sixteen-year-old who couldn’t lift one of the massive iron plates they were pumping. I watched them in awe (me watching them would have made yet another Norman Rockwell painting). Then I went up to the biggest guy and in a cheerful, totally optimistic voice said, “Excuse me, sir. I want to change how I look. If I start lifting weights today, how long do you think it would take for me to look like you?”

The buffalo-necked guy glared down at me, then lifted me by the scruff of my neck with one hand and examined my scrawny body. “How long would it take for you to look like me? I’d say at least three to four generations.” Everyone in the club laughed wildly.

The next day I felt hyper, felt shaky—like today was the day it had to be done. Now or never. Fish or cut bait.

I biked out to Mrs. Anderson’s right away in the morning. She looked like she had been wearing the same dress all week. She didn’t even get out of her chair when I came in.

“Garry!” she said.

“No, Jared,” I said loudly.

She blinked; then her eyes filled with water. “I’m sorry, Jared. Don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly. I drew up a chair and produced the title sheet to the Corvette. “I’ve changed my mind; I’d like to have the little car in the hay shed,” I said.

She stared at me.

“The one you offered to me,” I added.

“That would be fine,” she murmured. “I don’t even drive my Pontiac anymore.”

“You’ll have to sign on the title page,” I said clearly and loudly. “Do you understand?” Nothing illegal, nothing you can’t walk away from . . .

“Yes, I understand,” she said.

I had a pen ready. If I hadn’t, if one thing had gone wrong—say the pen ran dry—I swear I would have bolted.

But I didn’t.

“There,” she said. Her handwriting was cramped but legible.

“And date it,” I said. I wanted everything in her handwriting, everything legal.

“What is the date?” she asked.

I told her the day and the year.

She looked up quickly. “How is that possible?” she murmured. “That means Garry is fifty.”

“Right there,” I said, pointing to the line. “Fill in the date right there.” My voice was high and faster now. I was sweating. Images of my dream Fourth of July parade filled my head. Garry on the wall stared down at me. I thought I might throw up.

But then it was done. “Thank you so much,” I said. I touched her bony hand—it was cool, almost cold. I drew back, then hurried to the door.

“Jared?” she called after me. “Garry?”

Mrs. Anderson croaked only two weeks later. I was the one who found her, which I prefer not to talk about, other than that she was on the kitchen floor. Her false teeth had come out, and the place didn’t smell so good. I guess I knew she was going to tip over sooner rather than later, so to be honest it wasn’t a surprise.

Looking back, I could have taken advantage of the situation and cased the entire house—maybe she had money under the mattress—but that would have been a mistake. “Never get greedy,” my father always said. “It only calls attention to yourself.”

So I called 911, did all the right things. Me, the yard boy who had worked for Mrs. Anderson for nearly two years—loyal to the end. Even the nearest neighbors, who I didn’t know had been watching (my bad), knew of my work for her. “More than just work, a relationship with Mrs. Anderson,” as the attorney for the estate described it. He and the neighbors supported me when some long-lost Andersons appeared at the funeral (which I attended along with my mother and father) and then stayed in town for the reading of the will.

“It always happens,” the attorney muttered to me. “Somebody dies all alone, and then the relatives come out of the woodwork.” There were objections to the signatures and dates on the Corvette, but in the end it was no contest—and anyway, the distant relatives ended up with the farm, which they immediately put up for sale.

My father was beside himself with pride. “You’ve got a great future, son,” he kept saying as we loaded the Corvette onto the trailer. “This was masterful. Couldn’t have done better myself. And being there at the funeral—what a great touch.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

He was so happy he didn’t hear me.

As we drove out of the driveway, I looked back at the old white house, at the sagging, shabby buildings, at the dead flowers on the porch. Then we headed onto the highway and picked up speed. As we passed the endless rows of corn, for an instant I thought I saw bony, tattered arms reaching out at me, but they were only corn leaves fluttering in the wind.

My father began to whistle as he drove. I turned to look at him. My father the crook. My grandfather and great-grandfather, all crooks. At least three to four generations, the bodybuilder said. I looked behind at the little car on the trailer.

“So, I’ve found this dealer in Wisconsin who specializes in muscle cars. He’ll give top dollar,” my father began.

I cut him off. “We’ll see,” I answered.

He looked at me, surprised.

“Hey, it’s my car,” I said. “Has my name on the title, if you recall. Which means I can do with it what I want.”

His eyes flashed with anger, then a moment later his face opened in a great laugh. “Okay, I get it. Chip off the old block, yes? Just like your old man, right?”

“Maybe,” I said. I looked down the highway ahead of me. “Then again, maybe not.”

-the end-

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“WWJD”

A short story

Like Jesus when he lived, I am surrounded by sin. Every morning on my way to school I walk past rough boys with shaved heads and girls with pierced faces. They stand inches off the high school property line and smoke cigarettes. Some stomp their feet in the snow to keep warm, then spit brown tobacco juice. When I appear, they all whoop and swear and throw their trash at me. Every morning I am their amusement.

I could easily avoid my tormentors by taking a different path from my aunt’s house, but I try to live by one rule: WWJD? What would Jesus do? And the answer is clear: Jesus never took the easy way out. He never avoided the sinners, the lost, the lonely, the hurting. He went among them.

Today I carry a black plastic garbage bag. My enemies do not see me immediately—two of them are wrestling in the snow. The rest are laughing and egging them on. I tighten my long orange scarf around my throat, and quietly ease behind them. I begin to pick up their trash.

“Hey look, it’s Weird Suzy!”

The two wrestlers, covered with dirt and snow, sit up to stare.

“Weird Suzy, Weird Suzy!” they all begin to chant.

Sticks and stones. Their name-calling does not bother me. After all, my real name is Suzanne, as in the Leonard Cohen song by the same name. I am a sixteen-year-old sophomore at River Forks High School in central Wisconsin, and the year is 2003. But I don't feel like this is my school, Wisconsin my state, or these times my times. I mentioned these feelings to the school counselor; after all, she asked how things were going for me. "Transfer students often feel a sense of alienation," she said. "And in any case, high school here in the Midwest must be very different than in California."

"Not really," I said. "And anyway, I've felt strange most of my life."

She made me see a psychiatrist.

I tried to explain to the doctor that ever since I can remember I’ve felt odd. As if I were not like the other kids. "It might be because of my mother," I told him. But he was scribbling something on a little pad and I don't think he heard me. He smiled. "Go on, Suzanne," he said. As I talked, his eyes gaze went to his wristwatch. When I finished, he smiled again and ripped off the little sheet of paper. “Tazamix,” he said. “Fifteen milligrams, a very light dose. Trust me, Suzanne. After a week you’ll feel way less anxious about things. You'll feel like you fit right in here at River Forks.”

“Okay,” I said. After all, he was the doctor.

Taking Tazamix was like putting on somebody else's glasses. The world was suddenly large and looming. Everything had straighter angles, sharper lines. Skin was cardboard; wood was metal. Butter knives felt razor sharp. Everything scared me. I

waited up until my aunt finished her graveyard shift at the restaurant, and I told her how I was feeling.

“Suzy, honey, you flush those pills down the toilet right now! ” she said. She hugged me; her hair and uniform smelled like bacon. Like deep fat. “ Those shrinks are all crazy. Why do you think they became shrinks in the first place?”

I stopped taking the pills. In three or four days my world got smaller, with softer edges, just the way I liked it.

This morning a can of Mountain Dew clatters at my feet. Yellow spray splashes my clothes, spatters my face.

“Good hit, Eddie!” someone calls. I look up to my main tormentor, Eddie Halvorsen. Eddie is a short, wiry senior boy in a greasy cap and faded camo duck jacket ; I heard he used to play soccer all the time and wanted to be in the Olympics but then his knees gave out. Something genetic, they said. Eddie grins at me. Mountain Dew drips down my cheek and across my lips; I had forgotten that Mountain Dew was so sweet.

“Hey, pick up my can, Weird Suzy,” Eddie says. I bend down to get it. I place it carefully in my garbage bag. Everyone cheers.

“This too, freak,” Eddie says. He steps closer; he has a limp. From between his thumb and middle finger, he flips his cigarette directly at me. I'm not quick enough to avoid it, but would not have anyway. The cigarette stings my cheek like a bee. Sparks fly as the butt falls at my feet. I touch my cheek; gray ash comes off on my finger tip .

“Hey! Halvorsen!” an adult voice calls sharply. “I saw that.” I draw my ashy finger slowly across my forehead, then bend to pick up the dead butt. The parking lot monitor, an off duty security guard, trots across the street. He comes first to me.

“Are you all right, miss?” he says.

“I'm fine,” I say softly.

“You could have put her eye out,” the guard says, catching Eddie by the arm..

Eddie shrugs. “I was just getting rid of my butt. Can't help it if she got in the way.”

“If this were on school property, you'd be gone—for good,” the guard says.

“But it ain't. It's public property. I got my rights, now shove off and stop bothering me.”

After speaking into his little radio, the guard crosses the street back to school property. There he stands with his arms crossed and glares at Eddie.

“Way to go, Eddie. Cool man!” his friends call. Eddie grins. His teeth have gone bad from Mountain Dew and chewing tobacco.

Then the first hour bell rings.

My tormenters look at each other, then swear loudly. They slam the contents of pop bottles down their throats and take last draws on their cigarettes. Burping and

cursing, they throw down their trash, then trudge onto school property. I wait for them to leave. My cheek stings a little but I keep working with my garbage bag.

“Suzanne—come along now,” a voice says.

I look up. It's the assistant principal, Ms. Kaufman.

“I'm almost done,” I say.

“You are done, Suzanne. Come along,” she says firmly. She takes my garbage bag in one hand and my arm in the other. She reminds me of my real mother, who is in prison. I have not told anyone in River Forks about this. Only my aunt and I know. My aunt thinks it's best that way, though ometimes I'm not so sure.

“Remember, Suzanne, you have counselor this morning, then regular classes after that.”

I nod.

“Tell me your schedule today?” she says. Her voice is closer now; she has leaned in to stare at my cheek.

“Counselor. Then my regular classes.” I recite my schedule. Often people think I'm not listening to them. But I hear everything.

“That's right,” she says. “But first you 'd better drop by the nurse's office and get your face looked at. There's a little blister on your cheek.”

“Eddie,” I say. I touch the burned spot.

“The parking lot monitor told me. Would you like to fill out a harassment report?”

WWJD. “No,” I say.

“I really encourage you to do so. Eddie is out of control these days. You would be helping him.”

“A change of heart must come from the inside,” I murmur. I turn left toward the nurse's office. Behind me Mrs. Kaufman sighs. I can feel her standing there, watching me. She waits, I suppose, to make sure I actually go see the nurse. I can feel her eyes pushing on my back.

Ms. Jones, the nurse, puts ointment on my face. She tries to wipe clean the ash mark but I lean away. “I consider it a religious symbol,” I say.

“Excuse me?” she says. She is quite young, and possibly has no religion. Most people don't these days, especially in public schools.

“Like the mark Catholics wear on Ash Wednesday,” I add.

“Suzanne, today is Monday.”

“Religious marking are protected under the constitution,” I say. This is enough to make her lower the moist towelette.

Her eyes flicker down the rest of me. At my hair. At my clothes, which I get from the Salvation Army. At my sandals, which I made myself in shop class from tire rubber, leather straps and buckles. At my long orange scarf, which I wear everywhere. Her eyes return to my hair.

“Are you keeping up your hygiene, Suzanne?” she says. “Good personal hygiene is important—particularly for girls.” She smiles and winks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Let me give you some samples of shampoo and deodorant,” she says. “I get them free. I want you to try them and let me know how you like them. Some of them smell so nice.”

“Thank you, Ms. Jones,” I say, and take the white plastic bag. It is one of dozens from a large box labeled Student Hygiene Kits.

We look at each other. She blinks first.

“Okay, you may go, Suzanne,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Be sure to drop by and let me know which shampoo you liked best,” she adds.

Next I go to the counselor’s office. “Suzanne,” the secretary says cheerfully.

I smile. I’m a regular here. They have a school program for new and transfer students called “Meeters and Greeters.” For a while I met with a boy and girl my own age, but gradually they were replaced by adults. I’m not sure why. As I wait, I hear loud voices behind the door. Eddie Halvorsen emerges from Mr. Klephorn’s office. He is red-faced, and glares at me as he passes. “Crazy freak,” he grunts. “Now you’re really on my list.”

I only stare at him and smile.

“Who’s next? Why it’s Suzanne!” Mr. Klephorn calls heartily. His face is flushed from talking with Eddie. “Come on in!” A hearty greeting is requisite for all counselors. That and positive body language. Inside his office he sits beside me in one of the comfortable chairs; he keeps his knees open, his arms unfolded. He does not stay behind his desk like some counselors.

“Suzanne, how are things?” he begins. He has a nice smile.

“Fine,” I say. I smile back.

He glances at a memo on his desk. “I understand that you had an encounter with Eddie Halvorsen this morning.”

“Nothing serious.”

“That’s not what the parking lot monitor said.”

“Really, it was nothing.”

“Well I’ve just spoken to Eddie,” he says.

“There was no need. I have no complaint against Eddie. I think he’s going through tough times right now. Jesus is trying to speak to him.”

Mr. Klephorn purses his lips. “He burned your cheek. I can see the mark from here.”

“And I’ve forgiven him.”

“Suzanne, we’ve talked about this . . . forgiveness thing with you.”

“Yes,” I say.

“I know you’re a very religious person,” he continues.

I nod.

“You read the Bible every day.”

“Yes. Though mainly in the New Testament. The Old Testament is too centered upon revenge.”

“Yes, of course, Suzanne,” he says impatiently. “But my point, one we’ve talked about before, is that this is the twenty-first century. These are different times than when Jesus lived. And we must live in them. We must inhabit our own times, so to speak.”

I wait.

He clears his throat. “While Jesus provided us wonderful lessons, it is, may I say, perhaps unrealistic to try and live His example every minute of our day.”

There is silence as I think about that. Then I say, “But isn’t that why we go to church? Why we read the Bible? To live more like Jesus?”

He leans back, appears to consider that. Most counselors only pretend to think about what you say; Mr. Klephorn seems to actually listen sometimes. “Yes, you’re right, Suzanne,” he says at length. “But within limits. That’s my point here—within limits.”

“There are no limits to forgiveness,” I say.

Mr. Klephorn stares, then checks his wristwatch. “Otherwise, things are good, Suzanne?” he says. His voice is louder and heartier again; this is a signal that we are done.

“Fine,” I say.

“How are things at home?”

“Good.”

“Your Aunt . . .”

“Jean.”

“Thank you. Aunt Jean is around full time?”

“Yes,” I say. I do not tell him that she works the night shift at the truck stop, and is usually asleep when I get home. But she’s very good about bringing home food – especially day-old desserts– and leaving them out for me. I usually have pie several times a day.

“Good.” He pauses. His eyes drop to my clothes, to my long bright scarf. “One more thing. Remember our dress code at RFH, Suzanne. It’s probably different than California. Here you may of course choose your own clothes, but they mustn’t be disruptive or extreme. Page four, section 3-c of the Student Council Handbook.”

“Thank you, Mr. Klephorn,” I say. We shake hands.

My day goes all right. For lunch I get a milk to go along with my piece of restaurant pie. In the cafeteria I sit by myself as usual. I see some of the Meeters and Greeter kids from earlier in the year, but they are all sitting together. I don’t mind. What I’m looking forward to is my last class of the day, woodworking. I’ve always liked to make things,

plus I don't mind being surrounded by boys (I'm the only girl). It is among boys that I can do the most good.

At 2:00 p.m. I go to woodworking. Eddie Halvorsen is there, along with other "woodies", as they call themselves. He glares at me.

"Safety glasses," Mr. Patterson says automatically.

Eddie mutters something at me as I pass by to my shop locker. There I spin my combination padlock and take out my wooden swan lamp. I touch its long dark neck.

One of Eddie's friends eases up to me. "You sign?" he asks, meaning did I sign a harassment complaint.

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

"I forgive him."

"You're beyond weird." He oozes away, whispers to Eddie, who glares at me, then spits out words that even I can hear above the start-up hum of the machines. His friends look at him oddly.

I begin work on my wooden swan. I use a hand-held sanding block. I don't like machines; they're too loud, and can cut too quickly into the wood. I like to go slow. The neck of my black walnut swan curves up gracefully. I've been working on her all term, and she's really getting beautiful. Even Mr. Patterson complimented me on her. He let me do a project different from the boys, most of whom are making gun cabinets. But I love my swan. When I work on her, she reminds me that there is hope for Eddie. For all of us. My swan started as a rough piece of black walnut—hard and full of splinters. First I cut her outline with a band saw, then used a power sander for one day to round her neck and breast. Now each day she gets smoother. The grain of the wood is beginning to come out. It looks almost like tiny feathers.

After school, on my way home, it is snowing. I walk with my head down and my scarf wrapped around my face. It never snowed in California. Suddenly someone blocks the sidewalk. "Weird Suzy!" Eddie says.

I stop. Blink.

He has popped out of the alley; deeper in it, by a sagging garage, a group of his friends are looking at something in a small bag.

"Hello, Eddie," I say. For a moment he scares me. But I remember that Jesus must have been afraid many times.

"How's come you didn't sign?" he says. His eyes, small and very dark—like knots in black walnut—bore into mine.

"I don't believe in retaliation," I say.

"Turn the other cheek, that kind of bull?"

I nod.

He laughs hoarsely. "If you'd have signed, I'll be kicked out of school for good. Then I wouldn't be around to bother you."

"If you were out of school, where would you go, what would you do?" I answer. He stares. There is a pause. By then the others in the alley are looking at us. Suddenly Eddie whoops and snakes out his arm; he grabs my orange scarf and strips it from my neck.

"Hey everybody!" he shouts. He wraps it around his neck and dances just out of my reach. He flaps the scarf as if he's trying to fly.

I blink against the falling snow and look at him. WWJD? I set down my book bag, take off my coat, hold it out to him. "Take my coat, too," I say.

He stops, stares. Then he grabs my coat, throws it in the snow. "My hat, too," I say. I take off my beret, hand it to him. He throws it in the snow. He laughs.

I peel off my sweater—I have on only a teeshirt underneath and it is suddenly very chilly—and I hand it to him. After a moment's hesitation, he takes it.

"Hey, Eddie, no!" one of his friends says.
"You're gonna get us in trouble, Eddie," another calls.
"She's crazy, Eddie. Don't!"

The kids in the alley scatter. Now there is only Eddie and me. He swallows as he stares at me. I am shivering in the February air. Suddenly he flings my sweater in my face so hard I stumble back. "What in hell is the matter with you?" he says. His voice cracks. When I look up again, he is limping quickly away, disappearing in the snow after his friends.

The next morning I walk to school the usual way. Eddie's gang spots me, as usual. "Hey, Eddie, it's Weird Suzy," someone calls.

But this morning Eddie will not look at me. He stands with his back to me, his hands jammed in his pockets. I can feel his anger. His hard heart. Light snow is falling again and has whitened his cap and shoulders. For a moment he looks like a pillar of salt.

In shop class Eddie's dark eyes follow me as I go to my locker, unlock it, carefully take out my swan lamp. I go to my station and begin work. Working on my swan makes me forget everything, even my mother. Later this week Mr. Patterson will help me drill the hole for the cord and the light bulb post. Then I'll be ready for the final sanding and varnishing. I stroke my swan's dark neck. Parts of it are smoother than human skin.

"What the hell's that supposed to be?" Eddie says in my ear. I turn. He grabs at my swan. I jerk it away from him and cradle it in my arms. Mr. Patterson is on the far side of the shop helping someone with the table saw. He can't help me. Eddie laughs.

I feel my face flush. I shouldn't have jerked my swan away from Eddie. It's not something Jesus would have done. Slowly I hold it out so that he can see it—but not touch it.

“It’s a swan,” I say.

“Looks like a damned crow,” Eddie says.

“It’s not finished,” I answer. “Like all of us.”

He stares at me. I see the hate in his eyes.

“You should have stayed in California, you freak.”

After he leaves I turn back to my swan but my hands are shaky. For one brief moment I understand what Jesus felt like when he knew that he was the One. The Chosen One. “Take this cup,” I murmur to my swan. “Choose someone else to help Eddie.” But she is silent.

I do not see Eddie after school, which today is all right by me. The weather has cleared—there is low red sunlight on fresh snow—and I take a walk down by the river. The Fork River runs through town, and in winter is good for skiing and skating upon. I often go there. It is still amazing to me that people can walk on water. This winter, however, spring has come early; posted along the bank are “Danger—Thin Ice!” signs.

I like the river. It’s quieter here, and there are little benches to sit on. One place I think of as my own. I often come down here to pray. Today I pray for my mother—that she will not forget me—and especially for Eddie Halvorsen. I feel like he is close to a breakthrough. I pray for a long time, until I’m cold and have to go home.

Near school the next morning Eddie calls out to me. “Hey Suzy! How’s it going?”

I stare. His voice is almost cheerful. None of his friends throws anything at me. They are all smiling. I do not quite understand this, but not everything Jesus does is understandable. I smile a little, nod and pass by.

It is a good day at school. People seem pleased to see me, even the college prep crowd. In California it was lowriders, Chicanos, valley girls; here it's the jocks, the farmers, the motorheads. Everybody looks at me as I pass by. I guess I'm my own crowd. Still, today everyone seems extra friendly. In shop class I go straight to my locker. I can’t wait to get started. But my padlock, broken, falls into my hands. I stare at it, then at my little metal door. Its hinges are bent. Slowly I pull open the door. My swan falls out in pieces. She clatters to the floor like a spilled puzzle that cannot ever be put right. I can't help myself: I drop to my knees, clutch the pieces and begin to wail. I hear myself calling for my mother.

I leave school late. I have been in the nurse’s office. “Eddie won’t be back in school. Not after this,” the nurse says. I can't think of anything to say. Finally she lets me go home.

Outside, all the yellow buses are gone. The snow has stopped and it is colder again. The sun is low and orange and will be setting soon.

I head down by the river, when I am aware of footsteps.

“Hey, Weird Suzy,” Eddie says. “What happened to your crow?”

I stop. “It was a swan,” I blurt. “A black swan.” There is laughter from his gang, which is smaller now—only three besides Eddie.

I hunch under my scarf and keep walking.

“You see what happened when you didn’t sign that form? You should have gotten rid of me when you could,” Eddie says, limping after me.

I keep walking.

“So where you going now Weird Suzy?” he says.

“Down by the river,” I say.

“Gonna drown yourself?” Eddie says. He laughs with an odd, high-pitched sound. His friends chuckle uncertainly.

“Maybe today’s the day,” he whispers, close behind me now.

“Hey, Eddie, don’t,” someone says.

“If not now, when, Weird Suzy?” Eddie says, his breath strong and sweet from chewing tobacco.

“Come on, Eddie, let’s go, man.” The others have dropped back a little. But not Eddie.

To get away, I head down the bank, past a “Danger—Thin Ice!” sign.

“That’s right. Good girl!” Eddie calls. He follows me down the bank.

I step onto the ice. Wind has blown it bare in spots. There are tiny bubbles trapped in its glass. The frozen bubbles show me how thick the ice is. I walk out several yards.

“Eddie don’t!” his friends call. They retreat to the parkway—as if they will be safe there.

I walk farther out, toward the middle of the river where there is a dark, steaming open patch. I think of Jesus when he walked on water. It was all a matter of faith. I move a couple of steps closer to the black water. Then I turn and face Eddie, who remains on the white shore. “Are you coming?” I say. “Don’t be afraid.”

He laughs but there is something thin and strangled in his throat.

“You can do it,” I say. I beckon him forward.

He glances up toward the parkway; his friends stare down at him.

“You’re crazy,” he says. He steps onto the ice. Though he is heavier than me, it holds him just fine. He comes closer.

“Come out to where I am,” I say.

He stops.

“It’s all a matter of not being afraid,” I say.

He takes several more steps—and suddenly there is a sound under his feet like foil ripping. Eddie's arms flap, like a bird taking off, as his legs and trunk disappear through the ice. He screams. I wonder if my black swan screamed when its head was cut off.

“Oh shit!” someone shouts from the bank.

Suddenly, Eddie is hanging onto the ice by his elbows. Most of his body is underwater.

“Help!” he shouts to his friends. “Help me!”

They run away. Perhaps to get help, perhaps just to run. A car stops on the Parkway; the driver lifts a cell phone to his face.

“Save me,” Eddie screams. “Someone! Suzy! Please! Save me!”

I watch him. I think of my swan. My butchered black swan. I think, what would Jesus do? Possibly I could save Eddie, though he seems to have a grip on the ice. I have my long, orange scarf. It would be enough to throw to him. It would be something for him to hold onto until help arrives. But I understand that not even Jesus could save everyone.

I sit down on the ice just out of Eddie's reach. I must think about what to do. After all, I am only human.

-the end-

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