Tarradiddle a collection of stories

version 1.0b

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Mister

Bichon Frieze loses a crust of bread from his peanut butter and tuna fish sandwich. Mister snags the crust before it hits the cement. He chunks the bread into the corners of his mouth, a wary black eye toward the boney shadow sprawled on top of an overturned five gallon bucket. Bichon claps a brown hand down on his knee, absently gesticulating with his sandwich atrocity.

"Mister, you ever feel like we'z just goin through the motions... like mebbe we don't see the real deal?"

A glob of tuna butter smacks the ground and echoes around the boiler room. Mister darts into the circle of light, unmoralistically broadcast from a naked bulb hanging forehead level among stalactites of mineral build-up, to lap at the spewtle. The stark border of white on black, Bichon's unruly hairline, rushes down toward his thin brows and he squints at the shadow of the rat cast on the moss growing up the prison wall.

"That's right, friend, if a dollup of luck wanna fall down from heaven, ya smile and take it flat on the kisser, that's what I say, too."

Bichon emits viscous gagging tones, culminating in a slimey-chunky projectile that splats soundly on the concrete beside Mister, who is mildly interested.

"But see what I mean? It's hard nuff ta realize - recognize - the good from the bad, and then you gotta be quick bout that, too. Ole Doc knowed that, sure nuff, but even so, seems like somehow all us're missin the big picture. Mebbe heaven didn't drop nothin down on him after all, mebbe the world just pulls down bits and pieces of whatever, like it got a inclination towards our direction." Bichon tosses the rest of his sandwich down, "You gotta be quick in yer determination."

Mister lumbers across the light after the scraps. The old man picks up a burned out light bulb and throws. It bounces off the rodent's back and shatters against a jaundiced junction box.

"Stupid rat, you best be quicker en that, you'll end up fated like the good Doctor."

Bichon meets up with his janitor cart on Block D: Bottles of acids and bases, scrub cloths, scrub brushes, scrub stones, scrub-free rinse, a plunger, a box of urinal mints a broom, a mop. At one time the prison had need of a fix-it man and a custodian. As far as the prison was concerned, Doc checked out at just the right time. The building, like the inmates it suffocates, needs only the minimum of warmth in the belly to numb its slow decay.

"Bichon! I say, c'mere boy, got work to do."

Warden P. Willard Karstenicz stands at the entrance to the cell block corridor. In times of previous vitality the prison had hardly a bunk to spare, but these days Tarradiddle houses a total of seventeen convicts, none on Block D. His head sits squarely on his shoulders with no intermediary neck to complicate things. He turns his torso from side to side when looking around. Adding to Warden's primal overtones, he holds his arms out from his body like a weightlifter and cuts a figure more square than rectangle. Adjusting his mottled and threadbare Palomino stallion tie with a furtive, sweaty motion, he stamps his way down toward the waiting janitor.

"Boy, I need somebody ta get on up and give Sparky a once over, longside uv a general cleaning up of the chair and surroundings. Take care of that for me?"

Bichon lays his ears back and grimaces.

"Yessir. You got one goin down tonight?"

"That injun kid down in B-2. Raper, murderer, sodomizer, thief and general bad guy."

Warden is already walking away, and hesitates before settling on "guy." He leaves Bichon there, thinking about death.

The sun is out, beating down on the Tarradiddle scrub. Dung beetles churn up the foundation of the prison. So does Doc. He crouches over a bed of budless roses. The brown stalks break apart in his meaty hands. The flowers won't grow. Regardless of gallons of water, mounds of manure, cupfulls of nutrient supplements, hours of loving discourse, the roses refuse to take hold. He is relentless trying to get something to grow in the prison. He prunes dead bits from the plants.

"Hey down there! What're you wastin yer time with those damn flowers? Ain't nobody round here gonna take no notice of no damn roses. Fix the damn radiator!"

Davis, a porcine prison guard with a face like pistol, spits off the roof. The spittle brushes past Doc's shoulder. He looks up at the straining uniform and takes a few plodding steps back. For the first time, he focuses on the backs of heads, and a chorus of heaving and hoeing.

He moves around the building, and comes upon a rope and pulley contraption lifting an immense Gatling gun to the roof. He pauses beneath the arrangement to watch sunburnt prisoners hoist the gun just over the halfway point of the prison's height.

"It's the solution, old man! Keep these pukes in fear, right? Ever'body loves the gunslinger position."

The prisoners grumble at this. Escape has never been a problem for the Tarradiddle County Penal Facility.

"Shaddup all of ya!"

Doc notices a dog gnawing at the base of a rose bush, oblivious to the thorns. Doc moves to shoo the beast along and straighten the plant when he hears a twang. He looks up to see the shiny new armament falling towards him.

Bichon searches the shelves of chemicals for the brass cleaner. Before he finds the right container, he sees a movement of brown hair.

"Mister? Dat you, boy?"

Mister's head pops out from between bottles of ammonia and chlorine.

"Stupid rat. Y'know there ain't nothin in heah for ya."

Bichon lifts Mister up onto his grey collar, "I dog, Mister, seem like everyday we got another'n goin to the chair. But we ain't gettin em in that quick. Well, seem like me and you don't get much lonelier, but still, I don't like havin nothin to do with it."

He places the extra potions he needs on the cart and wheels it down towards the chamber. Davis comes around the corner.

"You gettin that chair all red up? Warden said you was takin care uv things, what you doin movin so damn slow?"

"I get there duly, sir. Din't realize no rush."

"It's an obligation ta do these things right, boy, outta respect for those that been wronged."

"Yessir. How many this boy kill?"

"Don't matter, a lot I'm sure."

"Yessir."

"Look boy, don't try to makes me look stupid. I've been gettin purty sick uv yer attitude since ole Doc's little accident."

"Yessir."

"Queer old man."

Davis goes past, smell of sausage and pickles wafting after him. Bichon enters Block B, floor two, which houses seven death row inmates, hoards of lice and crabs, and one tiny, renovated cell that sucks the life out of the bricks.

Thin, black hand upon the railing, Bichon begins his first descent of the iron stairs to the basement. Warden is already turning back down the mislit corridor, "Just down the stairs, there's an extra cot."

A steel door nearly butts up against the last step. He opens the door, and steps down into the room. A workbench strains against the normal force of deposited gadgetry. A portly elf sits in the light of the patchwork desk lamp, ocular socket clamped tightly on a loupe, fiddling with the remnants of a small motor. Bichon sets his duffle on the moldy concrete and removes his hat.

"How d'ya do, Mister?"

The Doctor looks up from the contraption, drops the loupe into his palm, "I'd pick up my bag if I were you, gets damp down here, terrible damp if it's raining."

Bichon notices the fungus covering the floor, scalier in the corners, slimy towards the drain in the center of the room. He puts it on top of a mostly empty bookshelf.

"I can make you somewhere to put your gear some time. Take it you're stayin awhile?"

"I'm the new custodian, s'pose I'm fixin to be here a long time."

"Well, you're already shock-white, I guess this place can't take much more from you."

Bichon scratches at the cottony mess atop his oblong skull. Wrinkles are firmly established already along his brow, and grow suddenly in the yellow shadows. "You makin somethin outta that ole garbage?"

"I'm doin a deed here – good deed – y'know, making an electric needle. For tattoos."

Bichon snorts.

"A man without a tattoo is just a hairless ape, friend. It's either this, or they just go at each other with a needle on a stick. Poor boys..."

"Seems to me, if the Lord wanted somethin else sides black on my skin he woulda put it there hisself."

"People have been doin tatoos longer than they've been doing God, son. Sides, nobody here's got time to waste prayin for a miracle. It's like that mold down there -- can't really appreciate it, but can't fault it none cuz it manages to survive."

The execution chamber of the Tarradiddle County Penal Facility is not as dramatic as it sounds. Yellow paint over grey brick contributes to a sulfur brilliance. The chair is covered with a tarp.

"I'll tell you what, Mister, this room give a man the jitters. Feel like the old man hisself is right behind me."

Mister clings to Bichon's shoulder. He scurries down the old man's arm, raising tiny pale welts on the back of his hand, and onto the arm of the chair. Bichon takes out a

polishing cloth and begins massaging the electrodes. The room is silent. The chair presses into Bichon's chemically weathered paw. His motion becomes less fluid. He fumbles with the brass polish, knocking the bottle over on the seat. Mister scrambles up a wrist restraint, leaving a damp trail of urine. The man sops up the mess, and returns to his polishing. Bringing the rag back into contact with the brass ring, he feels a static shock.

"I thought I'd plant some roses around the building." Doc sits at the workbench tinkering with a piece of thermostat. "Davis can't leave the heat alone."

"He wanna make it hotter than hell in heah, Mister. Jus one more thing fuh that sonuvabitch ta break." Bichon scrubs the scale out of a corner. The mold almost retreats during the height of summer, but returns before the leaves are off the trees, and becomes relentless during the dead of winter.

"I thought it'd add some color. Start the bushes down here, under some lights."

"Don't want this mold growin no faster. It's like tryin ta dig a pit in the sand, fightin this damn slime."

"Why do you fight it?"

"Man ain't supposed to live in filth."

"Who told you that?"

"Jus figure it's true nuff."

Doc plugs in a purple light and shines it toward Bichon, whose white hair glows.

"I don't know how you lived so long, rat." Bichon oils the leather straps of the chair. "You ain't makin it without me. Spoilt is what you is. Spoilt."

Mister nibbles a piece of cracker on the seat of the chair.

"If you'se a person, they'd be puttin you in this chair, stealin food and gnawin up the place."

The rodent sits back on its haunches, round.

"Don't know how you feel bout that, but I don't want them ta put me in some chair. Livin in prison – least it's still livin, right?"

Chewing on a restraining strap.

"Shoot, you'se just a stupid rat, what you is. I said, Mister, that jus cuz you livin in a prison, you still livin."

Bichon has moved on to polishing the wood. He moves quickly, but the wood shimmers. "That's how I see it, anyhow." He shoves the supplies back onto the cart, scoops up Mister -- "I don't want any part in this, I tell ya" – and maneuvers down corridor B.

The prisoners are in their cells, just sitting or standing. In number two is the young Indian. His head is shaved clean, eyes are hollow. It seems to Bichon that he is a manifestation of the world: That his content stretches far beyond his form. The old janitor feels the boy/man searching him, and wrings his polish-rag as if it would squeeze High John right out of the fibers.

"Old man, what's your name? Whatchoo know about that room there?" Bichon pauses in front of the cell.

"It's where they lectrocute thems that needs lectrocutin."

"You the one they make do it? Do I get to see your face when you do it?"

"Son, I don't want nothin ta do..."

The boy shoots across the cell, arms outstretched, and grabs Bichon by the shirt.

"You just getting ready, huh? Just get it all polished up, make it look nice for when they fry the dirty bastard! YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW ME!"

At this point, the rest of the inmates notice the confrontation, and begin hooting and hollaring for the kid to kill the custodian before it goes the other way, and Davis enters with his night stick already drawn:

"YOU MUTHERFUCKERS SHUT THE FUCK UP OR YOU'RE ALL IN DEEP SHIT!"

He marches straight to Bichon, pounding the stick on the cell bars. Without pausing, he brings down the club on the Indian's wrist producing an audible snap. The kid collapses to the ground, through clenched teeth, "You'd better get your mojo on, old man."

"I told you before, Bichon, you stay outta reach uv these convicts from now on."
"Yessir."

Were it not already so, the boy's intense gaze would have bleached the custodian's unruly hair. Davis marches back down to the staff lounge. Bichon feels empty where a root or a rat or a friend could fill him up. Mister is gone.

Doc strikes the wall with a pickaxe. His face is swollen and pink. He pauses, sits back on a short stool and folds his hands on his considerable belly. "Phew, it's hard work this pickaxin."

"Why they want this wall all tore up anyway?"

"Warden says they need to put some cables through for the new electric chair."

"They gonna start killin people up heah?"

"This place already kills people, friend, I reckon this'll just speed up the rotting. Don't like it, myself."

Bichon grabs the pickaxe and swings at the wall. Chunks of brick and rock explode everywhere, but there is one hunk that emanates a singularity. "What the hell is that, Mister?"

Doc picks up the dark lump. It's more rounded than the rest, as if it had been rolled along the bed of a long river before settling in the wall of the Tarradiddle County Penal Facility. Licking his finger, Doc works off the conglomerate clinging to the outer layer.

"I believe this is a frog."

Bichon looks unbelievingly at Doc. "A damn frog? In the wall?"

"It's pretty rare, I think."

"I never heard such a load of hooey."

Doc continues massaging the creature, and eventually it begins moving slightly. "See, it's a natural frog thing. They hibernate over the winter by burying themselves in the mud, so it's not completely unusual to find them in bricks."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe muh eyes."

"You'd be surprised how much stuff gets into something you're building. Sometimes it brings with it a whole life of its own." The frog, after a couple moments of wiggling in Doc's fleshy grip, leaps to the ground.

"He's fine, see?"

The frog hops once more. Again. Again. But this time lands on his side. His rear legs kick a few times, then quiver, then are still. Doc leans over to prod it in the stomach. No response. Doc's smile fades, and he looks like he's been punched in the gut.

"Well, he was fine. Geez, that's sad."

"But that little guy was in there for how long?"

"Don't know. I been here forty years, but nobody was going to give me a history lesson back then. Or today, for that matter. I'd guess probably at least a hundred years. More. Maybe."

"But he was livin that whole time?"

"Depends on how you differentiate living from just staying alive."

In the evening, he is swabbing out the kitchen. Warden enters and stands in the doorway until Bichon notices him.

"Yessir?"

"Boy, I need yer help up here with this injun kid. We need another buttonpusher."

"Oh, sir, I don't think I'm the one for that."

"Why not? You like workin here, right? You wanna keep on livin here?"

"Well, yessir."

"Right then, I'll see ya up there soon's yer finished here."

And Warden spins again on his heel and exits the doorway. Bichon leans on his mop. Mister eats bits of grated cheese from the chopping board.

"I'll tell ya, this business ain't no good at all. What'm I supposed to do now?"

Rats have paws like tiny human hands, without a thumb, and Mister uses his to comb back the hair on top of his head.

"It ain't no use. Dammit, you'd think a man of my yeahs would have somethin figgered out bout this kinda stuff. Stead I'm stuck talkin to a damn rat."

The cur snorts in the dirt, scratching a hole at the base of the perimeter fence. The ground is still damp after the cleanup, but Bichon is there. He can hear Davis' occasional burst of laughter from the rooftop where he tells another guard about the technical specifications of the Gatling gun. The prison yard is empty except for the dog, now pissing on the chain link. Bichon focuses on the crushed remnants of the rose bush. He hears a short burst of shots and a yelp.

Davis' hysterical chortle confirms the kill, and, without looking, Bichon makes his way down to his hovel. Although their dwelling had been mostly rodent-free for the duration of Bichon's time in the prison, when he returns to his room he notices a mound of brown fur moving on Doc's workbench.

"That you, Mister?"

The rat, in a move unnatural for rats in general, emerges from the clutter on the table and sits back. It's a young rat, but already it has a jovial belly.

The execution chamber is crowded with people standing around doing nothing. Davis is there, with a couple of guards, a priest, Warden, and a couple of people who Bichon suspects might work for the prison in areas he never sees. The kid is still in his cell. Warden ushers Bichon and one of the unnamed men into the control room. Davis and his cronies accompany the priest to retrieve the condemned. The man in the control room with Bichon is smiling.

"Whooo, boy! I have looked forward to this all week, hain't you?"

"I just heard about it today..."

"Shoot, got me a seat saved straight from the gitgo. You oughta be proud."

Three plungers stick out from the wall just below the window. Bichon watches the guards seat the prisoner and fasten the restraining belts around his waist, arms, feet and head. Lubricant oozes out from the edges of the skullcap.

"They put that stuff on there to get the current goin good through im."

Although the executionee area is well-lit and the executioner area is dark, to provide some anonymity for those pushing the buttons, the Indian boy's eyes find Bichon and manage to track his every move. The custodian mostly just fidgets. Warden enters the room, followed by Davis.

"Alright, Davis, you get on that other one, you other fellas ready?"

"You bet, Percy, I been ready all year," and then to Bichon, "Y'know this is the sonuvabitch what knocked up my daughter. All we could get him on was statutory rape, since the baby was born six months after her eighteenth birthday. It's a great favor, Percy lettin us do this."

"Sir, mebbe you could take my spot..."

"BOY! I told you to push the damn button, now yer gonna push the damn button."

Stomach cramps and dizziness. Warden flips the main switch. The light flickers above the boy. His broken hand sticks out at an unnatural angle from the leather strap, all black and green and swollen. "OK, we're all charged up boys. Fire when ready."

Davis pushes his plunger. The man pushes his plunger. Bichon hesitates, notices a lack of reaction from the boy in the prison jumpsuit, and feels himself pushing his plunger down. He sees the kid's eyes widen. There are screams. Foam oozes from the kid's mouth and nose and ears. Blood flows like tears. His right hand repeatedly clamps and unclamps on the arm of the chair, and his left spasmodically flails perpendicular to his forearm. Shit and piss flood his jumpsuit. Bichon is fading: vision tunneled on the kid's eyes, and it's like being sucked in.

Bichon and Doc sit on a fire escape at the back of the prison eating tuna-butter sandwiches. They are watching Davis and Warden out in the field behind the prison yard. Davis and Warden are knocking the heads off rabbits with golf clubs.

"Y'see, friend, those boys over there don't have enough sense to piss straight."

"Why you say that, Mister?"

"What're they doing that for? There's no reason to go killing all the bunnies like that."

"Lots of bunnies this yeah. Seem like they might just overrun us all over heah."

"I work all spring and summer trying to get a little life to grow around here."

"Them rosebushes oughtta be takin a lesson from the rabbits."

"No wonder they won't grow. I think Davis and Warden stomp them."

"Them two's just a-killin machines since they got that lectric chair."

"It ain't good."

"Naw, they was bad nuff before."

"I'll tell you friend, killing everything around you is the first step toward killing yourself."

In the basement room, Mister laps at the salty tracks running down Bichon's face. "He knew. I could see it in his eyes."

Water drips off a pipe running across the room and plops on the thick carpet of mold, unhindered in its growth since Doc's death. Bichon stares into the darkness. "It seeps. What's hot seeps into what's cold. What's known seeps into what ain't. What's kilt seeps into what's done the killin." His hand rests on Doc's tattoo gun. Bichon stuffs it, along with the rest of his belongings into his old duffle bag.

"Well I have to test it out."

Bichon is organizing his meager belongings on a small table he found in a storage closet on his first set of rounds. There had been a lot of extra cleaning backed up from the lag period between he and the last custodian, plus the prison is nearly full, so he hadn't gotten around to unpacking. Now, as he folds his shirt, Doc is preparing to test his latest device.

Stubby hands, impressively dexterous, quickly bring a razor over to clear a strip of hairless skin perpendicular to his forearm. He fingers a dial, cannibalized from a thermostat Davis broke, to initiate and then adjust the buzz of the tattoo gun. Blue sparks arc in the linkage, and the smell of ozone permeates the room. "Can't use it on nobody else if I won't use it on myself. It'd be against my conscience."

He dips the needle into a bottle cap full of India ink, and nearly flips it over with the vibrations. He grins at Bichon as he puts the needle to his flesh. In slow, methodic movements he spells out:

A L I V E in simple block letters.

He comes across the room, and holds his arm out to show Bichon.

"Can't say I's ever been much impressed with that sorta thing, Mister."

"Why not?"

"It ain't right. It ain't what the Lord wants."

"Who told you that?"

"Don't matter. It's true nuff ain't it."

"I say the Lord cares more how you treat other people."

"Sides, how come you want somethin on you forever?"

"Something like this, how could you not want it? It'll remind me every day."

Outside the rain is deafening. Bichon makes his way across the prison yard, oblivious to Davis' yells from the roof. Above the din of the storm rings a dog's howl, and the short burst of the Gatling gun. Bichon falls into the fence. Davis turns on his spotlight. Mister scrambles through the chain link. Alive.

Mutt

Claremont Montclair sits in his leather easy chair watching Wheel of Fortune on his 24" Magnavox feeling smart. Very smart. After work he comes home, kicks his daughter off the Nintendo and requisitions the set for M*A*S*H, A Current Affair, then Wheel of Fortune. It's ritualistic. He needs the entertainment. Claremont stickies up the sides of his cognate bits with a lukewarm Pabst from the garage and critiques Vanna's dress. It's too sparkley, draws too much attention to itself. Claremont appreciates anonymity in others, and leads by example. He's the head of the Tarradiddle county department of urban development. Recently he approved the installation of the county's first traffic light. Today he cut a ribbon and threw a bladeful of dirt over his shoulder with a golden shovel. There were at least a dozen people at the groundbreaking, mostly city officials. Trimbull Karstenicz, the mayor, commended him publicly for his years of service. All this was too much for Claremont, who thought only of returning to his office to peruse his maps and charts, then heading home for a lukewarm Pabst in time to catch M*A*S*H, A Current Affair, then Wheel of Fortune.

It's too sparkley. Pretty woman like that don't need no more sparkle to her. She's already gonna get the whole dang place lookin at her. Sheesh. I say, why can't people see what I mean. Look at ole Pat. He's got a nice, black suit on. He looks sharp.

The doorbell rings. I wait awhile, expectin Shirley or Sheila or Stan to come runnin for it. I don't never have no visitors anyhow. What's the point of gettin up just to miss the end of the puzzle when it ain't even for me? Dadgummit, whoever's out there ain't goin away.

-- Sheila! Shirley! Door!

It's reinforced concrete. Jeezus, ain't these bozos stupid? Why can't they see? It's reinforced concrete! Hell, I coulda figured that out after he picked the O. Hurry up and solve it, honey, there's someone at the door.

The doorbell rings for a third time. I look up and notice a little boy pressin his face against the window, watchin me, watchin these idiots fail to solve this puzzle. Well, hell.

I get up and open the door, keepin an eye on the puzzle from the entry. Not really lookin out the door, I usher the visitor in, figurin him to be a friend of Stanley's, but when a commercial interrupts the round, I turn to find that he is actually a they. I vaguely recognize him from Stan's class at school. He was the kid who threw up in the cement truck when I went for show and tell, Virgil Strobecker. Later, while we were cleanin up the cab, Stan told me they call Virgil "Stroker" and that he was the kid who gave everybody at school head lice.

Virgil looks tired. And pained. His freckles smear down from tears and dirt, and he keeps holdin his shorts out from his crotch. The man steps foreward. He looks profoundly sober.

-- Yer boy shot my boy.

He speaks softly and draws out the five words. In between syllables I hear bells dingin from the tv, and Pat Sajak reaffirms the answer: EL CAMINO ROYAL. I thought the topic was "Roads," but I figure now isn't the best time to look away from the gentleman in front of me. I wince from the gameshow, but it fits the mood.

-- Did ya here me say? Should I say it again?

I turn to Virgil, who's tryin to swallow his lips, and I say:

-- Stan shot you?

Stroker looks up at me, twelve years fat, and nods slowly.

-- With what?

Virgil opens his mouth, but his old man cuts him off.

- -- Yer boy shot im with is pellet gun.
- -- Where?
- -- Show im, boy.

Virgil points to his crotch, dirty jams makin a pup tent over his little tallywacker.

-- I said show im. Drop them britches.

He pulls down his shorts, looks up at his father, who motions with his Champion Sparkplugs ballcap, then pulls down his drawers as well. There's a bundle of guaze and surgical tape attached between his legs, bulging out and supporting his yellowgreen pecker at a near right angle. It looks to be uncomfortable, and truthfully makes me wince

again to see it. The man presses his temples with his free hand and mumbles for the boy to pull up his shorts. I can understand his distress. It's the kind of thing a man never wants to see his son have to suffer through.

- -- My God. Stan wouldn't do that. How'd this happen?
- -- The boy won't say cept that it was Stan Montclair. He kep it hid from us til this mornin when is momma found a stain on is bedsheets.
 - -- Is there any permanent damage?

Tears build up in Strobecker's eyes, and he wipes his nose on his sleeve.

- -- Lemme get my wife. Shirley! Shirley, could you come here?
- -- Don't know for sure.

Strobecker sobs out these words. I look down the hall to see Shirley coming with tissues in hand. Somehow she knows things, and it's times like this I'm glad of it. She'd never wear no sequins on her dress.

Oh Lord, what are those men up to? With that boy and his britches all down around his ankles, I don't know if that's decent. I don't even know that man, who is he? He could work for Claremont, I suppose. But I'd have seen him. If not around town, at least at the Christmas Buffet. Surely he wouldn't miss the Christmas Buffet.

Claremont and the dirty man stand there in the hallway on my brand new Oriental rug, and that man is fidgeting his feet. He's wheeling his boots around on his dirty heels, just pounding that crap into my carpet.

-- Shirley! Shirley, could you come here?

I'd better take the tissues, too, because that man looks like he's about to start crying. Oh Lord! There he goes. He's sobbing into his hands, and Look! Claremont pats him on the back and what's he saying?

-- Now, what's that mean Strobecker? You don't know for sure?

The man takes a Kleenex from me.

- -- The doctor says we goin hafta wait to see if is functions is afflicted, but even so...
 - -- Who's this, dear?

Claremont gestures towards me, smiling his introducing-my-wife smile. It comes off less proud and more look!-a-woman.

- -- Mr. Strobecker, this is my wife Shirley. Shirley, this is Mr. Strobecker and his son, Virgil.
 - -- What's the matter, Mr. Strobecker?
 - -- Well, ma'am, my boy's only got one testicle, and it's on account of your boy.

My God! What could have happened that would result in this? He must be joking. Stan would never do anything like tearing off another boy's testicle. He knows that's wrong.

- -- Are you sure it was Stan? It could have been one of those girls over there.

 Them girls can be vicious, and I wouldn't put it past them.
 - -- They had to amputate?

-- Doc said it was infected. Likesay, the boy says it happened a few days ago. He kep it secret cuz he was shamed. Doc said there weren't no way to save it. I asked him, believe me. I begged him.

Strobecker is devastated. As a matter of fact, he looks overly distraught. His pants aren't tight enough for me to tell if he is also deficient, but I think it's a good probability. He takes another tissue and blows his nose. Claremont turns to me.

- -- Have you seen Stan, hon? We should get him in here, I think.
- -- I'll get Sheila to go get him.

I turn and go to the foot of the stairs where I yell up for our daughter. I can hear her listening to the soundtrack from Cats, so I pound on the wall in time to each syllable.

-- Shei * la! * Come * down * here * now! *

She comes to the top of the stairs in her pink Guess overalls. Her hair is crimped like the girls wear these days, and she's got two pair of socks on with her pants tucked in. She's fiddling with her penny loafers, cramming her feet into them.

- -- What?
- -- Is your brother up there?
- -- Stan!
- -- If I wanted you to yell...
- -- Nope. I think he went over to Virgil's maybe?
- -- He didn't go to Virgil's.
- -- Somethin about Virgil. Idunno.
- -- Would you go look for him?
- -- Yes'm.

Strobecker is still moaning about his son in the hall. Claremont is more sympathetic than usual, once again with his arm across Strobecker's shoulders, telling him things will be alright.

- -- I preciate your kindness Mr. Montclair, but ain't no way the boy gonna go to God now.
 - -- Now, you don't know that.

Actually, in the Bible it says that no man with a mutilated set of genitals is getting into heaven. God doesn't want any man who isn't virile or is somehow otherwise incomplete. I wouldn't have figured Strobecker for a religious man.

-- I tell you, not God or any woman ever gonna want a one nut mutt.

-- Shei * la! * Come * down * here * now! *

Christ, what does she want? I ain't never gonna get my dance routine down with her buggin me all the damn time. Clean up you room. Set the table. Get off the Nintendo. Jesus Christ, how do they think I'm gonna get myself on the dance team with all this stuff goin on?

- -- What?
- -- Is your brother up there?
- -- Stan! Nope. I think he went over to Virgil's maybe?
- -- He didn't go to Virgil's.

Well, if you know so much why you askin me about it?

- -- Somethin about Virgil. Idunno.
- -- Would you go look for him?

I can't believe it. Christ, if it ain't one thing it's the other. What'd the little brat do now? I go out back and take a look cross the yard. There's dad's workshed in the corner, all locked up with a big old padlock. Next to the workshed is the climbin tree. Dad built us a tree fort up there a few years ago, when Stan got old enough to climb up it. Dad said it was good for the kids to have a place of their own. But then Stan said it was a Girl-Free Zone and I wasn't allowed up there. I don't care much about that, cuz my time's mostly taken up with better stuff than sittin in the treehouse, and besides, I can see into it from my bedroom window, so I know if I'm missin anything.

That kid Virgil is crazy. I saw him one time playin with himself when Stan was finishin up rakin leaves last fall. Stan says they call him Stroker, and I can see why. I don't know why Stan hangs out with that kid. I climb up the ladder dad nailed up the trunk of the tree, and push open the trapdoor. Jesus Christ, the place smells rotten, on account of the dead armadillos Stan's got piled up in the corner.

In the treehouse is a pair of binoculars, a stool for sittin, a steamer trunk and some sticks. Up on all the walls are drawins that Stan and his friends made. Some are spaceships, some are cars. There's plenty of nekkid women and people having sex. I can't believe how immature Stan and his friends are. Most of the drawings have labels or else I couldn't tell what's supposed to be goin on in them.

I look over the edge of the fort. I can see out across the neighbors' yards, and then over into the field out back of our house. It's all undeveloped cept the big concrete bulbs pokin out where they put in the sewage for future buildings. Dad says one day we'll live

right in the middle of town, but we'll probably move before then. Dad don't want to live smack in the center of things. He says we need to stay over on the outskirts. I'm gonna move the hell out of this town. It's too small, and there ain't nothin glamourous or excitin goin on.

I don't see Stan nowhere, so I figure I can sit up here til he comes along. I open up the steamer trunk, and that's where he's got his girlie mags hid along with his BB gun. Every time I come up here he's got some different magazines up there. Sometimes it's Playboy or Penthouse, which I heard of before. But sometimes it's something I never knew existed. It's amazin how many girlie magazines they make these days. He's got Swank and Hustler and Cream and Busty and Tush and Gallery and a bunch of others that just got one word titles. I wonder how come so many magazines just have one word titles. Christ, don't they think anybody could remember more?

So I pull an issue of Hawk out from under Stan's BB gun, and sit there on the stool where I can keep an eye out for him. Mostly it's just pictures of nekkid ladies with their legs all spread, but sometimes they have pictures of men, too. In every one, it looks like they're just about to do it, but they never do. He's sittin there with his dick all pointed at her pussy, else she's hangin over his dick with her mouth open, but they ain't never doin it. I flip through the Hawk, but there's nothin in it I want to see, just the same old ugly ladies showin off parts only the doctor should ever see. I remember at first I was shocked, cuz I never saw myself from that way before, and I couldn't believe that's what it looked like. Now it's just borin.

I drop the magazine in the trunk, and I'm fishin for another when I hear Stan climbin over the back fence. He scrambles up the one side, then jumps down into our yard, and heads over to the tree. I stand on the trapdoor, and wait til he pushes up on it.

- -- That you Stan?
- -- What're you doin up there? No girls allowed up there!
- -- Now it's a No Boys Allowed Zone.
- -- You can't do that! I'm tellin mom!
- -- Don't matter. I'll tell her bout your magazines.
- -- You don't tell er bout those magazines. I'll tell er bout you an Cephus Dugget at the lake.
 - -- Yeah, well you're already in trouble, doosh bag.
 - -- What for?
 - -- Christ, Idunno. Stroker's in there.
 - -- Shit.

Stan climbs back down the ladder. I can see him stand there for a second lookin at the back door, then he heads towards the house. He walks really slow, pushin down his hair and tuckin his shirt into his jeans. Before he goes inside he takes off his muddy shoes, and that's how I know he must really be in trouble.

There ain't nothin like playin with a pissed off armadillo. Cept killin it. I got this armadillo in my backpack cuz I'm makin some armor. I figure I can get enough so I can

sew up some good armor, then I'll be ready for battle. I can show all those bastards at school how tough I am. They won't be able to touch me.

I head up the ladder, but even at the bottom I can smell flowers and hairspray.

When I get to the top, the door won't open, and I know my goddamn sister is up there lookin at my girlie magazines again. She's like those women in the pictures who like the women.

- -- That you Stan?
- -- What're you doin up there? No girls allowed up there!
- -- Now it's a No Boys Allowed Zone.
- -- You can't do that! I'm tellin mom!
- -- Don't matter. I'll tell her bout your magazines.
- -- You don't tell her bout those magazines. I'll tell her bout you and Cephus Dugget at the lake.

We went out to the lake on youth group, and Sheila and Cephus, this kid who dropped outta school already and I heard decked a teacher one time, was kissin all night down by the water. It was gross watchin it, cuz he was puttin his hand all up her shirt and in her shorts, and all I could think about was how my sister always smells so bad on account of her perfume and how ugly she is. I feel bad for Cephus, and I hope I ain't never that desperate.

- -- Yeah, well you're already in trouble, doosh bag.
- -- What for?
- -- Idunno. Stroker's in there.
- -- Shit.

Virgil Strobecker used to be a friend of mine. Til I shot him in the ding ding. I didn't mean to shoot him in the pecker, but that's where the BB hit him. He said he was fine. He said it didn't hurt. He just punched me in the chest and ran home, but he's always runnin home to his momma cuz somebody was mean to him. Stroker's one of those kids everybody's just mean to. That's what he's there for.

I better straighten up. Momma will be mad cuz I got my school shoes all dirty. I tuck in my shirt and try to flatten down my hair, then I take off my shoes outside the door. I look through the back window, and I can see Stroker and his dad standin in the hallway. It looks like Mr. Strobecker is cryin, and it looks like my dad is givin him a hug. Fuck, I must be in trouble.

I wouldn't even have tried to shoot him if he hadn't been grabbin me in the crotch all day. Stroker's always grabbin you in the balls and squeezin, and that makes him laugh real hard. I don't get it. Nobody's supposed to touch another man in the balls. That's what girls do, is hit ya in the balls. Guys don't do that. I was so sick of gettin my balls pinched that I shot him. I got a CO2 BB gun pistol for my eleventh birthday, and we were out shootin stuff by the lake. Stroker had been grabbin balls all day long, and I shot him. In self defense. How much trouble could I get in?

I look through the window again. Now Virgil's got his shorts down around his ankles and Momma's lookin at his weiner. I always thought nobody could get hurt with a BB gun. Sure, they could shoot your eye out, but they don't break the skin. Shit, I shot Stroker a hundred times in the ass and he ain't got no problems. He probably just wants everybody to look at him nekkid. I ain't got no sympathy for him. Ball grabber.

Uncle Ned

- -- Ned sez when they say no they probly mean no.
- -- Yeah?
- -- Cept he sez you can usually talk em into yes.

Down by the lake it's hot an heatwaves blur the chigger weeds an make it hard tuh tell where solid ground begins. Sometimes the bay's so still an clear, an the bank slips smooth as a snake intuh the water, it looks like the lake wouldn't have no problem swallerin up all us an the house an the shed an everthin. Momma makes us wheel Uncle Ned down by the water, tells us he's too old tuh get on by is ownself. He ain't been able tuh take care uh isself since is stroke a coupla years ago. She sez we gotta keep an eye on im else he get isself drowned er somethin. I sez we oughta jest keep im in the house. So we sit down by the water ever day wit Ned. He's old an wrinkled, got skin like a baseball glove and is ears get longer ever year.

-- Boys, ya'll get yer asses ova heah.

Bocephus an I haul over to the dock. Ned's noddin in is chair, .22 rifle cross is lap. He points over tuh a clump uh weeds just next tuh the dock.

-- Yall go find a stick an poke it in those weeds ova there.

Cephus goes an finds the pokin stick. Ned keeps an eye on the lake, leastways on our bay. Sez he don't want nobody fuckin wit the lines an he don't want no damn troublesome critters comin round. We got trotlines out cross the bay opposite the dock. Means if Ned sees some critter he thinks don't belong, me an Cephus gotta go an get it an

bring it uh Ned so he can shoot it. We come up with a rotted part uh two by four and Cephus, who's all sweaty an still has scabies a lil bit, sticks it deep intuh the clump. He pulls it outta the weeds an there's a snapper hangin at the other end. Cephus tosses it up on the dock, just in front uh the metal footrest where Ned's crooked ole toes spread apart uh cradle the barrel uh the rifle. Then he shoots the turtle squa inna head.

-- You boys go an clean that thing out.

Me an Cephus go up on the dock an he grabs that usta be snapper up by the tail. Ned's starin off tuh the other side uh the lake.

-- Leave me a coupla cigarettes fore ya go, now.

I sit down, danglin my feets inda water an pull out the bag uh tobacco I nicked from daddys top drawer. Not one uh us supposta be smokin, an mos certainly not outta Daddy's bag.

-- Back in the twennies I was workin at a gum factory up in Fayettville, grindin up hoss hooves an what not, usta go round with this lil girl from up round Morrilton, yessir.

Cephus gets all cited when Ned starts in on the stories since mos ever one ends with some sex an some violence. He sits down in front uh the wheelchair with the turtle in his lap, fiddlin with the feets and pickin at scabs on his legs. I keep rollin smokes. Ned hacks. He sez since we gotta daddy ain't no good, he gotsta make sure we don't grow up sissies. Daddy sez he wouldn't give birth tuh no sissy, an if I was a sissy he weren't my Daddy.

-- She hadda ass on er wouldn't quit, so I figgerd she'd be alright with me. I like gals with kinda flatter keisters, but ya'll find yore type an when ya do I suggest ya keep with it. Nevah underestimate the kinda feelin a woman's ass gives ya. I come up to her apartment one day, she holed up in this apartment with some frien uh hers, an I found her up in the bed with this other woman – real ugly gal with pocks all ova her face an great big ole flappy titties.

Cephus giggles.

- -- I thawt you likt girls with big titties, Ned.
- -- There ain't nothin wrong with some big ole titties, but a man gotta be reasonable. Shoot, I can take care uh two, mebbe three, handfulls, but this woman's breastesses was biggern my head, an a man oughtn't be greedy bout that.

I would been more impressed if her titties was biggern ole Ned's ears.

- -- I sez what in tarnation's goin on here? Cuz if there's somethin I thought I'd never see it'd be a coupla otherwise fine ladies, well one otherwise fine lady an one real ugly lady, settlin intuh some unnatural acts. Special down in the projects uh Fayettville.
 - -- Did ya smack em in the heads?

Sometimes Cephus gets a lil crass for me. Since he quit the sixth grade las year I can't hardly tolerate him nomore. I know I ought not say such bout my lil brother, but I figger I can probly make it through the high school an I don't see no reason for him tuh quit now. We'll see how the ninth grade goes. Mebbe Cephus gots the right idea.

Ned chuckles a lil, or mebbe that's a cough, too, but at any rate he sez

-- Nosir, boy, ya don't smack a woman aroun for foolin with another woman. I just got shet uh muh britches an jumped on in.

Cephus busts out laughin, which comes out like a bunch uh throat farts, an Ned chimes in, wavin that gun an chokin.

- -- Shit, Ned, how many women you think you fucked?
- -- Hell, son, by the time I was your age I fucked more gals than you picked scabs.

I was standin outside the door an Ned's in there along with some woman or another. I don't member how come I was buggin Ned like that, but I figger I had some good reason. I knew I weren't sposta bug Ned when his door was shet but I did anyway, cuz I wanted tuh play Star Wars an I needed Ned tuh play Han.

-- Ned! Ned! I be Chewie you be Han Solo.

I held ontuh my Luke guy. I member when Momma and Daddy got me that Luke guy fer my seventh birthday an Daddy was pissed off cuz he thought no boy needed no doll. That's how he called it – my Luke guy was some lil doll to im. I dint tell em I really wanted a Han or, even more, a Chewie. I figgered I's lucky tuh get anythin Star Wars at all.

-- Kay, I be Luke an you can be Darth Vader!

A shoe hit the door, leastways sounded like somethin heavy an it made a smack. I heard a woman gasp a lil an I figgered Ned's mos definitely not gonna come out an play Star Wars with me.

Momma was cookin supper in the kitchen, so I headed over tuh see if I could get her tuh play wit me.

- -- Momma, I need somebody play Star Wars with me!
- -- Run along, find your brother.
- -- But I let you be Princess Leia. I can be Lando.
- -- Go on, you wanna eat don't ya?
- -- Er you coul be Princess Leia an I can be R2.
- -- Ya keep bothern me an I'll call up yer father.

I knew Daddy weren't nowhere near the bay, but I went on outside tuh find Cephus out by the water, squishin crawdads with a hammer. He was scratchin at some lice he had left in is hair an was covered in redgreen guts all over.

- -- Wanna squish some crawdads, Hacksaw?
- -- Wanna play Star Wars?
- -- Who can I be?
- -- I'll be Han Solo. You be Luke.
- -- I don't wanna be Luke.
- -- Well, you gotta be somebody. Who you wanna be?
- -- I wanna be the trash compactor.
- -- But if you be the trash compactor, then I gotta be Luke.
- -- I hate Luke.
- -- Me too.
- -- You know what the trash compactor does?

He hit me in the head with the hammer.

The Story Uh My Birth An How I Got My Name

by Hacksaw J. Duggett

When I was born it was a dark an stormy night. My Daddy was down inna shed, puttin together my crib when a light shown through the winder. He looked out the winder but there weren't nothin tuh see out there cept rain an more rain poundin on the glass. He went back tuh hacksawin off the ole nailheads that's stickin outta the wood. Daddy likesta say all about how he hadda take apart a perfect good chicken coop tuh make me a place tuh lay my little baby head, an all about how he hadda give up fresh eggs fer breakfast an later on, once Cephus was outta the crib, Daddy took it all apart an turned it back intuh a fine ole birdhouse. Momma sez it weren't no big deal tuh get rid uh the coop on account uh all the chickens was dead fore I came along. When Momma sez that, Daddy jumps in bout how he never did catch whatever it was snatchin up his chickens but now he gots it all fixed up cuz he put some tight chickenwire fencin up over the whole thing.

So Daddy was in there cuttin off nailheads an whistlin some Hank Williams Jr. tuh isself. Daddy loves Hank Williams Jr. most as much as he loves fresh eggs. An he says he kept seein this light shinin in off the bay. He kept goin tuh the winder an then over tuh the door an checkin, but he don't see nothin out there. Finally, an it must been gettin late cuz Daddy says he was almost finishin up for the night, he seen this light reflectin off the inside uh the shed an he says it looked like it's gettin closer, like a car with just one headlight or a motorbike or somethin was comin straight off the bay towards the shed. Daddy turned round just soon nuff so that he seen the light real close, real bright, outside the winder an then he heard this sorta thud-scrape at the corner uh the shed an the light moved off. Daddy sez he was gonna go over tuh investigate, but just when he turned around, inna midst uh all that startle and fright, he forgot tuh quit cuttin an sawed off is left thumb.

Daddy let out a howl, an wrapped a turpentine rag round his thumb, cording tuh Momma, an then howled agin an ran outta the shed. He tripped in a rut outside the door, an cordin tuh him there weren't ever no rut there before. He sez somebody er somethin

was out there that night an he don't know what. Momma sez he ain't fibbin an that the rut was still there, only all dried up, when they got back from the hospital, cept I guess it was strange cuz the rut dint have no tire tracks or nothin like that in it, just smooth-pressed mud a few feets wide.

At any rate, Momma heard the ruckus an come runnin out into the rain all pregnant an ready tuh pop, wavin round a flashlight. Daddy was comin up on er all covered in mud an holdin up is hand. She goes runnin down tuh im an slips on the same rut, cept closer tuh the house and runnin in a different direction. She falls down ontuh er behind an that's when she starts feelin them pains that let er know she hadda get tuh the tub an quick.

She shed er britches an got inna tub while Daddy got isself all cleaned up an held a rag over his thumblessness. He brung in er sewing kit, an she sewed up is wound while pushin me out intuh the warm water. Daddy sez he looked at me, squirmin there on my back, all red an angry, an he thought how much I lookt like his hurt hand – we was both all red an angry, with little tufts uh hair-like stuff stickin out the top. So they named me Hacksaw tuh commemorate the moment.

Cephus an I are cleanin out that snapper in this holler near the mouth uh the bay that we found long time ago. Cephus likesta turn em intuh ashtrays, an we got a lotta ashtrays inna holler.

- -- Why you quit school, Cephus?
- -- Shit. What they gonna teach me there?
- -- You ever gonna leave here?
- -- Oh yeah. I figger I wanna fuck all kindsa gals.
- -- No women comin here.
- -- Nope. Jes ole Ned an is imagination.
- -- You think he really had sex with all those women?
- -- Dunno. You think he dint?
- -- Dunno.

Cephus flicks a cigarette butt out intuh the lake. A fish comes up an snatches it off the surface.

-- Ima go show this tuh Ned.

Cephus heads out, leavin me there leanin up against the bank. I can't see the dock less I poke up my head outta the holler, but I can see the white trotlines stretched over the bay, thin lines goin down intuh the water. At the end uh each line is a treble hook with some chicken guts on it. Catfish like chicken guts, an Daddy pulls up each uh the lines at night an that's the food we live off. He gots lines hid all over the lake, so he goes an tends them durin the day an sells the fish an such an that's our money. He sez he likes it that way: no boss an no company an no rules cept is own. Sez a man gots tuh be governed by is ownself.

I light up a smoke an notice a lil john boat floatin towards the mouth uh the bay, edgin along the side close tuh me an filled with a girl, bout my age, but not from around here, I can see that.

Ned was smokin a cigarette an scratchin isself on the couch. Daddy's sittin there in is Lay-Z-Boy sorta watchin tv, sorta sleepin. Momma was all pregnant with Cephus,

cept we thought Cephus was gonna be an Emmy or Lucy so that's what everbody called im forehand. We're watchin M*A*S*H.

-- How come they call er Hotlips? There somethin wrong with er?

Momma wiped a damp cloth cross er head an looked down at me. She looked all tired, like she does mosly after fixin dinner an doin dishes.

- -- There's nothin wrong with her, sweetie. That's just er nickname's all.
- -- They call er that cuz she's a slut, boy. Mos women's all sluts.
- -- Ned, you don't go fillin that boy's head with all that. Mos women ain't sluts, sweetie.
- -- I tell ya, I knew this one gal, coulda called er hotlips cuz she coul make a ole man cry out usin jus er mouth.

The idea scared me.

- -- Ned, I tol you once tuh quit yer jabberin on. You don tell no three year ole bout no women you been with. There's plenty time for im tuh figger it out on is own.
 - -- Good thing you gettin a girl. Won't hafta raise this one up like a sissy.
 - -- Momma, how come that guy gots girl clothes?

She pulls the skiff up towards the bank, which is all sandy an spotted with smooth stones like they was put there tuh look like precious gems. She gots short hair, parted down the middle an not past er chin, wavin like a big ole wave in the front an kinda hangin over one eye. Er shirt says "Echo and the Bunnymen" on it, er shorts are striped, white an reglar jeans color, an er shoes are turquoise cept where they're ripped an then they're bright yellow, an they got ink writin all over em. On the tip uh one toe it says "Left" an on the other it says "Right."

- -- Hi.
- -- Hey.

Lookin right at me, she gots eyes that go straight tuh the part that feels funny when I poke my finger as deep intuh my bellybutton as I can. It gives me this quivery, sorta nauseous feelin an makes me kinda hafta pee all at the same time.

- -- You live here?
- -- Yep.

- -- I'm Beatrice. You can call me Bea.
- -- Don't know no one named Beatrice.
- -- Do now. What's your name?
- -- Hacksaw.
- -- Hacksaw? That's a strange name.
- -- Yep.

Er chest. I mean, her breasts. I mean, she's got the mos perfect tits I ever saw. Ned sez you can tell what a woman will be like in bed cordin tuh what kinda tits she's got. Ned always calls em tits, though Momma calls em breasts most always an Cephus likes the word boobs. Anyhow, Ned sez that women with big, lazy tits is lazy in bed, an a woman with perky tits (an me an Cephus has argued bout what kinda tits is perky tits, but that's how Ned calls em) gets all riled up in bed. Ned sez women with perky tits fuck like bunnies.

- -- You like Echo and the Bunnymen?
- -- What?
- -- You were staring at my shirt. D'you like 'em?
- -- Uh, sure. Yeah.

She looks me over a second. I'm in my cutoffs an workboots, no shirt cept the skeeter bites coverin mos ever inch uh me. All uh sudden I'm real conscious uh how my fingertips is all stained brown from smokin an I ain't combed my hair in a coupla days.

-- You wanna pull me in?

Bea tosses a rope tuh me, an I pull the boat in. Once it's in the shallow I tie it up tuh a piece uh driftwood we use for sittin. She gets out an comes up ontuh the beach, sneakers squeekin from the water.

- -- You live here, right?
- -- Yeah, jus over yonder. Good thing you dint get no further inna bay.
- -- How come?
- -- Uncle Ned's a lil touched. He might try tuh shootcha, thinkin yer a spotlighter er messin with the trotlines.
 - -- When's it get dark round here?
 - -- Couple hours, I spose. What you gonna do inna dark?

- -- I'm looking for a certain kind of animal.
- -- Where you from?
- -- I'm from Illinois. My father's a professor at the University up in Champaign. Been there?
 - -- Nope.
- -- That's okay. It's really not too exciting. Not like around here. Anyway, he's here to study the riparian areas around the lake. He's an ecologist.
 - -- Zat like a doctor?
 - -- Kind of. But for the environment.
 - -- Oh.
- -- Well, it's pretty boring. That's why I'm not going to follow in his footsteps when I get older.
 - -- Yeah? You got plans?
 - -- I'm going to be a cryptozoologist.
 - -- Yeah?
 - -- I'm looking for an animal.

I don't know much bout universities an doctors an such, but I know all bout the critters that live round here. I been bit by most uh em, an et the rest fer dinner at one time or another. Sides, when she talks her mouth moves like the water on a calm night an gets me all caught up on the inside.

- -- I'll help ya look.
- -- Do you see many snakes around here?
- -- Shoot, there's snakes all round. Can't haul in a dropline without pullin out a copperhead er cottonmouth er somethin.
 - -- Well, I'm not looking for anything that common. But you wanna help?
 - -- Yep.
- -- Okay. I'm going out tonight. It's more of a night time thing, really, if that's okay with you, but I think it'll be easier to find in the dark.
 - -- What're you lookin fer agin?

Ned sez when a woman giggles it's one uh two things, either she's plottin the fall uh man er she's gotta itchin in er britches.

-- I'll bring you a paper I wrote about it. You can read can't you? Again with the giggles.

-- I'm kidding. I'm sorry. That was cruel. Of course you can read.

An write. Fer some reason, maybe it's the way she traces er fingers long the words on the tips uh er shoes, I don't mind that she's laughin at me. She coul spin me tuh hell with a smile like ers, an I wouldn't mind a bit.

Over on the dock Ned fires a shot. He hoots zif he's het.

-- Boy! C'mon an clean this critter.

Bea cranes her neck up over the edge uh the holler.

- -- Sounds like you're wanted.
- -- Bout like it.
- -- Meet me hear at dark?
- -- Yep.

Ned's smokin an Cephus scrapes snapper guts outta the shell. He's all bent over lookin like a monk on account uh the bald spot Momma left when she pulled the ringworm off is head. Ned fingers is trigger an looks at me zif I done somethin real bad.

- -- Boy, I dint figger you cood make me so proud inna place like this.
- -- Sorry.
- -- Don be sorry, boy. I seen you talkin tuh that lil filly. Lookt a might strange tuh me, but ya'll is a new generashun I spose.
 - -- You gotta girlfrin Hacksaw?

Cephus squeals an he's got tobacco stuck all over is yaller teeth.

- -- Leave im lone. Yer first time's yer best, specially since I done taught ya everthin I ever knew. You been listnin all this yeahs, hain't ya boy?
 - -- You gonna fuck er Hacksaw?
- -- Course he gonna fuck er. Here lemme relate tuh ya'll bout somethin we cood all learn from.

Uncle Ned an Henry Miller

By Hacksaw J. Duggett

Ned ran moonshine fer a time. He dint have too big uh distrobutionship, just im an is neighbors mainly, but, cordin tuh Ned, times was different than what they is now an shine was illegal. I guess Ned was kinda like the Dukes uh Hazard that way.

Anyway, Ned an is buddy, Reid, would make runs in Ned's ole beat up Ford. The winders was all broke outta that truck, an it was missin the driver's side fender an quarter panel, so it was pretty much impossible tuh drive inna rain. They went over bout a hunert-fifty miles tuh ole Henry Miller's place tuh pick up a truckload uh good sour mash.

Now, the way Ned tells it, Miller was notorious for waterin down his shine, but he was the only guy for three hunert miles. So Ned an is buddy Reid go tuh get a truckload uh moonshine, cept it started rainin just fore they got tuh Miller's house an they showed up all wet an Ned's face was all covered with mud on account uh the no fender an all. They went head an loaded up the back with big five gallon jugs an put a tarp over all uh it, but when they finished up it was still pourin down just as hard as fore, even harder. Miller knew Ned an Reid couldn't make it home in the downpour, so he offered em a place tuh stay. He said:

-- We jus got a new bed for the baby, but she kin sleep in er crib. Y'all kin share it.

Miller's place was just one big room with three beds, a kitchen cranny off tuh one side an a outhouse in the back. Mrs. Miller, who Ned sez had great big tits the size uh a watermelon, an their older daughter Daisy, who Ned sez had big tits liker mother, cooked up a fine ole dinner an Miller kept insistin that they drink more an more moonshine til he passed out. Ned an Reid, who knew Miller's habit uh waterin down the liquor, had checked the bottles in the back uh the truck an, sure nuff, the potency weren't near what Miller's personal supply was. So Ned sez they was rightly pissed off, an with good reason, too. They both knocked off after the Millers had an lay there together in that bed, listenin tuh Mrs. Miller snorin an simmerin on what kinda ripoff they had suffered.

Finally, Reid had nuff uh thinkin an decided that he was gonna get Miller back. He tol Ned that he was gonna fuck that gal Daisy right there in the room while her daddy was sleepin. Ned thought that was a hoot an lay quietly while Reid got outta bed an slid in with the girl. Cordin tuh Ned, Daisy'd been makin eyes at Reid all night long, on account uh Reid was the best specimen uh man Ned had ever known. Fore long he could hear em goin at it, makin muffled moans an squeakin the mattress a lil.

Ned was happy cuz Reid was his best friend an best friends deserve tuh get laid, but he was also pissed off cuz he figgered he deserved some just as much as his buddy did. He lay there waitin an schemin an waitin for a chance tuh get a little revenge uh his own. Then, Mrs. Miller got up outta bed an headed out tuh use the facilities.

Ned saw his chance. He slipt outta bed real quiet an moved the cradle from the head uh Mr. and Mrs. Miller's bed an put it at the head uh his bed. Then he slid back under the blankets an waited.

Mrs. Miller come in feelin around fer the cradle. She found it an got in the sack without realizin it was Ned the whole time he kept whisperin rhymes in er ear. Fore long he's givin er the up an down, as he sez, an then they were both tuckered out an asleep.

Soon after all that, Reid woke up happy an proud that his plan came off so well. He crept outta Daisy's bed an felt round fer Ned. He stumbled on the cradle first, so he headed over tuh the other bed, where ole Mr. Miller was sleepin alone. Reid leaned over an tapped im on the shoulder

-- That'll teach Miller. I just fucked his daughter, an how!

Miller came up outta that bed like epicac an Reid screamed. Mrs. Miller woke up, took one look at Ned, who she thought was her husband, an screamed. Daisy was screamin just cuz everbody else was, an the baby's screamin cuz that's what babies do. Ned an Reid hauled ass outta the shack just ahead uh Miller, who stopped tuh put on is boots an grab is rifle, cept by the time he got outside there weren't nothin left but a pair uh muddy ruts.

An that's why Ned sez men should never ever take yer shoes off, specially not in bed.

In these parts the night comes like a fever – all hot an sweaty an things don't look right er normal. Momma cooks us up some catfish an crawdads that Cephus picked outta the bay. Daddy don't get in til the dusk is hightailin it out the backdoor, so we all set til he gets there. Finally, he sets down in is chair, not botherin tuh wash the bait slime off is hands or shed is work shirt, an goes tuh work on is meal. I watch im eat, can't help it cuz I'm drawn tuh is stump. There's a lil bit uh bone left after the joint an it moves round beneath is skin, makin is scar look like boilin flesh. I always half spect somethin tuh come poppin outta it. Daddy shoves imself back from the table, tells us all tuh thank Momma fer makin such good food, an heads back out. Soon after I'm hot-footin it over tuh the holler.

- -- You meetin that girl Hacksaw?
- -- You can't tag along.
- -- Whatchyall doin?
- -- Don't know.
- -- You guys gonna do it Hacksaw?
- -- Don't know.
- -- Yer a pussy Hacksaw.

Cephus throws a rock an it hits me in the back uh the leg. I turn round, scoopin up a stone, but the night is all that's there, up tuh the shack where some light squeeks out tween the cracks. There's light comin from the bay, too. The johnboat comes slidin up tuh the holler, silver skin bouncin moonlight ontuh the water, an she's standin there, dressed all in black now, holdin out an oar fer me tuh grab hold uh.

- -- Here. You steer.
- -- Row?
- -- Whatever. I figure you'll be able to take us where we need to go.
- -- Where's that?
- -- Mostly just everywhere. Around. I mean, it could be almost anywhere so I guess just take me on a tour.
 - -- A tur.

Been bout everwhere round the lake, mosly hikin long the shore with Cephus gathern up crawdads an snappers, snakes an other stuff we find. I paddle up toward Skinner's Cove. I figger she'll wanna see the spaceship.

- -- What's that thing?
- -- Flyin saucer.
- -- Wow. Like from an alien?
- -- Nope. Bilt outta Pepsi cans.
- -- Wow. Tell me about it.
- -- Don't know nuthin bout it.

Skinner's a champion toadsucker, past few years runnin, last I heard. One time me an Cephus went down tuh the Cove tuh get some crawdads an lookit the saucer. The ole man was there drinkin a Pepsi an holdin a toad all sprawled out on is knee. He rubbed it on its belly an was talkin tuh the critter all soft tellin it what a good toad it was an how they were gonna go with the space friends an how he just hoped the space men was as sweet an lovable as is toad. The toad's name was Q-Bert.

We was hidin in the grass, amongst the chiggers and the sweet clover, hangin ontuh pillow cases full uh squirmin river bugs. Cephus said he was gonna go ask that guy for a Pepsi an said I was a pussy if I didn't come too. So we went over tuh Skinner an Cephus marched up on im so fast he jumped a lil an scrambled tuh catch Q-Bert.

-- Say, mister, can we get a Pepsi?

Skinner squinted up at us. He gots real big lips that stick out past is nose an look like they're glued tuh is mustache. He grinned real big an reached down intuh the cooler he had side is stump.

-- Sho ya'll kin get a Pepshi, but ya gotta drink em heah an leave the can fer me.

He shoved forward two cans an we took em. He took a big swig, while we cracked ours open, an followed it up with a belch. Later on Cephus figgered Skinner coulda said the alphabet up tuh G er H in that burp.

-- Ya'll evah lookie up uh Pepshi can?

We looked at ours, turnin em round an tryin tuh see somethin speshul.

-- I mean, ya'll evah think bout what that mean?

He gets close an looks at us all crazy.

-- Shee heah, P fer Peesh, E fer Evree, P gin fer Pershun, ESH fer Sherch, I fer Inwurd. Getit? Peesh Evree Pershun, Sherch Inwurd.

We nodded.

Then again, real slow zif tuh make us understand better he sez:

-- Peesh Evree Pershun, Sherch Inward

An then he winks at us.

Cephus slurped on is pop an I felt water runnin out the corner uh the pillow case where it hit my knee, washin lil bits uh silt an crawdad shits down intuh my boot. Skinner held up is toad.

-- Wanna see sumpthin?

An he stuffed the toad, head first, intuh is mouth. That really bothered Cephus cuz he ain't but heard uh toadsuckin an he started quiverin like he does when he gets real upset. He took a long slug an eyed that grinnin fool, lips stretched over that toad's belly an its legs all stickin out an movin like it's swimmin. Cephus drained that soda an dropped the can on the ground. Then he socked Q-Bert right in the ass.

We took off an were outta there fore Skinner got up off is stump an started bellerin. I always wondered if that toad was okay, but I guess it don't much matter. Ned said people like that deserve tuh get beat so they know not tuh act funny in front uh other people.

We float the lake fer hours. Skinner ain't out, but the light's on in is trailor. Bea dint bring no light cuz she said the Uktinner had a light uh its own an wouldn't come near if it saw us. Fer awhile she just tells me all about the big snake an how she wants tuh find it an how it would be a big scientific deal an everthin. I keep noticing that she uses er hands tuh tell er story an how er mouth looks when she makes Os.

I row round til I can't row no more, then I let her row an we visit all the lil coves I've ever been tuh an a few I'm not sure bout. Pretty soon we're just driftin on the open lake, layin back on the floor uh the johnboat. We just sit an talk bout nothin in particular cuz it's late an we're wore out, watchin all over for strange lights. Pretty soon she's leanin ginst me an has er head up next tuh mine.

-- You don't talk much.

She gives me this look like I don't know if I pissed er off er what. Then I member something Ned tol me, that if a woman looks at a man in is eyes all steady then that means she's horny. He said that's how ya know if a woman's ready.

-- Should I kiss you now?

An she kisses me. I almost throw up, but I choke back the big chunks an try tuh get my arm under er, but er coat gets in the way. She pulls back from me an lets me put my arm around er. She wants me.

-- Yes.

She giggles an kisses me on the nose. She's still lookin right at me an I can see mysef reflected back in the curve uh her eye. My head looks inflated like a balloon. Agin, she's kissing me an I'm kissing er back. I think she wants me tuh have sex with er. She rubs er hand on my shirt.

-- You seem really strong. Do you row a lot?

Er fingers bounce off the bumps uh my ribs. She does want me. I take a deep breath.

-- D'you wanna have sex?

She gives me another look like the one before, but different too.

-- No.

I'm surprised. But, then agin, we ain't been at it long.

- -- What?
- -- No.
- -- You sure?
- -- I do not want to have sex with you.

She scoots away an crosses er arms.

- -- Ned sez when they say no they probly mean no.
- -- Yeah?
- -- Cept he sez you can usually talk em intuh yes.

She laughs an er arms wrap me up again.

-- You don't listen to Ned anymore. And before you convince anybody of anything you'll have to start talking.

- -- Ned sez men who talk too much are
- -- Ned talks too much.
- -- women.

A light shines cross one uh the bays. Bea jumps up tween the oars an starts pullin the boat along. I crane my neck tuh follow the light.

-- I'm sure that's it. You think so Hacksaw?

We're pulling close tuh the mouth uh the bay. Just as we get tuh the inlet a shot bangs out over the lake. I grab ontuh the oars an stop er rowin.

- -- Them's spotlighters, Bea. We ain't goin over there.
- -- How do you know it's not someone shooting at it?

A second later we hear the hoots an howls uh the drunken hunters.

-- They shine a light at the animal, blind it an then shoot it. Mosly they drink beer. She slumps her shoulders an drops the oars. I grab em up an take us out tuh the open lake.

-- I ought get home.

An I row us over tuh the holler. I tell er I'll help er look tomorruh night. She likes that an gives me a kiss goodnight. I watch er float off intuh the dark. It's quiet an I hope she don't bump intuh no Uktinner, no spotlighters, nothin bad er hurtful. I slip in the winder. Cephus is snorin on is bed. I ride the drone intuh the night thinkin uh snakes an Cherry Coke.

Beatrice Riel Mrs. Hunt March 15, 1987 Social Studies Third Period

Search for the Allusive Uktena

Long ago American Indians beleived the land we now call America was full of magical creatures. All kind of storeis and legends told of magical creatures inhabiting the land, and these creatures were also a part of American Indian religon. Which believed the snake had saved there children and could tell the future.

One of these cretures was the Uktena; a giant snake with fethers and horns and a light shining on it's head.

The light was made from a crystal, and if you catch one you can see the future. While we know that in modern times that these store are only imaginary, it is still very probable that some rare creatures actully exist.

Dr. Eduardo Mendrosa has been studying what he calls, "Recent sightings of giant snakes". He says that the giant snake has been sighted in the Amazon, Central America, Mexico and the American Southeast. All of these places are connected to America. He says that in Mexico the giant snake was called Quetzalcoatl in the religons that were there before the civilazation was there. In America it was called the Uktena.

If people are sighting creatures like this in other countreis that are connected to America then they must be in America too.

We should look for them so we can save them and so they will not go extinct like those that we killed. And so we can see our future.

-- Boy, c'mere.

It's early morning an the bay jumps with light. Mist floats over the water an the air smells like frozen fish.

Ned's grabbin fer Cephus so I stop pushin is chair.

-- Dammit boy, git yore ass ova heah. You gots somethin on yore neck.

Cephus bends down an Ned fingers a swole up tick on the back uh is neck. Ned pulls out is pocketknife an grabs at me with is other hand.

-- Git yore lighter an hol it up fer me.

I hold the flame for im an he manages tuh heat up the tip uh is blade. He puts one hand on the back uh Cephus' head tuh steady isself an holds the point close tuh the tick's head, buried deep in Cephus' neck. Cephus jerks is head.

-- Goddammit boy, hol still.

The tick eventually backs out. Ned's happy with isself an replaces is pocketknife. Cephus rubs an hisses at the small burns an nicks he gots on is neck.

-- Quit yore whinin boy, ya cry lak a girl. Yore just singed a lil's all.

Cephus lays down on the dock an splashes water up over is neck. Ned looks out on the lake.

-- How'd yore date go boy?

He gots hair comin out is nose.

-- Alright.

An is ears.

-- Ye got home late. Spose thas good, eh?

His eyes are sunk intuh is head.

-- Spose.

His lobes most touch is shoulders.

-- Gittin smart with me boy?

There's just a brown splotch left where is hair was.

-- Nossir.

He can't walk.

-- So did ya getit er not?

He's goin crazy slowly.

-- No.

He talks too loud.

-- Nothin tuh be shame uv. Always next time.

Bea come up tuh the holler just after dark an picks me up in er shiny little johnboat. She sez we should go in the opposite direction we went last night so I row us over tuh the far end uh the lake. She sits there in er cutoffs an er funny shoes are folded down so there's a big yaller stripe round the top uh em. Er knees gots scars on em an er shins gots a couple fresh scabs. She picks a lil at one uh em an just looks an smiles at me an watches me row til we're out inna middle uh the lake away from shore or lights or anythin. Then she leans forward an says real low:

- -- I'm leaving tomorrow.
- -- Yeah?
- -- My dad's job's done. We're going to California, then Phoenix and then home in time for school.
 - -- Huh. That ain't no good.
 - -- Nope.

She looks out over the lake, up at the stars, not at me.

- -- You gon get all quiet on me?
- -- Did you say more than three words?
- -- I'll say a whole lot more n that fore you head out.
- -- You stopped rowing.

I look round onna lake. I can see two spotlights cross in the distance.

- -- Nothin out but spotlighters.
- -- Don't you want to find the Uktena?
- -- Spen all night lookin fer some big ole snake er else sittin an talkin with you?

She looks up at me an meets me inna eyes. At first she gots big ole sad eyes lookin like they gonna spill over tuh fill up the boat an sink us both, but while she looks at me, sittin an grinnin, all gap-toothed an goofy, extra hard fer her benefit, a smile comes creepin out the corners uh her face.

-- We can talk.

So we talk. Most all night we talk, an I tell er bout Ned an Cephus an Momma an Daddy. She sez that er daddy gots girlfriens all over an that's what they go tuh big cities fer. She sez they stay overnight, tween planes, an er daddy takes all kinds uh trips all the time while she's in school, so she stays home an goes tuh school an everthin by herself. Er momma divorced er daddy a long time ago an took off down tuh some country in South America tuh climb mountains an find lost cities. She sez she ain't ever met a boy like me an I tell er I ain't never met a boy like me either an she laughs. She laughs at me lots, but I don't mind, cuz evertime she does it makes me feel all light in my stomach. She calls me sweet a lot.

-- It's getting late, isn't it.

I look up at the moon zif I can tell the time.

- -- Yep. Past my bedtime, I spose.
- -- I guess we should get going.
- -- So you ain't gonna wanna have sex, tonight, right?
- -- Don't think so.
- -- That's okay. Just figgered I ought ask.

I take up the oars an row us back toward the bay. Long the way it looks like the stars fell down intuh the lake in a perfect line goin right up past the holler. We come round the mouth an I can see a spotlight out cross the bay an Cephus an Ned up on the dock. The light's shinin right at em an Cephus keeps walkin out tuh the end uh the dock, pushin Ned's chair ahead uh im. Ned's screamin at im tuh stop an starts shootin .22 shells at the light, which moves in on em.

Bea grabs my arm an whispers in my ear.

-- That's it. That's it.

I squint an as my eyes recover from the brightness I can see it ain't no spotlighters out there inna bay. It's a great big snake with a light shinin out is forehead an big ole horns like a deer's antlers on the top uh is head. It's got feathers all over an they reflect the stars back at us. Ned shoots is load at the snake, who skims over the water towards the dock.

POW! an I can hear the echos all cross the bay.

The Uktinner comes up on im an swallers up the chair an is bottom half in one gulp. Ned shoves the rifle right up tween that snake's eyes. Ned's face is all squished up an wallerin bout how that sucker gonna get on back tuh hell wherefore he came an Ned's gonna be the one tuh send it there. Ned pulls that trigger, an the blast cuts up the night like it were rainin Christmas tree lights. Little shards uh that bright, shinin scale in the middle uh the Uktinner's head plink intuh the water. The shot sends crud all over Ned, an the big snake drags im down under. Cephus falls off the dock an splashes intuh the water. The light is gone, and all I can see is the little dancin remains of all those shimmerin pieces. For a second it is quiet.

Then I'm screamin an Bea's screamin.

I get back tween the oars an pull us over tuh the dock. Momma runs intuh the water an pulls Cephus all sputterin an dazed outta the shallows. Those two hurry up intuh the house. Me an Bea sit on what's left uh the dock, watchin the moon goin over and under the clouds, an shiverin.

Hacksaw,

Hope you had a great summer. I had a good time with Dad in California. School's busy, how's yours? Met another boy like you. I think you'd like him.

Friends Forever,



Hacksaw

420 Dugget Bay

Tarradíddle, TR

30303

The Arizona Jackalope One of the most most mysterious and elusive animals of the American Southwest

Tenderness

Outside Coleman's Café, Kurtzweld Karstinicz hitches up his pants and checks the pistol in the back of his waistband. His Stroh's t-shirt creeps up under his dirty brown cardigan, stained with bongwater and raspberry filling. His moustache hasn't quite grown in, and his brow furrows under dishwater bangs. He snorts, then spits, then coughs, then scratches his ass. The building stands alone, abutting a gravel parking lot, empty except Kurtzweld's 1982 Honda Civic. It's a wooden building that has been standing on the outskirts of Tarradiddle County for the last half century. Every year the cracks between the panels grow and the corners of aluminum signs advertising Dr. Pepper and Sunbeam bend a little. He pushes into the door, then pulls it open and steps into the café-cumconvenience store.

Inside Coleman's, the light hits the floor running. Kurtzweld surveys the place, which is divided into two halves. On the left is the convenience store. Four rows rise shoulder high, perpendicular to a short counter that supports cigarette displays, barrels of beef sticks, an old cash register, and a fair portion of the younger Coleman's belly. On the right a counter stretches the length of the building. There are no tables or booths in the café, just a coffee counter serviced by haggard stools. Coleman, the senior, is at the far end of the counter working a crossword puzzle from a book and drinking coffee.

Kurtzweld takes the stool furthest from the old man. The younger Coleman nods at him and squeezes out from behind the till, dragging his bum leg across the wooden floorboards. He rounds the counter and pulls a cup from the rack below.

-- Coffee?

Kurtzweld nods and mumbles an affirmation. He pulls a napkin from the dispenser.

-- Gotta pen?

Coleman takes a ball point from his shirt pocket.

-- Give it back. It's my only one.

He fills Kurtzweld's cup, then goes to the end of the counter to fill his father's cup. The senior looks up and jabs his pencil into his ear, skewering a log of wax.

Kurtzweld bites his lip and puts pen to napkin. He scrawls.

-- Whatcha writin there son?

The senior leans toward Kurtzweld, craning his neck to see.

- -- Dat a love letter? Member that, son. Usta write love letters to yer momma on the napkins sometime.
 - -- Yep. I member.

Coleman, the younger, hobbles down in front of Kurtzweld, who lowers his eyes and shields the note from view. Coleman's lips part. He hitches up one cheek, then the other, showing his uneven teeth.

-- Whatcha got there, son? Nothin wrong with writin a little love letter. Mebbe we could help ya out there.

Kurtzweld twitches his head horizontally.

-- No thanks. I think I got it.

The younger raises an eyebrow and looks up toward his father.

- -- Thinks he's got it, pa.
- -- Trouble with these kids nowadays. Think they know it all. Probly don't know the first thing bout love letters, leavin all kinda things out.
 - -- You oughta listen to him, son. Taught me how to write a winner.
 - -- Whatcha need to do is put in somethin bout her lips.
 - -- They're red. Like a rose.
 - -- And somethin about her eyes.
 - -- They gotta be sparkling. And bottomless. And blue. Are they blue?
 - -- And her hair.
 - -- It's blond right?

The Coleman's turn to Kurtzweld expectantly.

-- I think I got it.

He pushes the folded note across the counter. Coleman picks it up and holds out his palm.

- -- Pen?
- -- Oh, yeah. Thanks.

Kurtzweld hands him the pen, which is carefully returned to Coleman's bulging chest pocket. He studies the note at arm's length. His lips move as he reads, and when he finishes he looks at Kurtzweld, then at his father. He clears his throat and looks Kurtzweld over.

-- Pa?

- -- Zit a good un, son? We got us a poet in the place?
- -- Sez here he wants to rob us.

The old man is surprised. His eyes widen, pushing rows of flesh up into his forehead. A long grin oozes across his face, and finally he spits out a cackle.

- -- The boy there wants to rob us?
- -- Sez, "This is a robbery. Put all yer money inna bag and hand it over."
- -- Well what the hell kinda note is that?

Kurtzweld looks away as the senior moves to the stool next to him. Coleman leans over the counter and holds it out for his father to examine.

- -- If you could just give me the money
- -- Now why should we give you anything? That cup uh coffee gonna cost you 52 cents.

Kurtzweld rubs his hand on the back of his neck and sighs. He reaches into his shirt pocket, brings out a pack of cigarettes and pushes one into his lips. Coleman, the younger, pulls a match across the counter and lights the smoke for him.

-- I gotta gun, y'know.

The old man pulls the gun from Kurtzweld's waistband and waves it in his face.

-- Course you gotta gun, son. I can see halfway down the crack uh yer ass there, an I could see when ya walked in ya hadda gun.

Kurtzweld grabs for the pistol, but is intercepted by the younger Coleman. The old man points at him with the gun, squinting.

-- I know you. Yer Trimbull's boy, ain'tcha?

Kurtzweld gives a shallow nod and looks down into his coffee. Coleman tops off the mug from the caraffe of decaf while Coleman, the elder, shakes his head in disbelief.

- -- Crazy world, huh pa? Mayor can't even raise up a decent robber.
- -- Could I just have the money?

The senior chuckles and wiggles his mug for a refill.

- -- Son, you member that last time we got robbed?
- -- Shore do.
- -- That boy come in here with a pair uh girly panties on his head.
- -- Them were hose, pa.
- -- Hose, panties. Ain't no different far as I see. Anyway, that's how come we couldn't recognize him. His face was all smooshed up in them things.
 - -- You should try that next time.
- -- And that boy were good, too. He weren't no beginner. He had his note all writ out fore he come in.
- -- He noted that he had a gun. That's important, y'know? You gotta let the clerk know where he stands in the situation.
- -- Yessir. He noted he had a gun, and that it was loaded. He were polite, too. Said thank you in his note and everything.
 - -- Yep.
 - -- So did you give him the money?
 - -- Naw. He didn't really have no gun, right pa?
 - -- Nope. He hadda water pistol shoved in his coat pocket.
 - -- Ain't there a book you could get on the subject?

-- Hell, I'd think it'd be hard growin up nowadays without knowin how to rob a store. What's wrong with you, boy?

Kurtzweld shakes his head. He begins to sob, and a teardrop falls into his coffee making a greasy rainbow swirl in the mug.

-- I dunno, sir.

Coleman, the younger, hands him another napkin.

- -- Aw, it's alright. You just need to study up a little. There's always tomorrow, y'know?
- -- That's right, son. You just gotta watch some of those films. Who's a good person to watch?
 - -- Hell, pa. There's about a million films about robbers and crooks.
- -- So you just study up and try again sometime later on, see? Everything's gonna be alright.

The old man pats Kurtzweld on the back. Kurtzweld wipes the tears from his eyes and smiles.

- -- Yeah. I spose so.
- -- That's the spirit, boy. Now you go on. Come see us when yer all ready.

Kurtzweld pushes himself up from the stool.

-- Thanks.

He turns to leave the store, then pauses.

-- Y'think I could have my gun back?

Coleman hands the pistol to him. Kurtzweld replaces it into his waistband.

-- Thanks again.

Kurtzweld leaves the café-cum-convenience store. The door bangs goodbye after him.

- -- Think he's gonna be alright, pa?
- -- Sure, son, sure. Just takes a little tenderness is all. Everbody needs a little tenderness.

Plastic

Tammy lives in filth.

Every day she wakes at 5:30 am. It takes a long time for her to rat her hair and apply layer after layer of foundation and cover-up and blue eyeliner and blush and rouge and mascara and lipstick and lip- liner and then she puts in fifteen of her earrings: six in the right ear and nine in the left.

She began piercing her ears when she was thirteen, which was the age her mother said she could start piercing her ears, and she hasn't stopped in the three years since. She gets together with her girlfriends -- Rhonda, Linda, Kerri-Ann, Joy -- and they perform the ritual, usually after somebody's boyfriend left one for the other or maybe the whole group altogether, which is the most unfortunate Right now there is a group of boys who hang out with the girls during school at Tarradiddle High. This group of boys is like a reservoir from which the five girls pick their prospective lovers, friends, prom dates and so on and so forth.

Joy began dating Leon who was best friends with Craig, so Craig began seeing Rhonda but that's radically different from dating because *seeing* people means you can still *see* other people, and that's exactly what Rhonda did, so Craig got mad and started *going out* with Kerri-Ann, which is much more serious than just *dating* because *going out* means that you are stuck that way for life or at least until something comes along to disrupt things, which is exactly what happened when Kerri-Ann's old boyfriend, Ronnie, pulled up on his brand new Honda Rebel 250. She left Craig for good.

Fortunately, Ronnie is a nice enough guy and helped Craig fix up his Honda Trail 90 and cut his hair short in front and long in back and that was enough for Linda to fall madly in love with Craig for almost three whole weeks, which is a considerable amount of time for a couple of kids from Tarradiddle in the tenth grade.

Joy and Leon had broken up awhile ago by this point in time, but they still went to homecoming together, and they would still make out in Rhonda's backyard after school even though Leon and Linda were *seeing* each other. Linda thought it was cute that both of their names started with *L* and she would roll them off of her tongue all day long:

- -- Leon Loves Linda
- -- Linda Loves Leon
- -- Leon Loves Linda
- -- Linda Loves Leon

This habit of Linda's was the main excuse Leon gave to Rhonda whenever she became the object of his affection in the backyard or at the movies or at homecoming or during lunch or whenever he felt he could talk her into going along with it.

Tammy, on occasion, has had over twenty seperate holes in her ears. During sleepovers she and her friends would sneak out into the kitchen, grab a cupful of ice and a potato, and then sit up until morning putting holes in each other's ears.

Linda felt comfortable letting Tammy pierce the cartilage:

- -- Okay, it's not my fault if your face gets paralyzed, okay?
 - -- Damn, Tammy, don't you think I trust you?
- -- No, yeah, I mean I know you trust me, but I've heard that sometimes it makes your face paralyzed.
 - -- Well, then, just don't do that, okay? Damn, what do y'all think?

Kerri-Ann and Rhonda were looking at Tammy's *Playgirl* that she had stolen out of her brother's room.

- -- You got this out of your brother's room, Tammy?
 - -- Wow, he's a weirdo, huh?
- -- My brother's okay...
 - -- Hello, girl, he looks at naked men.
- --So?
- -- 'So?' So you know what that means.
 - -- Tammy's brother's a faggot.
- -- You guys, shut up Shit, y'all act like you ain't never seen a faggot before.
 - -- Just at your house.
 - -- Tammy, my ear's numb enough I think.
- -- Just a sec.
 - -- You don't think it'll paralyze my face do you?
 - -- Who cares if it paralyzes your face, just hold your mouth open

like this

Rhonda makes an 'O' with her mouth.

-- Why?

-- Cuz this guy wants you, Linda.

And Rhonda holds up a beefcake centerfold, penis flaccid in his big, muscular hands

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Tammy dated from the reservoir of high school boys until fall of her tenth grade year. Linda turned sixteen just after school started and her father, Gilbert Spratt, the deal man, who was incredibly rich and powerful in Tarradiddle (Powerful enough that he leased the mayor, Trimbull Karstenicz, who worked part-time as a foreman on a construction crew, the minister, the doctor, the lawyer and the businessman in Tarradiddle cars with luxury interiors and electric amenities.) bought her a car.

The first Friday night of their driving lives passed uneventfully until they pulled around the back of Tarradiddle Technical University and found a group of older kids huddled around a keg, sitting like a fat, old man in the back of an old Chevy pickup. The pickup and the keg shell belonged to Lucas T. McBride, the toughest, lovinest, rockin and rollinest hunk of man in all of Tarradiddle, and Tammy fell in love immediately. With all three of them.

That night Tammy had all twenty-one earrings in. Gold plate, cheap silver, and cubic zirconians all nestled snugly in her swollen pink-green ears, glisten in the floodlights of the parking lot. Lucas noticed and said

-- This here looks infected

from behind her seat on the tailgate where she nursed a sixteen ounce cup of Bud Light. She shivered a little, not because it ever got cold at night in Tarradiddle, but because of his breath so close to the back of her neck.

- -- I'm Lucas. What's your name?
- -- Tammy.
- -- Well, Tammy, that's just gonna grow out of there anyway.

Lucas gently touched the uppermost earring -- a bit of green glass in a gold plated piercing stud. Tammy wouldn't let anybody pierce her through the cartilage, so a tiny strip of skin bulged on the outer edge of her ear, straining to hold in the metal.

- -- Whaddaya mean it's going to grow out?
- -- You pierce something like that, with just a little skin on the outside, and it's just gonna grow out, babe. I oughta know.
- -- You don't have any earrings
 - -- No, but look at this

Lucas pulled up his black Megadeth t-shirt to reveal a deformed left nipple

- -- See. That grew out in just a few weeks
- -- You pierced your nipple?
- -- Oh, yeah. That's what they do out in LA and stuff That's what all the real rockers do, y'know, none of that faggoty new wave right ear shit.
- -- I never seen that.
 - -- Well, like I say, they grow out.

Lucas sat down next to her on the tailgate.

- -- You should take a few of these out.
- -- Think so?
- -- Yeah, my cousin had a lot of earrings How many you got?
- -- Twenty-one.
- -- Julie, my cousin, had about that many and her ears got all infected real bad Turned all green and yellow, and pus just oozed all over and stuff, but she wouldn't take 'em out. Pretty soon she had to go to the doctor and get a shot it got so bad.
- -- What happened to her?
- -- Well, her ear, I don't remember which one, it got all floppy. Y'know, like a dog ear? And now it just sort of hangs there, all floppy and stuff, and they say they can't do anything about it. Don't matter, though, she's a dog anyway.
- -- Oh my God, that's so gross.

- -- Yeah, it was pretty bad. So you might think about taking some of those out, sure would be a shame if your pretty little ears got all floppy. Tammy shivered again.
 - -- You cold? Here, you can wear my jacket.

Lucas reached back into the truck bed to retrieve his black denim jacket from where it sat upon the sleeping bag that made its home just in front of the wheel-well for use in emergencies or drive-ins. Lucas had bought a t-shirt at the 1987 Monsters of Rock tour and decided that the cartoony version of Godzilla driving a monster truck was so cool it should be on the back of his jacket, so he cut out the front of the shirt to the size of that perfect, flat field of denim and stapled it on over the Ratt t-shirt he had stapled on over the Metallica t-shirt he had stapled on over the Van Halen stencil he had spraypainted on. All of this made it a heavy jacket, and Tammy could feel every ounce of it weigh on her shoulders when Lucas placed it there. It smelled of oil, beer, cigarettes and faint perfume around the collar.

- -- Who you here with?
- -- My friend, Linda.
 - -- Where is she?
- -- I don't know.

Tammy looked around the parking lot, but Linda's car was gone. Most of the cars were gone, and the remaining vehicles had veiled themselves with fogged windows and radio white noise for a deeper sense of privacy.

- -- Looks like you need a ride home. I'll take you.
- -- Thanks. That's real nice of you.
 - -- No sweat, babe.

Lucas escorted her to the passenger door, and, after securing the keg in the back, joined her in the cab. They drove to Tammy's house with Yngvie J. Malmsteen blaring from the tinny speaker in the dash

-- Because Malmsteen is a genius. Y'know, I play guitar, too.

and Lucas'

hand situated squarely on Tammy's knee. Lucas drove slowly, like he was hiding something, and she couldn't take her eyes off him. He had light brown hair, feathered across the top and curly and long in back. His biceps bulged every time he turned the wheel below the rolled up sleeves of his tight t-shirt. He wore tight jeans with bleach spots all over them (one right on the bulge in his crotch just like Robert Plant) and ripps in the knees. He talked about rock and roll and knew the names of so many bands. He told Tammy about his guitar, his band, his plans to fix up this old truck. When they rumbled to a stop in front of Tammy's driveway she asked

-- Am I gonna see you again?

Then he kissed her on the mouth, but no tongue.

-- You should lose some of the earrings, babe. Tammy smiles and nods.

-- What'd you pierce your nipple with?
-- Safety pin.

000

The Saturday after she met Lucas Tammy slept in until 2:00 in the afternoon, and only woke then because Linda called to make sure she got home alright.

- -- What the hell happened to you?
 - -- Do you remember that guy, Chuck?
- -- No
- -- Well, there was this guy, Chuck, there, and he and I were sitting in the car listening to the radio and stuff and then he said he knew this really cool place that we could go check out.
- -- What place?
- -- I don't know We never got there He was telling me to go on all these backroads and stuff, y'know out past Coleman's and up into the hills, but I think he was too drunk to know where he was going and then he puked.
- -- Where?
- -- All over. He kept leaning over and kissing my neck, and you know I was telling him to quit and all, and then he put my hand on his dick.
- -- He pulled it out?
 - -- No, but his pants were tight, honey.
- -- How big was it?
 - -- Huge
- -- Okay, go on.
- -- Yeah, so we were just driving along and I was giving him a handjob and all and then all of a sudden he just puked.
- -- In the car?
- -- Yeah, all over the dash mostly, but he got some on his dick and on my hand and everything. It was so gross, hon, I can't even begin to tell you. He kind of burped, then gurgled, then made this really weird face, I dunno, it was just gross. And then he just took off his shirt and started sopping it up and he was cryin' and all and sayin' how he was so sorry this and so sorry that and how he didn't usually puke and stuff.
- -- So what'd you do?
- -- I told my dad this morning that you got a bad milkshake at A&W and got sick, so he feels sorry for you and all. I just wanted to make sure if you come over and he asks you about it you know what he's talking about. He made Hank at the dealership clean it all up this morning. So if he asks, you got sick in the car last night, 'kay?
- -- 'Kay.

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5:30am

Tammy gets up to begin her routine of cosmetic application and general primping. She applies various creams and powders to cover up the daily eruption of irritated pores as well as the rotting corpses of those pores that had become irritated before. Her hair, while

generally wrangled into a scrunchie or banana clip on *staying home* days, is then structured and supported with liberal amounts of AquaNet and Stiff Stuff to form an always impressive flip of curled bangs that rises up from the ratted mess below. She ties a knot in her oversized t-shirt just above her hip so you can see the Wrangler tag on her back pocket.

6:00am

In the upstairs bedroom, Darryl Lipnick, Tammy's father, lies heavy next to his wife, Cheryl. The alarm buzzes. At six am, before Darryl has begun his shower, he is already soaked, and the bed where he slept smells musty, sweet, metallic.

6:20am

Darryl enters the kitchen where Tammy fixes breakfast, wiping the rolled up arm of his unbuttoned pale yellow shirt across his forehead. The sweat is already beginning to soak through the armpits. Darryl stands next to the table rolling his sleeves down and buttoning them.

- -- You iron this shirt?
- -- I iron all the shirts, daddy.
 - -- This one's wrinkled.
- -- Cuz you roll up your sleeves.
 - -- Yeah, well, you be sure to iron all my work shirts extra good, y'hear?
- -- Here's breakfast.

Tammy sets eggs, sausage, toast in front of him at the table.

-- Yolks are hard.

Tammy is thinking of Lucas McBride. She's decided he must work out after replaying the sight of his deformed left nipple. In that instant she saw his chiseled chest and washboard stomach, and just a little line of hair leading below his belt.

- -- I said, These yolks are hard.
- -- Oh, sorry.

7:04am

Tammy knocks gently on her older brother's door. Bruce graduated high school the year before but still lives at home. He has a job, or at least he has money most of the time, and is gone a lot of the time, sometimes for days or weeks on end. It's during these absences that Tammy sneaks in to steal his Playgirls, borrow his tapes and lay in his bed. Bruce's room is the nicest smelling room in the house. Tammy wonders where Bruce gets the time to keep his room so clean.

- -- Yeah?
- -- You up yet?
- -- Come in.
- -- I wanted to give you back your Smiths tape.
 - -- Thanks. You like it?
- -- Yeah, it was cool.

Bruce hadn't slept in his bed He sits at his Amiga 500.

- -- You just get home?
 - -- Awhile ago. You were in the shower.
- -- Where'd ya go last night?

- -- Out with a friend. Why?
- -- Just wonderin'.

7:23am

School. Tammy gets off the bus in the circle behind the school, and then walks around front where she sits in her spot on the planter that runs the length of the building. It's the same spot she sat in with all of her friends their first day in the tenth grade (as far away as you can get from the front doors) and, until the seniors graduate and the juniors vacate their spot for the seniors' spot (on the front steps), there is nowhere else for sophomores to sit before school.

Tammy sits waiting for everybody else to show up, but when she looks up towards the Kwik-Mart she notices that Lucas McBride is sitting in his truck. He is watching her. He is smiling at her. He is waving at her. He is beckoning her over to him. He is gorgeous. Tammy crosses the street

- -- Hi.
- -- You sure look pretty today. How 'bout you come on over and see my apartment.
- -- I got school.
 - -- So do I, but it's not stoppin' me. You never skipped school before?
- -- Yeah, I've skipped before.
 - -- Then let's go.

Tammy gets into the old Chevy. Motley Crue blares on the cheap speakers so loud she can barely hear Lucas telling her about the kegger they had at the park last night, about how some guy named Bo tossed a snapping turtle to some other guy named Mike and it bit him on the dick because Mike had decided to strip off all his clothes and Bo doesn't like to see other guys naked.

-- I mean, he really gets pissed off about that faggot shit, y'know.

Then

Chuck threw up all over some girl, but she was so drunk she just peeled off her shirt and rinsed the rest of the puke off with beer. Lucas continues his stories of booze and naked men and Vince Neil continues to belt out heartfelt songs about GIRLS GIRLS and long legs and burgundy lips. Tammy leans into the fuzzy seat cover and takes it all in. They pull into a gravel drive.

-- This is it, baby. Whaddaya think?

Tammy looks across the yard to the house.

- -- This whole place yours?
- -- Nah. I live back here. That house belongs to Mr. Karstenicz. He's a contractor.
- -- Oh, yeah, I think I seen those signs before.
 - -- Yeah. Helluva guy. Lets me live back here cheap while I'm in school.
- -- So this is your apartment?

They are standing at the door of the small building behind the much larger house.

-- Sure is . C'mon in, baby.

The first thing that comes to Tammy's mind upon entering the apartment is hamburger because the smell of fried meat is almost overwhelming, especially when mixed with the lingering sweetness of macaroni and cheese and Stetson cologne.

The apartment is a studio, kitchen to the left, living/sleeping area to the right and a bathroom in the rear middle. There are grease stains all over the wall above the stove, and dishes are overflowing the sink. Empty macaroni boxes and half-eaten tv dinners belch out of the garbage. A half eaten pizza sits, still in its box, on the coffee table in the living area which basically consists of a La-Z-Boy, the aforementioned coffee table, and an AudioVox car stereo system rebuilt and customized for home entertainment. The bed is positioned for optimized aural pleasure.

- -- This is all yours, huh?
 - -- Yes ma'am. Whaddaya think?
- -- Where's your guitar?
 - --I keep it over in the shop at school. We use it for practice.
- -- You have a band, right?
 - -- Yeah, yeah, I'm the guitarist and singer.
- -- What's it called again?
 - -- Vortexx right now, but we were thinking about changing it.
- -- Vortexx, huh?
 - -- Yeah, cool, huh? Hey, you want some Mad Dog?

Lucas jumps up from his spot on the bed and goes to the fridge.

-- Some what?

Tammy is casually glancing through the pile of mail cluttering the coffee table. There are a half dozen Columbia House envelopes, of which only a couple are opened. They are addressed to Lucas McBride, Luke Breed, L Brighton, LM Busker, Lance McBain, and Larry Brian at apartments one through six. Lucas comes back from the kitchen with two glasses of purple something.

- -- Some Mad Dog, y'know MD 20/20.
- -- I dunno.
- -- C'mon, it's grape.

And he pushes the glass in front of her.

-- Just have a few sips. You can sit over here, if you want.

And he sits on the edge of the bed.

Tammy takes the glass and sits down.

- -- What's all this?
 - -- Oh, that stuff's from Columbia House, y'know the tape club.
- -- Yeah, but who're all these other people?

- -- That's how ya get free tapes. See, you just hafta fill out the little card you get from magazines, and then you fill it out, right, with all the things they wanna know and what tapes you want, and then you put a fake name in the box. It's easy.
- -- Don't you get caught?
- -- Naw. You gotta make the names kinda like yours so the mailman just thinks they screwed up, y'know, Columbia House.
- -- Does that work with other stuff?
- -- What, like credit cards and shit? Sometimes. They ain't too careful. They got insurance to cover stuff like that. Everybody's got insurance these days, right?
- -- I ain't got insurance.
 - -- Whaddaya mean? You don't drive.
- -- Yeah, but my daddy don't believe in insurance He says we don't need to pay for something that might happen. Says that it ain't smart to pay just cuz something might happen. In fact, he always says
 - -- Ain't nobody payin' me cuz I *might* win the lottery, right?

so he figures we can

all just

go to the emergency room or whatever and he just gives 'em a credit card.

-- They sent me a credit card.

My daddy's got all kinds of credit cards. He says that credit cards are the way to go. He says he's gonna get more credit cards. One time my daddy took us all out to Coleman's and my brother, he was a lot littler back then, went in and found this gum or some candy or something and daddy came in and found him and told him he'd hafta go. Then he started bawling and stuff so my daddy had to buy him the candy or whatever to get him to shut up, and my mom, she gets bad headaches, like real bad migraines, and so then she had to go and lie down and daddy had to go to get her some Tylenol or something and then he bought us some food on the way home cuz momma really liked french fries and shakes. And he paid for all that with his credit card. My daddy's got all kinds of credit cards He's got cards that only work at certain stores and cards for getting gas and cards for ordering stuff off the TV and normal cards like you see on commercials and then some of those weird cards you see commercials for but have never heard of. He says that's his plan. He's gonna charge up the whole bunch of them. I guess that's a lot of money, cuz he hasn't done it yet, but he says he's gonna charge up all of

Yeah, they sent me something and it said guaranteed credit card for college students and so I said well, what the hell, and sent it in and now I got this credit card with like a million dollar limit or something. I don't remember how much exactly, but it's a lot. I'm gonna use it when I head to LA cuz that's where I need to be. That's where all the action is, y'know, LA with the Whisky and all that stuff. Me and my band are gonna go and we will rock LA like it ain't never been rocked before. We got this new cover of Shout at the Devil all worked out and it's so cool. But really, we aren't limited to Motley Crue covers. We do some Def Leppard for the pussies and stuff. Oh, man, I almost forgot to tell you, but I learned Iron Man the other day. I just figured it out, y'know. That's how I usually do it, just sit down with the tape and figure the shit out and then I can play it. Plus, I'm versatile, y'know. I can play some Zep and Blue Oyster Cult and stuff, even though that's a little old. I like the harder stuff, y'know Like Hot for Teacher or Panama. I like David Lee Roth a lot. I think Sammy Hagar is a fag and Van Halen fucked up. Plus David Lee Roth got Steve Vai to play guitar and that's just

them and then he's got some plan worked out to file bankruptcy or something like that, but I guess that's not so bad after all cuz he says then they'll just erase his debts and he'll just hafta wait a little while before he can get more credit cards. But they can't fire him or nothing and he's gonna get all the stuff he really wants and not ever hafta pay for it. He says that's why he loves his plastic so much, cuz it's better than money and it's free.

fucking cool. So anyway, when I decide to, when I feel the time is right, y'know, I'm gonna just bust out of this little shithole and make it big. I figure I'll truck out to LA, maybe meet some dudes on the way who want to be in the most hardcore rockin' metal band of the century, and then make it big. I figure I could last like some six months to a year livin' off the plastic, y'know, free money

Tammy swills the last of her wine. Lucas has already finished his and gets up for refills. This time he abandons the cups and returns with the half-empty bottle. Lucas leans over to hit play on the stereo. Dokken creeps out of the hanging car speakers.

- -- What if I told you about how pretty you are? What if I told you I think I care about you a lot?
- -- Um...
- -- What if I kissed you?

And there it is, a kiss on the lips (with tongue). Lucas pushes Tammy back onto the bed and she gives in to his pressure. He puts his hand under her shirt and first fumbles with the back of her bra.

-- It hooks in front.

-- Oh, okay.

And then the front of her bra, until it comes open. He caresses her small breasts for a short moment before jamming his hand into her tight tight Wranglers to frantically search for that magic spot.

- -- Oh, baby, you're so pretty.
- -- Lucas...
- -- Baby, I need you baby, I want you.

He pulls open the button on her jeans and unzips them to reveal her cotton panties with pink and lavender blossoms.

- -- Uhh...
- -- C'mon baby, don't make me wait, you know I care about you.
- -- But

He is pushing her jeans and panties down

-- Baby, but I love you.

And then the door flies open.

-- LUCAS T. McBRIDE!

Lucas turned over and Tammy sees a woman standing in the doorway. She wears a short, silk robe, and carries a bottle of wine and two glasses.

- -- Hon, er, I mean, Mrs. Miller, what're you doing here?
 - -- What the hell is *she* doing here?
- -- This is, uh, just a friend.

Tammy scrambles to pull her pants back up.

-- A friend? Looks more like a little slut if you ask me.

And put her bra right.

- -- She was, uh, just leaving, right?
- -- I guess.

- -- Good! Get that little tramp off my property.
- -- Yes, Ma'am.
 - -- I told you about havin' girls over.
- -- Yes, Ma'am.
 - -- And I don't want to see this bitch around here again.
- -- Yes, Ma'am.

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Tammy's house needs paint, but Darryl says he's going to get siding on his Sears card whenever anybody asks him about it. Tammy lies on her back in the front yard memorizing the cracks in the paint. She thinks of piercing and plastic.

000

Lucas McBride begins his afternoon ritual by drinking a Silver Bullet behind the auto shop at TTU with his friends Steve and Chuck.

- -- Man there ain't shit to do in this town anymore, Lucas.
- -- Shit, Chuck, there's a whole lotta beer. We just gotta go and get it and then drink it.
 - -- Yeah, lets go get a keg and have a bust over at the lake.
 - -- We did that last night.
- -- So. Let's do it again.

The three hop into the front of Lucas' truck. Megadeth blasts at them from the Sparkomatic sound system.

- -- Look, man, you gotta take this out.
- -- What the fuck, man, this is Megadeth.
 - -- I hate Megadeth.
 - -- Why?
- -- Dave Mustaine, man, he's a dick.
- -- He's not that bad.
- -- They kicked him out of Metallica didn't they? That's enough for me. If James Hetfield thinks he's a dick, then I think he's a dick, too.
- -- Shit, James Hetfield is the dick, man.

-- Fuck You!

-- Look, here's some Maiden.

000

The phone rings and Tammy answers.

- -- Tammy, it's Linda. Where were you today?
- -- With Lucas.
 - -- No way.
- -- Way.
 - -- So what'd you do?
- -- Talked mostly.
 - -- Bullshit! I call bullshit.
- -- Well, we kissed.
 - -- No way!
- -- I'm serious.
 - -- Was it good?
- -- It was okay.
 - -- Did he feel you up?
- -- Yeah, I guess.
 - -- So what, are you guys gonna do it?
- -- I don't know.
 - -- How come you didn't do it today?
- -- His landlord's wife busted in.
 - -- No way. Were you naked?
- -- Not really.
 - -- Not really? Hold on, I gotta get Rhonda on three way, she'll die.

000

- -- See, Chuck, it's all right here man.
 - -- Whaddaya mean?
- -- Look, here's David Lee Roth's first solo album. He called it EAT THE RICH right? So then you have Van Halen, who kicked out David Lee Roth and got Sammy Hagar.
 - -- Pussy
- -- Absolutely, but anyway they got him and the first album they put out with him is called OU812.
 - -- I don't get it.
 - -- Jeezus, you idiot. It's so simple. Fuck, why didn't I figure that out?
- -- You just gotta think about it.
 - -- Oh!
 - -- See, it's pretty obvious.
 - -- So what's it mean then?
- -- It's like a slam, y'know. Sammy Hagar thinks he's bad and shit, so he's gonna make fun of David Lee Roth, y'know?
 - -- That's fucked up, man.

- -- Yeah, that's fucked up.
- -- We're here What kind of beer you guys want?

000

- -- Okay, Rhonda's on, too.
- -- Hey, girl.
- -- Hi, Tammy.
- -- I told her about what happened today.
- -- You *told* her already?
- -- I didn't think you'd mind Besides, I didn't wanna hafta listen to the whole thing all over again.
 - -- It's okay. I can't believe his landlord's wife walked in.
 - -- And Tammy was naked.
- -- Not all the way.
 - -- So what, Tammy, are you gonna do it with him or what?
- -- I dunno.
 - -- I think you should.
- -- Why?
 - -- He's so cute, honey.
 - -- I'll bet he's got a huge package.
- -- Yeah.
- -- Did you feel it?
- -- Kinda. Against my leg mostly.

000

- -- Okay, I got some chicks to come.
- -- Damn, you were on the phone long enough.
 - -- Which chicks?
 - -- Those girls we met last week. At the fair.
- -- Where are we meetin' 'em?
 - -- The bay.

The primer gray Chevy truck coughs a little at first, then grumbles to the lake and the General Robert E. Lee memorial campground and bay, favored location for drinking beers and scamming chicks.

Lucas, Steve and Chuck arrive and proceed to:

- 1 Light cigarettes
- 2 Turn on KC overhead truck lights
- 3 Tap keg
- 4 Flip over RIDE THE LIGHTNING
- 5 Drink beer
- 6 Drink more beer
- 7 Drink another beer

8 Pop in TOO FAST FOR LOVE

9 Greet girls, offer beer

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- -- Y'think he'll ask you to prom?
- -- I dunno.
- -- Of course not. You think he wants to go back for a prom.
- -- Yeah, he's kind've a rebel, y'know.
 - -- That's so cheesy.
- -- I think it's cute.
 - -- Me too. I want a rebel guy.
 - -- You want any guy.
- -- He really likes me.
 - -- I'm sure.
- -- No, he said so.
 - -- D'you really like him?
- -- Yeah.
 - -- So you gonna do it with 'im?
- -- I think so. Why not?
 - -- When?
- -- I guess whenever he calls me.
 - -- You think he'll call after today?
- -- Hope so.

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Chrissy, Melinda and Amy are seniors. They met Lucas, Steve and Chuck at the Tarradiddle County Fair where Lucas won Chrissy a pink stuffed bear, Steve won Melinda a mirrored Spuds McKenzie plaque and Chuck puked on the Scrambler. They all saw REO Speedwagon.

- -- Y'know I've missed you, baby.
 - -- How come you haven't called?
- -- I just been busy practicin' with my band.
 - -- These guys in your band?
- -- Naw. I've got some real talent backing me up. Y'know I was thinkin' about writin' a song for you, Chrissy. Y'know, to let you know how I feel about you and all.
 - -- That's so sweet.

Kiss.

-- Not as sweet as you. You want another beer?

Kiss Beer Kiss Fondle Kiss Beer Kiss Fondle
Tap on the shoulder

- -- What the? Chuck, what the fuck's wrong with you man? I'm busy here.
 - -- Dude, Lucas, I just fuckin' went into the woods to puke.

- -- You always puke.
- -- Yeah. But I puked on Steve and Melinda.
- -- Shit, Chuck. What's wrong with you?
 - -- I gotta weak stomach.
- -- Where'd they go?
- -- They took off. Well, Steve took off. Melinda's in the car. She wants you to take her home.

Lucas looks to Chrissy. The sight of Chuck's shirt is making her sick.

- -- Hey baby, just let them take your car. I'll get you home.
 - -- I can't. It's my dad's.
- -- But we were gonna...
 - -- Not with that smell around. Call me next time you're rehearsing with your band.

She kisses Lucas deeply on the mouth, squeezing firmly on his package, then turns toward the car. Melinda and Amy are mortified, and the three drive off in the yellow camaro in silence. Lucas punches Chuck in the gut.

-- Fucking moron. What the hell are we gonna do now?

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-- Tammy.

Tammy sits in her room working out polynomial roots for Algebra. Progress is slow. -- Tammy.

The voice comes from outside her bedroom window. She pushes the curtain back and sees Lucas T. McBride standing in the darkness.

-- Lucas?

He approaches her window.

-- Tammy. Can you come out? I gotta tell you something.

She crawls out the window and he leads her to his truck, which is parked on the street in front of her house. They get in.

- -- Baby, I gotta go. It's time.
- -- Where to?
- -- You know. LA. Gotta be a rock star.
- -- Now? Why?
 - -- I dunno. Just feels right.

Kiss.

-- But what're you gonna do?

Kiss.

-- Get a band. Then some gigs. I got that credit, you know?

Kiss.

-- I could steal one of daddy's credit cards for you.

Kiss.

-- That sure is sweet of you, baby, but I'll use my own plastic this time.

Kiss.

-- Oh, Lucas, I wish you wouldn't go.

Kiss.

-- Me too, baby, but I can't stay here no more. Listen, I want to know how you feel about me. I mean, I love you, baby, and I want to come back for you, y'know, if you feel the same.

Kiss.

- -- Of course. What should I do?
 - -- Tammy, I think we should do it. Y'know, to prove our love to each other.

Kiss.

-- D'you wanna?

-- Okay, Lucas.

Tammy lays back on the bench seat in Lucas' truck. "Aces High" is playing as Lucas undresses her and gets on top. She notices for the first time the gap in his teeth, the pimple on his nose, the roughness of his hands, that his breath smells like smoke and alcohol, and his shirt smells of Stetson and something else. She notices the rebel flag stapled in the top of the truck cab. The stars and bars. Rock and roll. It only takes a minute.

Lucas leaves her standing in her yard. There are stars above, and once the truck has pulled away Tammy can hear the paint peeling. Tammy sits there contemplating the feeling of Lucas inside of her. She thinks of the FOIL method – First, Outside, Inside, Last – and remembers she has homework. She sits down to finish her Algebra and thinks she'll probably see Lucas again tomorrow. Maybe she won't wear all of her earrings.

Nervous

Tarradiddle is hot tonight; so hot that Cephus Duggett can't sleep. An old box fan churns the air in the bedroom, and the torn corner of a Farrah Fawcett poster, hand-me-down from a cousin or uncle, flaps against the wall. Outside the crickets chirp, a cicada buzzes, the hum of the bay, the lake, the trees, the grass keeps Cephus awake. He's masturbating. There's nothing else to do. But the effort makes him hotter. Chigger bites itch on his legs. He's kicked off the sheet, the unravelling blanket. The elastic on the corners of the fitted sheet below him has come out in spots, and he lays mostly on uncovered mattress, atop stains of piss, soda pop and blood. He cut himself once on another blazing night, trying to whittle.

In Scouts they told him not to whittle towards himself. His Den Mother, Lemilda Karstinicz, took away his chip after he stabbed Kurtzweld, who was considerably older and only there to help the boys learn basic knife safety, in the thigh.

Kurtzweld was doing a favor for his mother. He taught them about safety circles	
and stressed the importance of whittling to the wood.	

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You can't force the wood. It's gotta be a shape the wood wants to go in.
What if I don't wanna carve that shape?
What shape do you wanna make, Cephus?
I dunno. Not this one.
What do you see in that one?
A dick.
What about this one?
A dick.
Nothing else?

-- Nope.

Kurtzweld shakes his head and smiles to himself. He sees dicks everywhere, too.

- -- Wait. I could make that one into a gun.
- -- Alright then, carve a gun.

Kurtzweld turns his back to Cephus. Stan Montclair is having trouble dealing with a knot. Cephus flings his knife around in a semi-circle. It finds Kurtzweld's thigh, and he drops to the floor screaming. Lemilda knocks over cups of Kool-Aid she's pouring for refreshments in her scramble to attend to her son.

- -- What do you think you're doing, boy?
- -- He was in my safetly circle.

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In his bed, Cephus stretches one arm out above him and makes a half-circle. He was kicked out of Scouts after that. It wasn't even Scouts, it was just Weeblos. Still, a few months later, after Cephus turned thirteen, Uncle Ned gave him his own knife. It was summertime and the heat was too oppressive to sleep.

Sometimes in Tarradiddle the heat is so thick you need a knife to cut it; you feel you're swimming through the air and you come out wet.

Cephus had tried his knife out on stumps and crawdads and snappers. It's an Old Timer, lockback, with a six inch blade. At night sometimes he measures his penis against the blade, stretching it to the tip. One sleepless night he had been looking at Farrah and playing with himself. He had a piece of wood, and had intended to whittle a pipe from it. He could nick plenty of tobacco from his father, but papers were harder to find. They wouldn't sell to him at Coleman's. He tried Bible pages, and those worked pretty well. But there are only so many blank pages in the Bible, and soon those were all used up. He tried smoking a printed page, something from Revelations because that was his favorite book, but it was no good. It was good for awhile, but eventually the buzz just turned to headache.

He tried to see the shape in the wood. He wanted a pipe, but this particular chunk of driftwood didn't want to be a pipe. It wanted to be a penis. He began to carve an exact replica of his organ. Of course, for accuracy, he sat naked on his bed, crosslegged, sheets and covers piled on the floor by the wall, pecker stretched out over his ankle.

The carving went well for awhile, and he really felt the wood wanted to be a duplicate of his flesh – not a small, soft replica, but a long, hard approximation. It was when he got to the crown and had to work harder to round the back edge

that he began to cut towards himself. He caught an odd notch in the wood and sliced his own thigh open.

The cut was smooth and long, not particularly deep, but it drew blood. In the instance before the blood pooled in the wound he could see the layer of pale flesh, then the layer of pink. Before he could study it more the cut was full of blood, and it rolled off his thigh and onto his heel. Some of it got on his balls. Most of it got on his bed. He got an old t-shirt and tied it on. Eventually the bleeding stopped, but by that point in time Cephus had cooled down and fallen into a deep sleep.

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Tonight, though, Cephus doesn't feel like whittling, and he doesn't feel much like jerking off either. Tonight, Cephus decides to take a walk.

A few weeks ago, at the First Baptist Christian Youth Group campout he'd gotten to third base with Sheila Montclair, Stan's older sister. Cephus used to beat up Stan for his Garbage Pail Kid cards, but since the campout he hasn't seen Stan around much. Sheila says he's grounded for some reason. But that means the treehouse is free more often. Stan keeps a trunk of porno mags there and if you sit against the wall nobody can see you from below. It also faces Sheila's room.

It's a couple of miles from Duggett Bay to Sheila's house if you take the roads, but Cephus follows the shore of the lake around, through the cattails and chigger weeds, to cut the distance in half. Soon, the overgrowth of ferns and bushes gives way to clean, cleared lakeshore, complete with imported sand and carpeted docks. The neighborhood is brand new; in some parts there are no streets yet. The sewage has all been put in, and in places the manholes stick up above the dirt like concrete bunkers in a trench war against undevelopment. The houses they build here are nothing like the shack that Cephus and his family live in. These places are all two or three stories high, with plastic or aluminum siding, and they all have fences around them to keep the critters out of the backyard.

Cephus scales the Montclairs' fence and ascends into the treehouse. He's sweating from the walk, so he sits for a few minutes, smokes a little on a handroll he's been saving all day, and browses through a *Hustler*. Sheila's light is off, but he can see the blue strobe of television. The rest of the house is dark. He has a handfull of pebbles he picked from the sand, and begins to toss them at her window. After a few, the curtains part and Sheila cups her hands against the glass, peering out into the night. Cephus flicks his lighter. The curtains fall back.

A few minutes later, Sheila climbs the ladder into the tree fort.

-- What you doin' in here?

- -- Lookin' fer you.
- -- What you want with me?
- -- Mosly just to look atcha.

She giggles her trademark giggle. Sheila wears her favorite Guess jeans, pegged at the ankle, accented by baggy yellow socks that don't seem like they should fit into such tiny navy blue Keds. She's got a peach colored blouse, v-neck cut, and it's gathered up in the bottom left corner and held in place with a large barrett. Her hair is sandy, crimped down the back, teased and curled in the front. She has a long nose, with a weird flat spot at the tip, and she tries not to smile so she doesn't show off her braces. She is three years older than Cephus, a sophomore at the high school, but says she's impressed with the fact that Cephus quit school after the sixth grade. She likes a man who knows what he wants, and she doesn't think school is worth it anyway.

She sits next to Cephus against the wall. He has no shoes on, and his feet are muddy from the lakeshore. The sleeves of his white t-shirt are rolled twice. His dirty denim cutoffs are decorated with marker doodles and the names of rock bands and movies. "Die Hard" and "Van Halen" feature prominently.

-- I heard Stan shot some kid.

Yeah, Stroker. With a air rifle.
Those don't even break the skin.
I guess it did. Stroker's dad showed up all pissed off.
Wow, where'd he shoot 'im?
In the nuts.
Cephus convulses and drops to the floor, across Sheila's lap, quivering.
Oooh, that's so painful just to think about. It broke the skin?
Yep.
Wow. That's tough.
Stan ain't tough.
Yeah he is. If you shoot somebody, you're tough. That's how it works.

-- Well he ain't.

Cephus turns onto his back, looking at Sheila. He reaches up and twists a bit of her long hair.

- -- Y'know, it takes forever to get it that way.
- -- It's pretty.
- -- Do you wanna make out?

They shuffle and recombine, lips pressed together, arms wrapped tightly around backs. They kiss tight, dry lip-kisses, and big, sloppy tongue kisses, and they accidently knock their teeth together. Cephus waits the customary amount of time before his hand begins to wander. He moves it up and down her back, feeling her backbone and noting the rear clasp bra. He pulls up her shirt a little, touching her warm, soft skin. He feels the waist of her jeans, and the top of her underwear. He works his hand up the side of her body, taking special care to brush along her butt with his fingers, and palm the side of her breast as if he didn't mean to. Sheila runs her fingers through his hair, and pulls him closer. She is over him, and his hand slips naturally up her shirt, feeling her stomach and searching for a hard nipple-spot through her bra. Should he try to work her bra off (which he already did once at the youth group campout) or should he work on

getting her belt unlatched and try for the ultimate prize? This is the delimma Cephus faces.

He is so concentrated on his actions that he doesn't notice a definite slowing of the tongue. He feels Sheila's hand in his hair, but doesn't even notice the hand so lightly touching his leg, working up from his knee. He doesn't notice until he feels a distinct pressure around his genitals that Sheila is the first one to get to third base. As she grabs his cock in her hands, she sticks her tongue as far into his mouth as she can, and Cephus chokes.

He sputters and pulls away.

- -- What the hell is that all about?
- -- What?
- -- You're not supposed to.
- -- What? Grab your dick?
- -- I didn't say you could.
- -- I didn't say you could feel me up.

But, that's different.
How?
You wanted me to.
And you <i>didn't</i> want me to?
No. Well, I mean I don't know.
Are you the only one allowed to touch your dick?
I don't touch it. I don't play with it.
Then what good is it?
It's plenty good. Just that
What?
I don't know.

There is a silence. Cephus pedals his mouth as if an explanation, a really good and undeniable explanation, will fall right out if he keeps doing it. Sheila is smug, sure that she is right, and still thrilled from the action.

- -- Look, I really just wanted to know if we're meeting at the movies tomorrow.
- -- Sure. Are you mad?
- -- No. But I gotta go.
- -- Okay, as long as you're not mad. I only did it cuz I love you.
- -- Okay. But I gotta go.

Cephus leaves the treehouse quickly, pondering the new shift in his relationship with Sheila. How could she do that? Just grabbing his pecker – you don't just grab a man's pecker. Stroker did that at school – that's probably why Stan shot him in the nuts – and nobody likes Stroker. Stroker just hangs around because there's not enough space to avoid him.

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shuffles out next to his older brother and lights a smoke. He offers it to Hacksaw,
who takes it, and continues to look out across the water, toward the open lake.
Managerities fourth at an a real O
You waitin fer that one gal?
Me? Nah, I know she ain't comin back.
Hey, did you ever do it with her?
Nope. We mosly talked.
Cuz I was wondering about doin it.
Too bad Ned's not around no more. He could tell you all bout doin it.
No, he did. But, well, okay – did she ever touch yer pecker?
What?
writat:
Yer pecker. Did that gal you were with ever touch it?
Nope.

In the morning Hacksaw sits on the end of the Dugget Bay Dock. Cephus

Any gal ever touch yer pecker?
Last week in school this gal was doin a mean impression of Stroker. You know that kid?
Yeah. He was in my grade.
Well, he's still in school. I heard he got hisself shot. Serves im right.
Yep. So how did it feel?
What?
When that gal grabbed yer pecker.
Felt okay. Bout like when some gal grabs yer ass.
I thought they weren't supposed to grab it.
Whaddaya mean?

-- You know, like ceptin they're gonna blow it or fuck it. They ain't supposed to touch it, right? You shouldn't let em touch it?

-- Hell if I know. You want it touched?

-- I dunno.

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Pet Sematary is playing at the Tarradiddle quad-plex. Without many options for recreation, the movies are the diversion of choice for a large number of the population, especially the kids and teenagers. Two showings nightly means you pay for one and watch both. Cephus meets Sheila on the inside, next to the Ikari Warriors stand-up machine.

-- Hey baby.

Sheila runs up and hugs Cephus around the neck. They meander into the theater, taking seats in the far back corner, under the broken light.

-- So are you mad at me?

Cephus shakes his head.

- -- No. Why?
- -- I thought maybe last night...
- -- What about it? It was fine, right?
- -- Yeah, okay. Just so long as you know how much I care about you.

The theater fills up and the previews begin showing. Sheila talks about how she gets really scared, and how when she gets really scared she just grabs onto something around her, and how Cephus had better be ready to be grabbed whenever it gets scare, and he might even have to cover her eyes. Cephus scans the rows in front of them, trying to figure out if anybody had gotten to grab bush yet. Someday he'd grab bush before the previews ended.

He rests his hand casually on Sheila's knee. At the church campout they had played "Nervous," and Sheila never quit before Cephus decided he'd better stop. As the film progresses, his hand moves up her thigh, and Sheila mirrors the movement on his thigh. He begins to see that if he touches her crotch, she'll touch his. He leans over to whisper.

Are going to grab my stuff again?
Yer dick?
Yeah. Are you gonna?
Want me to?
She moves her hand into the pit between his thigh and his groin, her knuckles
resting against his testicles. He feels the stir of his boner.
Um, well, you know if you do that it could be difficult.
What do you mean?
You know, if I get to excited I could just blow up.
Like blood and guts blow up, or like figuratively blow up?
Both?
Sheila looks him in the eye.

-- Look, you know that after you take a girl so far, you can't stop? Don't you want to feel me up?

-- Yeah.

-- Okay, then. So you can't wuss out. Let's do it.

-- IT?

-- No. I mean, let's feel each other up. Sheesh, aren't you supposed to be better at this?

Sheila unzips her jeans, and pulls the fly open. In the darkness Cephus can see a shimmer of polyester panties. She reaches over to unzip his fly, and puts her hand inside.

-- Come on, baby. Let's make out.

They kiss and fondle each other, trying to stay quiet so the other movigoers don't notice, but mostly trying to touch every inch of the other's body. Cephus thinks he might come a half-dozen times, and staves it off with thoughts of rotten armadillos and dead snakes. The film winds up, and the two close up all the openings they had created in their clothing. They decide to stay for the second

showing – except this time they'll go into the theater showing *Ghostbusters II*, where there won't be so many kids. The PG films fill up with couples on dates and voyeurs during the late showing. Cephus has sat through these movies before, trying to catch a glimpse of breast as some guy lifts his girlfriend's shirt.

This time, before the previews are over, his hand has been down Sheila's pants and up her shirt (under the bra) and he even squeezed her butt before she sat down. Before the movie has started, he knows it is the best film he's ever seen.

Sheila moves even more voraciously than before – her hands are all over him, and she even pulls his pecker out of his pants in order to look at it. She tells him it seems big, and that she likes it. He's too nervous to respond, and too busy trying once again to not come.

- -- So does this mean you're my girlfriend?
- -- Sure.
- -- Do you wanna be my girlfriend?
- -- Whatever you want.
- -- Okay, then. Girlfriend.

Sheila hasn't been home for the last week. Cephus calls each night at 7:30, just when she said to call. She made it clear that her family doesn't take calls during dinner, and that's at 6:00, then she has to help clean up, then she's on her own time after 7:30. She reminded him to call her -7:30 – but each time her mother answers, says Sheila's not home, and takes his name and number.

Although he hasn't heard from her in a week, he figures she surely won't miss their date to see *Pet Sematary* and *Ghostbusters II* again. Cephus waits around, playing games of Ikari Warriors and sipping a Coke, until the first showing of *Pet Sematary* lets out. He is sure she must have gotten grounded or something. She wouldn't leave him waiting without a good reason, that's for sure.

Before the second showing begins, Cephus slinks into the theater, and takes his seat in the same spot where, one week ago, Sheila made him feel in ways he never new possible. The previews begin, and the lights go down, leaving him alone in the furthest, darkest corner.

Two figures enter the theater from the door closest to Cephus. He can see one of them is Sheila, and her giggle as she takes a seat a few rows in front of him confirms he's not just imagining it. She's with another guy – some cowboy from

the high school who he's seen driving around in his big, fancy truck. He doesn't take his hat off when he sits down. Cephus thinks he's probably felt her up already by the time he gets up to leave – before the previews are finished.