

## T.G.I.F

By Bob Francis

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I think they should make a law: no hard classes during the last period on Fridays. Especially beautiful Friday afternoons like today. My body is sitting here in Algebra; sort of paying attention to Mr. Freeley. I think he's talking about polynomials or some damn thing, but I'm thinking about the cool fall weather outside. And it's not just me. Everybody's talking -- well whispering -- and I don't hear any math in any of it.

"...so I finally just tapped her on the shoulder and talked to her. She was real cool about it." I listen to my best friend Mike sitting in the chair behind me and one row over. After having a monumental crush on Jenny Harrison for at least the past five years, he finally got the nerve to actually talk to her. "I'm gonna meet her at the roller rink on Saturday," he says. I'm impressed. I figured he would just walk up to her, lose his cool and throw up or something. Good thing I didn't bet money.

Greg's sitting to the side of me and gives Mike his best "you poor bastard" look. "Why do you want to do anything with her?" Greg's still a bit unclear on this whole boy/girl thing. Girls are still pretty icky in his book; probably full of germs and cooties and stuff. I don't say anything because it wasn't that long ago that I figured out there might be better things to do with girls than beat them up. Mike gives Greg his best "poor bastard" look; Greg'll come around eventually. It's just a matter of time.

Hold it. I just remembered something. "Hey, Mike," I say quietly. "When did you learn how to roller skate?" He looks at

me and suddenly I can read his mind. Mike still can't roller skate.

"Well, it was sort of Jenny's idea to meet there..." Greg lets a laugh blow out between his lips and I stifle a snicker. Mike's really dug himself a pit.

I try to give him some confidence. "It's not that hard. Just don't fall down."

"How? How am I not supposed to fall down, huh?" That's a good question. I used to roller skate when I was little. I try to remember the exact procedure, but I don't remember the specifics.

"You just don't."

Mike snorts. "Thanks a lot. Thank you very fucking much."

"You're welcome," I giggle. I can just see him trying to look cool on Saturday; falling down and then explaining to Jenny he meant to do that. Man, I wish I could be there --

Damn. I try to keep the weekend out of my mind, but now it's there. That's the thing I hate most about my parents' divorce. I used to like the weekends. I could see my friends and have fun. Now that's all changed. Now, my brother and I don't see anyone anymore. Dad picks us up and we make the trek out to his new house in Algonquin; twenty miles from Schaumburg, twenty miles from anywhere. I guess it's the biggest change besides "Mom" and "Dad" becoming "your mother" and "your father".

Even worse, since the split last summer, my dad been trying to get to know me better. I guess he feels guilty about always traveling and not being around too much when I was a kid. Now, every weekend, he makes me hang around with him and we do all these projects together. "Bonding" he calls it.

"Stupid" I call it.

Take last weekend. My dad's just moved into this new house and he's trying to make it look more homey. He decides to make the basement into a rumpus room; something he always wanted while he and Mom were together. So we pull out these Time-Life books on how to put in a floor. I thought it would be a good idea to have someone... "professional" do something hard like a floor, but no! I bought Dad these books for Christmas two years ago, by God we're gonna finally put them to good use.

So we buy about five million boxes of square tile plus these huge drums of black mastic and long squeegees that are way taller than I am. My dad gets dressed up in these funky blue coveralls; complete with hammer tucked in the front belt strap (what he's going to do with a hammer, I don't know. Mom was the one who used to do all the little repairs around the house). All the unopened moving boxes get shoved in the far corner (we'll just tile around them). Then we start pouring out this mastic all over and try to smear it around with the squeegees. Easy enough, right?

Well, you know those little warning labels: "USE WITH ADEQUATE VENTILATION"? They wrote that on the side of the mastic container because after awhile you start seeing strange things. I was slapping this mastic down when I noticed the walls were glowing. I swear to God they were glowing orange! It was so cool. I just couldn't stop staring at it. Then everything sort of shimmered and turned into little triangles which began streaming down in front of my eyes; green, blue, black, blacker than black. They twisted and blurred and then I went bye-bye.

I was like the little canary they take down into the mine to see if there's any poison gases. Dad pulled me out into the fresh air, but not without some losses. Neither of us thought to leave

a clear path to the staircase when we were putting down the mastic. I guess this week we'll be spending this Saturday trying to pry our shoes out of the dried goop. Before we left Dad was thinking about buying a cheap couch to cover them up.

"Ahem. Would you like to join us again, Mr. Smeltzer?" Mr. Freeley is peering over his glasses at me from the front of the class. Everyone is laughing and I turn red.

"Smooth move, Ex-lax," mutters Mike under his breath. I try to look as innocent as possible, but of course it doesn't work. Mr. Freeley knows me way too well and doesn't buy it for a minute. I still don't think he's forgiven me for that mail incident.

For some reason, the girls started writing notes when we got into seventh grade. I mean lots of notes; back and forth, back and forth, all day. And nothing stopped them; not even threats of detention and getting them read out loud to the class. After the first couple of weeks of school, I got tired of listening to their little gossips getting read out loud and watching girls trying to cry their way out of staying after school. I got this brilliant idea; almost like a divine inspiration. For a nickel, I would pass the girls' notes back and forth. If it got caught, I would take the blame. I called my business M.F. Mail after Mr. Freeley since I started it in his class. It was great insurance and it caught on like you wouldn't believe. Soon I was getting letters in all my classes to give to girls in other classes. I made my friends business partners; branch offices in the cafeteria during lunch and the study halls. We drew up little signs with paper airplanes flying over rainbows for our desks. And that's where it began to get out of hand.

Mr. Freeley really didn't notice M.F. Mail until one afternoon he wrote a problem on the board, turned around and 23

out of 30 people had these little signs on their desks. He didn't say anything for a long time and even though he had this really funny look on his face, nobody laughed. Nobody did anything. We all knew it had gone too far.

Actually I suppose it could have been worse. Mr. Freeley gave us five seconds to get the signs off our desks and I got a week's worth of detentions. That was the end of M.F. Mail, but hey! I made fifteen dollars in three weeks. Not bad cash for a kid.

Mercifully, the bell rings; getting me off the hook with Mr. Freeley. You know he looks really tired. He slumps down in his chair and takes a long swig from his Diet Dr. Pepper parked eternally on the right front corner of the desk next to his nameplate. I grab my papers and scrunch them into my books. I hear Greg say something to me, but I don't have time to respond. I'm running late. Usually I have everything packed up before class ends. Kids are pouring out of the classrooms and the traffic is terrible by the lockers. I'm dodging kids right and left; even going over someone bent down tying their shoe. It's like swimming upstream against the current. Luckily, the stairwell isn't only halfway down the hall from my math class. I have time to catch my breath before she comes down.

She. Wow. That's the only way I can describe her. I don't know her name, but I've seen her come down the stairs since the first day of school. She's got blond hair and really, really blue eyes. She's kind of short and smells really good. Today she's talking with one of her friends: this monster girl about two feet taller than everyone else in the hallway. They sometimes come down together. Other times she hangs out with this fat girl with glasses. I like to think if she came down alone, I could just tap her on the shoulder, introduce myself and say something really

cool; like poetry. It would just blow her away and she'd kind of fall into my arms and we'd kiss real slowly. It would be the most beautiful moment.

It's just not going to be this particular moment. Once again, she walks past and I fold up like a wet paper bag. I can't talk to her, even if she was alone. I just follow her down the hallway; back the way I came. Luckily my locker is closer than hers and I have a chance to escape unnoticed, unseen. For crying out loud, how come I can't ever say anything to her? Now that she's gone all sorts of good stuff pops into my head. Flowers and music and the stars in the sky. I juggle my combination lock and pull out a crumpled piece of paper from the bottom of my locker. It has a big footprint on it, but it'll do. I've got a few minutes before the bus leaves, so I just squat down next to my locker door and begin to write down whatever comes into my head. At first I'm just using pencil, but then I realize thoughts like these deserve better. I start writing again -- this time in pen:

"I see you from far away..."

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Mom always gets home at six o'clock and on Friday nights Dad always picks us up five minutes to six. It's five forty seven now and I'm still trying to remember everything I need. Clothes. I have no clothes at Dad's house (hell, my room doesn't have anything except a light and a radio on top of a big moving box and a mattress in the corner). I throw a couple of old shirts and my jeans with the holes in the knees into my duffel bag from school. I haven't done any of my homework yet, so I know it's all still in there. I've got some math, but that's no big deal. I only have to do the even problems because the answers to the odd ones are in the back of the book. I also have to write some stupid letter for

English class. Our teacher, Ms. Davies, is always coming up with these weird assignments. Everyone else just reads books. We're writing letters to a class in England. Even so, it shouldn't be too bad. The great thing about school is you don't have to think. Just do whatever the teacher wants and you're home free. Like I know Ms. Davies wants us to describe ourselves and our country and have it compared with England; what we think England is like and what it could be like. Ten sentences, tops.

Sometimes I feel bad for not trying harder, but there's no point. I can either work really hard and get an A or just do what they want and get a B (or an A if I write it neatly). And don't get me wrong. I used to actually try, but that was silly. Mike's parents give him a dollar for every class he gets a C in. I've never got anything lower than a B on my report cards and my parents hardly notice.

"Hey, Mike!" I yell at my little brother. "Don't forget the tapes!" A year ago if I had asked him to do anything, he would have ignored me and I would've had to kill him. I guess that's one of the good things coming out of the "big D"; we get along now and look out for each other. The tapes for instance: Algonquin is halfway between Chicago and Rockford and I guess the signals sort of short each other out or something. We don't watch too much TV; just stupid football games on Sunday and then it doesn't really matter. The Bears always lose and Dad just uses them as an excuse to force me to spend six hours or so with him doing nothing. The rest of the time, my brother and I watch stuff we tape at Mom's house throughout the week and since the picture is clear and the sound is not full of static, Dad doesn't bother us too much.

Dad pulls up in his company car while I'm looking for a good way to dry out the soap in the bathroom. Dad travels around a lot and our house used to be full of really rough hotel toilet paper

and tiny hotel soaps. Mom says that's one of the things she could never get used to. I agree. I never used a big bar of soap until this fall and now I can't go back to those mini things that always peter out about one leg short of getting you completely clean.

Usually Dad just rings the bell and goes back to the car to listen to the radio until we're ready to go. But it's that time of the month. He walks down to the car like he forgot something, then comes back and hands me a check.

"Give this to your mother and tell her not to cash it until next Friday; I don't get paid till then and the way business has been..." Yeah, yeah. I've heard all this before. Every month it's the same. I check the check and sure enough, Dad misspelled Mom's maiden name again. And his signature is really messy; like he was choking while writing out the amount. I leave it on the kitchen table and grab my bag.

Another good thing about the divorce: I don't have to sit in the backseat with my brother anymore. Now a bad thing. David doesn't miss me at all. He stretches out and falls asleep almost as soon as we're out of the driveway. I'm alone with Dad.

The business first. "Call Grandma this week?" I nod. This is one of those parity things. My grandma on my mom's side comes out to baby-sit us two or three times a week because my mom has to work full time now. And to keep it fair, Dad makes me call my other grandma every week to say hi. Literally. Don't get me wrong. She's a great old lady, but pretty much deaf. Our conversation consists of her saying "hello" three times while I'm screaming "Grandma! Turn on your hearing aid!". She curses a little Grandma curse -- "rotten little monsters" -- then hangs up and complains to my dad about the prank calls she gets all the time. Dad thinks it's gangs.

"When do those school pictures come in?" More business. It's been kind of like the arms build-up. My mom wanted one 8x10 picture of me to hang up in the den. My dad found out about it and decided he needed two 8x10s of me; one for him, one for Grandma. Then my mom upped the ante with some wallet sizes for my aunts, then the orders just kept getting bigger and bigger. So if you happen to get a picture of a pissed off seventh grader in the mail in the next 4 to 6 weeks, you'll understand what happened.

Dad's pretty quiet the rest of the way out, but he doesn't turn on the radio either. I concentrate on the scenery and it's actually not too bad. Algonquin Road goes through a lot of the old rich suburbs. You can see all these big houses sitting on their sprawling miles of land. A lot of them have trees going right to the edge of the pavement and their branches join overhead in places. The car seems to flicker between the sun and shadows. And it's really pretty this time of year; all of the leaves are beginning to change colors. I'm getting good at picking out maple trees; they turn this really dark red color. I think oak trees turn yellow, but I don't remember. A lot of trees are turning yellow and some are orange and some are turning both at the same time. A few others just turn brown, but luckily there aren't many of them and their leaves fall off pretty fast.

The trees thin out as we get close to town. We pass a farm with some cows dotting the grass on the hills behind a long white barn. The other farm we pass doesn't have any cows, but there's a racing track for horses right in front of a long ranch house. No horses out there now, however. At the city limits is a big wooden Indian. I think he was painted all different colors at one time, but now he's broken out in a bad case of rainbow dandruff; especially around the face and feathers. You can still read the sign he's holding, but just barely.

## ALGONQUIN WELCOMES YOU

We pull into the parking lot of Mario's Pizza; parking right in front like we always do. My brother is still asleep, so we leave him in the car.

Mario's is your typical store-front pizza place with that typical flat pizza you get in a plain cardboard box with a little menu stapled to the corner. There's nothing inside except two ripped up restaurant booths without tables. A neon sign is flickering "CARRY OUT PIZZA" in the steamed up window and I can hear some oldies station playing from the kitchen behind the stand up window. Dad sits down right next to me; probably wanting to bond some more. I concentrate on studying the menu.

I wonder why Mario's even has a menu. They say they have shrimp and ravioli and mostaciolli, but I've never seen anyone get anything but pizza here. And we've been coming here every Friday since June. I wonder if they even have any shrimp or ravioli around anymore. It would be pretty funny to order something else; just to see what they'd do.

"I didn't know they stuff beside pizza here," says Dad suddenly. I don't say anything and he continues. "I've never seen anyone get anything but pizza here. I bet they don't have any ravioli back there." I hide my smile.

Dad changes the subject, "The contractors finally leveled the yard, so we should put some grass seed down. I heard that if you put the seed down in the fall, it will grow better in the spring." You heard that? Yeah, I remember saying something about that last week. "And while we're there, maybe we can buy a few bushes... you know, start landscaping." In other words, do all of it at once in a big tree planting frenzy.

We drive up to the local K-mart after we eat. Dad says he saw some good deals advertised in the paper. That's a warning sign. If there's one thing I've learned since summer is none of Dad's good deals are really good deals. I don't know why that should be. Dad sells corporations concrete flooring; makes them pay a lot more for his brand. I used to tag along on some of my dad's business trips and the engineers always think they're getting a great deal. At the same time my dad can be fleeced by anybody. He's never figured out why he always loses at poker and it's a good thing he can't pick up the Home Shopping Channel in Algonquin or his house would be full of more useless crap than it already is. Anytime my dad thinks he's saving money, it always seems like he spends a lot more than he would have without the big savings.

Believe it or not K-mart's not busy on a Friday night. Dad wanders up and down the aisles in the outdoor garden shop; feeling various bags of seed for -- I don't know -- freshness or something. David's disappeared and I just lean my head on the cart handle. After an hour or so, Dad finally finds a bag he likes. It lands in the cart with a poof of escaped air like a low-budget whoopee cushion.

"Not too bad. Only a buck seventy nine." I take a look at the bag which is leaking seed out of one corner. It's probably not more than a couple of pounds and even if it was completely full, I don't think it would be much bigger than both my hands together. I check the back to take a closer look.

"Uh, Dad? This is only supposed to cover 20 square feet." Dad's house is sitting on half and acre; not counting all the land around him which is his by default. "I think you'll have to buy some more seed."

Dad takes the bag from me and studies the instructions. "No," he says. "That's just what they say on the bag. We can stretch it out." Sure we can. It's getting late and Dad pulls the cart from the front, dragging it from aisle to aisle. We find a stack of rosebushes on sale. They're wrapped in little plastic garbage bags (probably because somebody thought they were dead and tried to throw them out). However, they are only a buck fifty a piece, so a dozen of them end up in the cart (big savings, you know).

"We can plant them in the back," says Dad. "Make a privacy hedge." A privacy hedge? The tallest of the lot stands two feet tall -- and none of them have any leaves or branches or anything.

We do find some cheap shrubs with actual leaves and branches on them and they end up in the cart too. Then Dad actually finds a true bargain. I scream for my brother; get him to grab another cart while my Dad guards his treasure. Birch trees are on sale; ten dollars per pot. And Dad has found the biggest tree in the bunch. It must be ten feet tall and four inches around. It has leaves (and these leaves are green). I'm actually impressed.

"We can put it in the front yard by the driveway," he says. "That way we won't have to carry it too far." Good idea. The tree is huge. It must weigh a ton. David comes back with another cart and unfortunately I was right. The tree does weigh a ton. It takes both me and Dad to drag it out of the pile and we have to swing it into the cart. My brother leans on the cart handle with all his might so it doesn't roll away from the impact. I take a step back to catch my breath. Sitting in the cart, it looks even better. Dad laughs a little breathlessly and throws an arm around me and one around my brother as we proudly push it inside.

KEEE-RACK!!! The ten foot tree is now standing eight foot three; the same height as the doors out of the garden section. The top couple of feet hang limp; swinging back and forth to the motion of the cart's wobbly front wheel. It's not as impressive now (and we're not quite as proud). Then the check-out girl gives us the final coup de gras.

"You should have rung these bushes up out in the garden section." Dad laughs a little and waves his arms around with that "Yeah, I could have done that but it wasn't enough of a challenge" look. She is nice enough to call some kid from garden to help us get it to the car (which means he holds the cart steady while Dad and I rip internal organs getting this broken behemoth out. David puts the shrubs in the back seat while Garden Weasel asks us about the tree.

"I can tie it to the roof," he says. Dad thinks about it, but I point out the dirt in the pot will all fall out. Besides we're the ones who will have to hoist it on top of the car (and frankly my pizza isn't sitting too well in my shivering stomach). That decides the matter. Helper Boy holds the trunk lid while we drag the thing to the back of the car and get it in with pure grunting power. The car bounces a few times and after a minute it steadies up and he ties the trunk lid, the tree and the back bumper down securely with about three miles of K-mart twine. I hope we have a knife at home.

My legs feel funny; they're twitching a lot and I notice Dad is walking a little strange. David is already asleep again in the back of the car. His head resting on the grass seed bag and one foot lying on a bush. The teenage kid shuts the car door for me and waits. Maybe he's expecting a tip or something. Dad doesn't even give him a second glance; just starts the car and off we go. The trunk lid slams down against the tree and bounces up again.

It does it again when we pull out of the parking lot, when we go over the train tracks in town, when we drive over every bump in the twelve mile stretch of road back to the subdivision and of course on the gravel proto-street to Dad's house. By the time we pull in the driveway, the tree is leaning at a crazy angle. It's off balance and almost falls out of the trunk on its own when we cut all the ropes. I help Dad get the pot out on the ground next to the driveway and just kneel there feeling dinner crawling up my throat. Dad walks around the tree, looking at it from this way and that.

"Maybe it will... I don't know, straighten up in the wind," he says scratching his head. The tree is leaning 40 degrees, but I fervently pray it will be okay. Anything as long as we don't have to return it. David wakes up long enough to walk inside (and go to bed I assume). Dad parks the car in the garage and takes one last look at our tree as the garage door closes.

"You think it will be all right out there?" he asks me.

"Who would steal it?" I ask back. No answer from Dad, so now we can all go to bed.

The next day flies along at five miles an hour. I think I'm dead from the waist down and I drag my useless stumps around the yard with me. Ow. I guess they're not completely dead; they still hurt. Dad hasn't complained, but he hasn't talked too much either. Just makes a low moan under his breath every once in a while. We've decided to start small; seed the backyard.

"Hey, Dad," I say. "I thought the builders leveled the yard." The ground in the back definitely does not look flat. There's a big groove near the edge of the house and I can even see tractor tracks here and there.

"Well, they had a big steamroller in here on Thursday. And the builders said they were done with the yard when I called about it..." Dad trails off for a moment; trying to mesh the story with what his eyes are telling him. "And it does look flatter than it was." I suppose it's a bit flatter. Maybe the grass will cover up the grooves. We start seeding and even my Dad figures out we don't have enough. While we do manage to cover the whole backyard, there's only one grass seed down on every foot of ground. After a break for lunch, we jump in the car for another seed-run.

Wait a minute. "Where's David?"

Dad looks around to make sure he's not about to back up over him. "Oh, he's probably just out exploring."

"Do you think we should just leave him alone?"

Dad shrugs, "What can possibly happen to him out here?" Good point. We leave the garage door open just in case he returns then it's off to town. This time we do it right. Six bags of grass seed at K-mart; the big bags. We buy it at the garden shop register and even get some teenage kid to carry it out to the car for us. Four hours later, all the seed is down; the ground completely covered everywhere you look. Not a bad job if I do say so myself. Wait. What am I thinking? I guess I've been out in the sun too long. Maybe it's time to do some homework indoors.

Math takes fifteen minutes with the help of a calculator that does square roots. Then it's time for the letter to England.

DEAR LINDA,

MY NAME IS JEFF AND I AM IN SEVENTH GRADE. I HAVE ONE YOUNGER BROTHER. HIS NAME IS DAVID AND HE'S IN SECOND GRADE.

Crash! Several choice words rise up from the basement through the air ducts. Dad's down there looking for something to dig the tree holes with and I take it he still hasn't found the shovels (but something metal, I gather from the sound). Now, what was I doing? Shoot. I've forgotten what I was going to write. I actually have to think for a moment. Let's see. David's out of the way. I've got three sentences, only seven more to go.

MY FRIENDS AND I LIKE TO RIDE OUR BICYCLES. WE PLAY SOCCER AFTER SCHOOL. WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO?

Dad knocks on my door and shows me the shovels.

"What did you do to your head?" I ask, pointing to a Band Aid stuck over one eyebrow. He just laughs a little and gives me that same look he gave the girl at K-mart. I just shake my head and follow him outside.

Now my arms match my legs; throbbing so much it makes me dizzy. We have a pit dug in the front yard that could swallow a compact car. Dad helps me out of the hole and we admire our handiwork from the driveway. The birch pot is sliced in half with a tile knife and the tree gets flopped in with a cloud of dust. I can taste it in my mouth mixed with some burning vomit on the back of my tongue. Dad takes a few steps back and forth, folding his arms and looking at the tree. It's upright, but we dug the pit a tad too deep. By the time we finish filling the hole, it's about as tall as my shoulders.

"At least it's standing straight up," says Dad. I have to agree. At least we did something right this weekend. I can't wait to get back to school.

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I was wrong. If there's anything worse than math class as my last class, it's gym the first thing in the morning. It's seven

thirty and the sun has only been up for half an hour. I can't wait until winter when we're doing calisthenics in the dark. As it is, it's about forty degrees outside and not much warmer than that in the locker room. At least it gives all of us some incentive to change quickly into our gym clothes. My shirt's wrapped up in a ball; all wrinkled and a bit ripe by Friday. I slip it on quickly before my body gets goose-pimples. The forty percent of the shirt unnecessary to cover me gets stuffed into my polyester shorts (look! the sweat still beads!).

"New unit today," says Greg. "I wonder what we'll be doing now?" I shrug my shoulders. What's the use? We all know it's going to suck. We started the year playing football. That wasn't too bad even if it was just touch, so of course we only played it for two weeks. Then there was cross country. We got to slip on three miles worth of dewy fields in the parks next to the school every single morning. I shouldn't really complain; at least cross country was a real sport. After that we started playing the stupidest game ever

created -- whiffle tennis. I had never heard of whiffle tennis. Neither had anyone else. In fact the gym teachers hadn't heard of it until they invented it to justify some leftover sports equipment. The object of the game was to whack a whiffle ball over a volleyball net with a ping pong racket. Unfortunately, there were a few problems with the concept. First: ping pong rackets are a lot smaller than tennis rackets, so it's that much harder to hit the ball. Second: whiffle balls hit the ground and stay on the ground; they're kind of hard to return. Finally: nobody wanted to play. So even if it was a little bit fun, we couldn't give it a chance. That wouldn't be cool.

I follow Greg out to the gym. He stops dead in the doorway and I run into his back. What the hell's going on?

"Hey! There's girls out there!"

I push him aside and take a look for myself. We haven't done anything with girls up to this. I didn't even know girls had gym first period. But there they are, sitting in groups of four, eyeing us as suspiciously as we are them. Maybe we weren't supposed to meet in the gym today. A couple of guys walk back into the locker room to check. The rest of us just stand against the back wall. Mr. Bradley, our gym teacher walks out of the locker room with the stragglers in tow and blows once on his whistle.

"Okay, men, choose partners." We all look at each other and he clarifies. "Pick a girl and sit next to her."

"Oh God," mutters Greg next to me. I admit I'm not so keen on the idea myself. Neither are the others -- of either gender. Us guys wander around the edges of the gym and the girls huddle closer to each other for protection. Finally, a couple of the cooler guys take the plunge and sit down. Then the rest of the groups begin to fill up. I grab Greg and we sit down in an empty group near the back of the gym by the bleachers. Greg's next to me; afraid to be too close to his partner. I punch him in the shoulder and nod in the direction he should go. He sits next to her reluctantly with a wounded expression on his face and "traitor" on his lips.

The girl to my left gets a partner; some guy named WHEELER -- I don't know him that well. However, the girl across from me just glares at every guy who even remotely looks like he wants to sit down. Not a good idea. She ends up with Frank Vitilo, all 500 pounds of him (body hair not included). I almost feel sorry for her. The whistle blows again and Mr. Bradley steps to the center of the gym with some woman -- the girls' gym teacher I guess. He

bows and she curtseys and they swing each other by their left hands then their right hands then lock at the elbows (do-si-do) and walk around in a circle (promenade). I don't know about this.

"You mean we have to touch them?" Greg asks. I almost laugh.

"Yeah, I guess so." He swallows and takes a look at his partner. I lean back on my hands and take a look at my partner for the first time.

OH MY GOD IT'S HER! Blond hair and really, really blue eyes. Wow. I try to swallow, but there's something stuck in my throat. It's the girl. I mean The Girl. The one I follow every afternoon after math. My stomach is spinning and I realize I better stop staring at her or I might get caught. The music starts and we all stand up. I bow and she curtseys. And that's it. There's a guy on the record, but I think they're playing it at the wrong speed; no one can understand a single word he's saying. After two minutes of confusion, we make out "bow to your partner", we all do that and the music is over. I wonder what girls do with their gym clothes. After a week my gym suit smells like feet. But the girl -- my girl -- still smells good. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it's nice. Especially her hair; like strawberries maybe.

Mr. Bradley blows his whistle again to get our attention. "Not bad," he says, "for the first time." Greg groans, so does Frank's partner. I look a little mad, but it's just for effect. I'm pretty open about this boy/girl thing, but I don't think I want anyone to know yet. Not even Her. I don't know why, but I feel kind of uncomfortable. This has never happened before to me. Am I in love? I'm not sure. I look at her again and feel -- well, kind of sick.

The feeling stays with me into English class. Mostly because I keep thinking about how it felt to dance with her. She looked

at me twice and I got to touch her hand once. I replay it over and over; trying to remember what it felt like, but by fifth period it's getting kind of fuzzy. I touch my palms together, but I think it was different somehow. Her skin wasn't stiff and didn't scratch like my palms. It was kind of soft and a little puffy. And her hands smelled good too.

Time to turn in our letters to England. I fumble through my notebook, but it's not in there. I could have sworn I wrote it in my English notebook, but apparently I didn't. Luckily I sit on the far right side of class. Ms. Davies always starts things from the far left (symbolic, she told us once; I have no idea what she was talking about). I manage to scribble down a quick ten sentence letter in the time it takes her to cross the classroom. It's only going to be a "B" though, I didn't have time to be neat.

Next we get our stories back from earlier in the week. It's an "A" and I feel proud. I actually thought about this assignment and compressed about twelve years of television watching into a two pages (one page more than the requirement). "VERY ORIGINAL STORY" she wrote on the back.

She claps her hands for our attention. "For the most part, your writing was very impressive. Now, we're going to write a poem." Big moans from the class, including me. I've already used up Star Trek in my story, what else is left? I haven't watched much TV during the week. We tape it to watch on the weekends at Dad's house. Maybe I can remake my story into a poem. No. Too predictable. I try to think about something I've read in a book or a magazine. No dice.

"I want you to close your eyes, and think about something important to you. Write what you believe. Write what you feel." Oh no. We're not writing, we're writing. With that big stress.

The important kind. I better come up with something good. I shut my eyes like she says and think for a few minutes. Only the girl from gym comes to mind and I'm not sure if I'm ready to put anything about her down on paper. At least, not to show to anyone else.

I try again in lunch and math, but the girl is still the only person in my mind. Even when I try to think about someone else or even something else, I can't stop seeing her. The way she stood up and looked up at me with those really, really blue eyes. It's a moment frozen in time; playing endlessly in my brain like a scratched record.

"Note for you, Jeff," interrupts Mike. He hands me a piece of notebook paper wadded up in a little square. The handwriting is from a girl; little circles over the i's. Damn. It's one of those survey sheets that girls like to write. I look back and figure it was either Jennifer or Diana; they're giggling the most. I try to pass it off on Greg who shrinks back at the sight. I give it back to Mike, but he hands it back.

"Come on." Mike shakes his head.

"I filled out one last week. It's your turn." I sigh and resign myself to fill it out. It's pretty typical. I've seen about twenty of these so far this year. I would really like to know who started these things and stab them (her) in the heart with one of those multi-color pens. It's not like I'd get in trouble. Every seventh grade guy would probably help me. I think we've all had to fill out at least one of these things. Even Greg couldn't avoid them. He had to confess he'd been kissed by a girl once. I take a closer look. It's pretty typical; a survey on true love. First question: ARE YOU IN LOVE?

Man, why couldn't I have gotten this yesterday? Then I could have lied without feeling guilty. Today, I don't know what to write. "No" doesn't feel right.

"Y-E-S"

The next question: "DOES SHE KNOW YOU?" Easier to answer.

"N-O"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW HER?" My t-shirt is suddenly glued to my neck. I pry it away with a finger. I'd really like to know who the first guy was who filled one of these things out. Traitor. Now we're all stuck. This is beginning to make me feel a little nervous and I really have to work hard to get my pen to stop making its little dancing marks on the paper.

"SQUARE DANCING" That sounds really stupid; even to me and I was there. Oh well. It's the truth and it's in ink. Nothing I can do about it now. Next question.

"WHO IS SHE?"

I stop. What is her name? I've been following her around for months, eavesdropped on her conversations. Did anyone ever say her name? I don't remember. Actually I had a prime opportunity today; girls have to write their name on their gym shirts too, but I didn't think to look. I don't fucking believe this. How can I be in love when I don't know her name? For a moment I think about changing my other answers, but it's too late.

A hand rips the paper off my desk suddenly. I scoot back in my chair; startled. Mr. Freeley is standing over me. I didn't see him at all. He holds the note like a trophy and I know he's going to read it. Anyone else, he might give them a break, but not me. I am dead. Truly dead.

"Class, if I can have your attention." Please, don't do this. I'm begging. "This is a note I have to read to you from Mr. Smeltzer." He clears his throat and I sink a foot down into my chair. "It looks like he's in love. He met her while square dancing, but she doesn't know who he is." The class laughs like maniacs. My face feels hot and I glare at Mr. Freeley who glares back at me.

"Very interesting, Mr. Smeltzer. I hope that taught you a lesson." Sure did. I think about what kind of chalk is going to end up in his diet Dr. Pepper at the end of class. We have pink, white and yellow chalk. Do they all taste the same?

"Who's the girl?" asks Mike. I shrug.

"I don't know her name. I just saw her today."

"Today?" asks Greg. "You mean the girl you danced with?" I nod. "She was pretty." What? Greg thinks a girl is pretty? I suppose if I was really in love with her I'd be a little jealous, but I'm more surprised than anything else.

"You think so?"

"Well, for a girl," he amends. Ah.

Actually I don't feel that bad. It feels kind of good letting other people know. A relief. I imagine one of the girls in class is a friend of hers. Then she knows I love her and she falls in love with me. That makes me think of a good line for my poem. I tack it on with the first verse I wrote down last week.

"I think of you and wonder if you ever think of me."

Who knows? Maybe Mr. Freeley did me a favor. It could happen. I decide not to follow the girl after class; allow fate to roll into motion.

I also decide yellow chalk should end up in Mr. Freeley's pop.

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Dad's unusually quiet on the way out to his house. David is of course unconscious in the backseat; passed out before we pulled out of the driveway. Sometimes I wish I could do that. I notice Dad keeps looking at me out of the corner of his eye, but he hasn't said anything. Something's going on, but I'm not sure what... yet.

"Ready for the big weekend?" he asks. Yeah, brought the Ben Gay with me this weekend. "Got lots of stuff to do," he continues, "and a surprise." I am surprised. We drive right past Mario's and stop at the K-mart. "Leave David in the car, he'll be okay." I shut the door -- gently -- not that it would bother David if the car tipped over, he's way gone.

Dad explains, "I've been looking at a camera for David's birthday. And I saw some good deals in the paper." Oh no, not again. Mom picked up a Polaroid One Step last week, Dad must have seen it. That means we'll probably end up going home with a camcorder or something. Not that it wouldn't be so bad to have a camcorder. Dad's never going to figure out how to use it, so all I have to do is make sure he doesn't break it and then it's as good as mine.

"Wait, Dad, don't we have to go down this way?" Dad shakes his head.

"No, that's the televisions." Oh yeah, right. Forgot. I meekly follow as we head towards the still cameras. You know, K-mart actually has some cool cameras. There's this one Minolta with a power zoom lens and it automatically advances the film. Some pictures are sitting next to it; apparently you can connect

it to a telescope and leave the shutter open for a long time so the stars look like circles as the earth goes round. My dad, of course, is checking out the instamatic section. At least he knows his limitations. I help him look and find a nice little Kodak with a telephoto lens and a built in flash. It even comes in a vinyl case with a free pack of film.

"How about this one?" Dad shakes his head. It's nice, but it's forty dollars.

"We're going out tomorrow night with Grandma and Grandpa," he explains. "If we spend that much on the camera, we won't be able to eat." Dad's choice is one of those cameras disguised as a box of film. Costs nine dollars and I suppose it makes fiscal sense in Dad's scheme of things. But tomorrow night?

"Dad. you said we're going out tomorrow night?" He nods. "Then you can't use that camera."

"Why not?"

"Because you need a flash," I explain. Plus the Kodak is really a better buy; you can use it over and over again. My dad is unconvinced.

"But my camera is cheaper."

"Well yeah, Dad, but it's not going to work. You need to get a flash."

"But that costs money," he explains. "This camera is cheaper."

"But it's not going to work."

"But it's cheaper."

"But it won't work." Dad just doesn't get the point and he's looking at me like I'm not getting it either. We argue for two or

three minutes more, but it's obvious that we're on two different wavelengths. Dad throws his choice into the cart and I just hope the restaurant is bright inside.

"So where are we going to eat tomorrow?" I ask.

"I think we'll try Lavinia's." Lavinia's? What the heck is that? I've never even heard of it?

"I have a coupon for it." Dad explains. My blood runs cold. The coupon book. Not again. Last month Dad bought one of those thick coupon books; the kind that saves you half-price at restaurants and theaters. He shelled out fifty bucks for this thing because the salesman told him there was five hundred dollars worth of values inside. It became like a quest to find the savings. We went to eat in Chicago and Rockford, even in some little town in Wisconsin. And these restaurants... We went to this yuppie club last weekend to get a half-price pizza. And while we did get a half-price pizza, it cost more than twice what Mario's cost. And we couldn't even eat it. We had to order the house special to use the coupon; a loaded pizza with pineapple and all sorts of other crap on it. Who likes pineapple and cheese together? We only order your basic pepperoni pizza at Mario's. That pineapple thing wasn't meant to be eaten by human beings, but Dad was happy. We saved enough money there to pay for a trip to McDonald's later that night.

I wonder if Grandma and Grandpa know? Probably not if they agreed to go. They got pulled into the coupon quest once... once. Dad took all of us to see a movie in a theater downtown in the old neighborhood he lived in when he was a kid. Unfortunately that was a long time ago. The neighborhood has changed a bit -- and not for the better (in fact, that's probably why Grandma and Grandpa moved out to the suburbs in the first place). I passed on the

popcorn after I saw a dead bug leaning against the outside glass. The theater seats were all sliced up and no one had cleaned the floor in years. It was like walking on new blacktop. David had to go to the bathroom about halfway through the film, but came back quickly because there were no urinals left; just big gaping holes in the tile on the walls.

Dad was happy he had saved some money, but while walking back to get the car, he had to spend most of the big savings when this big guy walked up to us on the sidewalk; real twitchy like. His eyes were rolling all over and he kept putting his hands in his pockets like he was fumbling for something. He showed my Dad this little gold chain and asked for fifty dollars. Dad only had thirty four, but it was enough. Sold. I remember Dad talking up a storm about the movie, but no one else said a word all the way home.

The next morning I get up early and grab a bowl of Cheerios. David's up already; not surprising after sleeping so long in the car. He puts some cereal in a plastic sandwich bag and heads out the door. I check the clock on the stove; 9:30. Still plenty of blurry cartoons on television to watch.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I met a friend last week," David tells me excitedly. I'm a little surprised. Dad's house is pretty isolated. Judging from the surrounding house skeletons, I figure we won't have neighbors until next spring or summer. If David found a friend, he must live in town. No wonder he was gone all last weekend.

"So what's his name?"

"She's a girl," says Mike. "Her name is Moo."

"Moo?" Odd name. Must be Vietnamese. I know a kid at school named Moo Duck Soon, but he's a guy.

"Want to come with?" I shrug. Why not? Dad's still asleep. I can hear him sawing wood from the bedroom. We walk up the gravel street a block or so. It ends, but we keep going; heading east. Our shadows are long and really distinct on the ground. The sun is burning bright in a sky without clouds, but it's still a little early and kind of cool.

"Your friend gonna be up this early?" David nods. A downright cold breeze whips up a dust devil in the unfinished yard next to us. I feel the grit covering my face and can taste mud in my mouth, but I don't spit. I learned never to spit in the wind the first time Dad came out to Algonquin looking to buy a house. It ended up in my eye.

The subdivision returns to virgin forest less than a mile from Dad's yard. Well, not exactly virgin; there's a lot of pop cans lying around, their sunny sides faded completely white. As we walk, the trash gets older. The cans are now made of steel and almost completely rusted away. Finally, all the trash is gone, not even a Styrofoam McDonald's container blowing in the wind. I stop. There is no sound. No sound at all. Strange. Even at my dad's house, as far away as that is, you can still hear traffic on the main road. Here is nothing. We might as well be back in 1492. It doesn't seem to bother David. He's walking like he knows where we're going and sure enough, the forest ends in a field.

"Be careful," he tells me. "That's barbed wire... And that wire on top --" he points to the top of the fence. "That wire's electrified."

"How would you" escapes from my lips before it dawns on me: I really don't want to know the answer to that question. David crawls underneath the fence easily, but I'm bigger than he is.

The bottom wire stretches a bit then comes crashing down on me; missing my groin by an inch and a half. This better be worth it. I suck in a breath and pull my caught leg through with no harm done to me; just my jeans. The field is a planting-type field. Just dirt. On the other side is another fence -- with wooden slats -- and grass and hills beyond. David runs over and screams Moo at the top of his lungs. I stand and wait, but Moo never shows up. Just some cows ambling over.

Then it dawns on me. "Moo?" I ask pointing to the big old cow looking at us from the other side of the fence. David smiles and begins feeding Moo the Cheerios from his bag. This is too much. The field smells like cow manure (go figure) and the big black and white source doesn't smell much better. David doesn't seem to notice, but it's making me gag.

"Don't you like Moo?" he asks. Yeah, but I'd like her better medium well on a sesame seed bun. David looks like his feelings are hurt, but I can't stand it anymore. No more nature for me.

I get back and Dad's wandering around the house in his boxer shorts.

"Have you seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The coupon book," he says with a little desperation in his voice. "I had it in the top drawer in the kitchen and now it's gone." I try to look concerned, but decide it's not very convincing, so I take a look in the drawers just to make sure. Dad had everything stuffed into the top drawer. There are a couple of towels wedged in among a box of trash bags, pizza coupons from Mario's (save 50 coupons and get a free small cheese pizza!), but no coupon book. Dad's down in the basement; I can hear boxes crashing around. I check the rest of the cabinets and

the freezer. No luck. The medicine cabinet in Dad's bathroom is full of little soaps, but nothing else. Our medicine cabinet is completely empty. I'm about to turn off the light when I see something purple floating in the toilet bowl. The water looks clean, but I don't have to fish it out. I flush it once and a bunch of other purple shards come floating out of the drain hole. Well, what do you know? That little stinker. I guess David must do a lot of dreaming when he's sleeping in the car; that was a brilliant piece of work especially for a little kid. I flush a couple more times to get rid of the evidence, spacing them so dad just thinks I'm ill.

Dinner with Grandma's gets cancelled, but Dad says we'll stop over there tomorrow before going back to Mom's house so David can get his birthday presents: most likely notebook paper, socks and underwear. Grandma and Grandpa are pretty set in their ways. I've been getting socks and underwear for my birthday since I was born and notebook paper ever since I began Kindergarten. And David is in much the same pattern. In fact, Grandma usually buys him about the same size as mine. I can always tell when David wears Grandma's socks. They either ride up to his hips or flop out forwards like Bozo the Clown feet. Oh well. I know Dad's going to give him money because he doesn't

know what we want anymore and Mom will probably take him to Toys 'R' Us after work on Monday and let him pick something out. Sometimes I wish Mom and Dad had split up earlier. When I was a kid, they always tried to pick my stuff out on their own. David won't ever have to worry about his big gift being some baby toy or a chemistry set that will be set aside for years "until you're old enough to be responsible".

Come to think of it, I still haven't got to play with the chemistry set. I wonder whatever happened to it?

It's dinner at Dad's house for the second night in a row and I'm getting a little bored by it. We always eat at home when we're with Mom. That's one of the few good things about coming out to Dad's house. We always have Mario's Pizza and McDonald's and other fast food. Tonight it's Dad's so called "special mostaciolli" and a can of generic peas courtesy of a big sale at Jewel about a month ago. Dad bought a whole cart full of cans there. The cashier girl couldn't believe it and people were staring at us in line. David thought it was kind of funny, but I felt like crawling under a rock. I tried to walk away, but Dad called for me from the checkout line and made me carry a bunch of the bags -- all chock full of peas. I hate peas. Especially now that we have them with every home meal. I try to hold off the inevitable. David isn't back yet; we can't eat without him, but Dad's not too worried. I tell him about Moo and he thinks it's good he has a friend. Dad is acting a bit strange again; looking at me funny like he was Friday night. Maybe he found more of the coupon book floating in our john. Maybe he thinks I did it. I'll bet that's it. I try not to notice his covert glances at me. Just eat my peas quietly; get them over with so I can wash my mouth out with the tomato sauce on the mostaciolli.

"So," starts Dad acting kind of leisurely, "how's your girlfriend?" A couple of peas head up my nose but I cough and get them back where they belong -- on the plate. I wipe the tears from the corners of my eyes and try to recover.

"Dad, I don't have a girlfriend." He nods with mock understanding; his poker face not working as always. Oh no. He can't know about the girl in square dancing. He just can't.

"Well, you must like someone." There's a trap here, waiting to spring on me. But for the life of me, I don't know what he could be leading up to this time. Usually Dad is pretty

transparent because I watch the same sitcoms he does. But I think he made this up on his own. Best to go on with the vague truth.

"Yeah, I suppose..."

Dad pounces on my answer. "So what's her name?" I just look at him blankly. Like I would say her name even I did know it. He continues, "Let's start with A through M."

"And what -- do N through Z next weekend?"

Dad laughs -- too loud. "We can narrow it down. How about K through M?" I stare blankly again, but this time it's an honest blank. "How about L?" What is he talking about?

"How about Linda?"

Linda? Linda who? I run all the girls I know through my head and can't think of a single Linda. Of course Dad hasn't been to an open house at my school since fourth grade. Maybe I had a Linda in class back then. I try to think, but my life before the divorce seems like it was from a whole different person. Linda... Linda... who could he mean?

Dad tells me how he solved the case from the clues. "I found your love letter while you were packing up last week." Dad says something else, but I don't hear it over my own laughter.

"Why didn't you tell me right off? You shouldn't be going out with girls behind my back." I try to catch my breath, but I can't. My sides hurt and it's spreading to my chest. Dad looks nonplussed.

"I'm very disappointed..."

Tears are rolling down my cheeks. I wipe them off, but more take their place. I just can't stop. Dad must think I'm crazy, but then -- hell, I guess it runs in the family. At least I know what happened to my English homework. Love letter? I start

laughing all over again because I can just see him jumping to all these bizarre conclusions. I can just see it.

Oh, God, I hurt. I can't pull in a breath without a pain in my stomach and my sides are screaming at me. My laughter drops down to a few giggles and I clear my eyes.

"Dad, I --" I don't know where to start; my father is nuts. "Dad, Linda is not my girlfriend. She lives in England. I had to write to her for class." Now it's Dad's turn to stare at me. I can see the wheels in his mind turning and clicking. He folds his hands and clears his throat, probably trying to come up with an apology.

"You're ashamed of me," he says. "I can understand that. You're ashamed of your old man and don't want him around when your with your friends." That's true, but what does that have to do with me having a girlfriend? I don't think Dad got the message.

"Dad --"

He waves me off. "You really should give Algonquin a chance. Sure it's not like Schaumburg --" I have to agree. "It's calm and peaceful; not with all the hustle and bustle of Schaumburg." In other words boring as sin for anyone under 30.

"Bowling." What? "Bowling," says Dad, finally gone round the bend. "You could take her bowling out here. There's an alley in town --"

"DAD! STOP IT!" I try to explain the situation again; this time slower, using short simple words that even my father should understand, but it's no use. This is like the time Dad thought I was taking drugs because he read an article most kids are on crack by the time they're in seventh grade. And every time I tried to explain I was clean, he kept telling me I was in denial. I couldn't win.

I still can't win. I told him I'd get off the junk starting the next day. This time, I say Linda and I broke up. He can understand that and puts an arm around my shoulder as I tell him all the gruesome details of a romance gone sour.

"See? Doesn't it feel better to come clean with your old Dad?" Oh, yeah. We're really bonding now. Great.

But it doesn't end there. "You know there are plenty of fish in the sea," Dad tells me. I nod. Yep. Fish, sea, lots of 'em. "And it doesn't hurt to know how to put on a few moves." I don't believe this. Dad is going to give me his secrets on women; probably what he used on Mom (and look how well that turned out).

"Women love a guy who can dance." What? I think Dad actually said something that made sense. I tune in to the conversation again. "Most guys don't know how to dance; they think they'll look stupid." I can agree with that. Dad runs downstairs to the basement, talking all the way.

"Now I'm sure the dances have changed a bit since I married your mother, but I can show you a few basic steps and you can just make up the rest... ah, here we are." Dad slips a couple of records on the stereo in the family room. David walks in the house at that moment expecting a birthday present, but Dad shoos him back into the kitchen. This is great. If I can come up with a way to actually talk to that girl and get her to dance -- a real dance. The possibilities are endless.

"Now just watch the basics. You can adapt it to the music you listen to later." I nod and watch Dad carefully as the turntable hums to life. The feet will probably be the hardest thing to follow. I better watch them so I don't accidentally step on her foot. The music starts and my Dad squats down.

"Come on baby... let's do the twist..." There's blood in my mouth. I think I just bit my tongue off trying not to laugh. My lungs can't take any more of that kind of punishment. But this -- this is too much. My dad is whirling and gyrating all over the room. He even jumps up on the coffee table and begins shimmying up and imaginary rope when the next song comes on. It's called the monkey -- and I recognize it from the hippies in the "Beverly Hillbillies". Dad's hair is flying all over. Literally (only the back and sides are really his).

"I remember back in the army. My buddy was from New York and he taught me to twist almost a year before it hit Chicago." Dad laughs and jumps around to something called the mashed potato. It looks like someone set his socks on fire and he's trying to stomp them out.

"I was home on a three day pass. The twist came on and I walked over to a girl standing with a couple of her friends. I asked her to dance, but she said she didn't know how. 'That's okay, baby,' I said. 'I'll show you how it's done.' And you know what? That girl was your mother." Okay, that's it. I walk over to the turntable, stopping Dad in mid mash.

"Why did you stop the music?" asks Dad. "You want to try it?" I shake my head. Dad was really trying to help me, so I think of a way to be polite. Where to start?

"Dad... about the music..." This is going to hurt no matter how I do it. "Dad... uh, no one..." I trail off, but Dad urges me on. "Dad, no one dances like that anymore." There. It's out. Dad looks surprised by the news; like he can't believe it. The twist? Dead? I can see it in his eyes. It's like losing an old friend.

"So, what are some of the new moves nowadays?" Good question. I've seen M-TV on cable at my friends' house, but I don't remember the dances having names. People just sort of -- go to the music. I try to think of something, anything.

"Well, there's all kinds..."

"Like what?"

For some reason Michael Jackson comes to mind. I don't even like Michael Jackson. "Well, there's moonwalking."

"What's that?" Boy, Dad has been out of it for a while.

"Well, you walk backwards, you see, but you look like you're walking... forwards..." Dad puts me under scrutiny as I lamely try to slip across the room backwards, but it just doesn't work very well on shag carpeting. I think you need a slippery surface.

"That's kind of stupid," says Dad. I can't really argue. I guess stupid dances are one bond we can share.

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I don't believe this. There's a dance tonight at school. I want to go with The Girl, and I've seen her everyday this week. Hell, she's been my square dancing partner all week, but I haven't said one word to her. Not that I haven't tried. Yesterday I started talking to Greg about the cool things we were going to do after school. You know, play in our band or practice karate. I figure if she got interested, maybe she would join the conversation. That's all I need. Once she says something, I can say something and make her laugh. And if you can make a girl laugh, she's yours. Mike says that worked with Jenny and since they went out once on an actual date, it must work. And I think my plan would have worked if only Greg had played along. He kept

looking at me with these "what the hell are you talking about" expressions on his face. He just would not get the hint.

Now it's too late. We walked into the gym a couple of minutes ago and the girls weren't out there. It's our turn to be the chosen. I sit with Greg and Frank and this little kid -- we call him Sherman because he looks like the kid in the cartoons with Mr. Peabody. He got moved up a couple of grades and looks like he's about 5 years old. The girls are out now, walking around all the squares. Figures. The little kid gets picked first and she's not too bad looking. There's a girl about the size of a linebacker looking at me. I try to ignore her; maybe she'll go away. Greg is looking at me weird and I'm trying not to look at him either. However he looks at me awhile, then at the girl, then starts laughing like an idiot. At least she gets mad and joins another square, so I guess I won't have to kill him. And he's going to get his just desserts, the girl that just sat down next to him is a skyscraper. I think she's taller than both of us just sitting down. Should be fun to watch them promenade.

Yes! The girl -- I mean -- The Girl sits next to me. She picked me. Be cool. I try not to notice her too much. I look at Greg instead and it's actually pretty easy to feign interest. Greg is sending sideways glances at the giant sitting next to him. I think it's fear in his eyes, but I can't be sure. He's in shadow right now.

There's a tap on my shoulder. "What's your name?" The Girl asks me. I don't believe this. She wants to talk to me. She's interested. She wants to know my name.

That's a good question.

For crying out loud, I knew it this morning when I was on the bus, I wrote it down on my homework. Fumbling around, I finally point down to my name marked on my shirt. She laughs.

"I'm Karen," she says pointing to her chest. I listen for some conversation, something witty or funny, something in the fucking English language to come from my mouth, but -- no. Nothing. Karen turns around and starts talking to her friend -- the big girl; I recognize her now. I'm left trying to listen in on their conversation and kicking myself for not saying anything else. It was my chance. My last chance and I blew it. The music starts. I bow to her and Karen curtseys back. We're not too bad at this now, even if my heart isn't in it somehow.

This day's a waste. Ms. Davies finally writes on the board "Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy." after we just spent most of English class trying to spell it. Ms. Davies didn't realize how hard it was for us, she seems to think we'd heard it before. I guess it's another one of those symbolic things. I turn in my spelling -- just like she said it: MAREZEDOTESANDOEZEEDOTESANDLITTULDAMSDEEDIVEY. She looks at it and says she wants me to stay after school today. What did I do? She won't say. Just wants me to meet her in the office after school. I thought I was in good with her; maybe she finally saw Star Trek.

No point in going back to my locker, I forgot my lunch today. I go straight to the cafeteria and sit at the table. God, I can't believe how I've screwed up. It was the chance I had been waiting for with Karen. She talked to me. She wanted to talk to me. I made her laugh. It was perfect, except for me. She probably thinks I hate her now; that was my last chance. I wonder -- maybe I'm actually gay or something. That's why I couldn't talk to her. I suppose in a way it's good. Tonight I'll just go with Dad like I always do. The other way there would have been too many

questions and Dad would have probably tried to teach me something else.

Greg comes in with Mike. I guess they expect me to joke around with them, but I'm not in the mood. I don't feel like talking just now. They sit down with their brown bags and school milk and say -- something. I don't know, I'm not really listening. Aaaah --

POW! Mike's punch just about knocks me off my stool. What was that for?

"We're trying to give you good news, Dickhead!" What? I'm a little surprised by the answer, so I don't smack him back.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your teacher," Greg says. "She's the hippie one, right?" I nod. "She was in talking to our teacher while we were taking a test. She was talking about you."

"What did she say?"

"I'm getting to that!" Oh, sorry (dick). Greg recovers. "She turned in some stuff you wrote in class to the writing contest." Wait. This is beginning to make some sense. Staying after school, a contest. I'll bet I won.

"First place is fifty bucks," says Mike. "What are you going to buy?"

"Well, I haven't won yet..." I laugh modestly. Inside I'm dancing. Fifty dollars? Fifty dollars! That's a lot of money. I could buy --

I have to think. What could I buy? Fifty dollars is in that grey area. It's not a big amount; like enough to get a bike or even a good skateboard. But it's bigger than a regular amount. Bigger than birthday money; and I won't have to put half of this

in the bank anyway. This is going to require some serious thought.

I am on air the rest of the day. I feel great. I even raise my hand to answer a problem in math class. Of course I make fun of Mr. Freeley behind his back, but it's nothing serious. The Diet Dr. Pepper stays on his desk unmolested. Even after I get the problem completely and utterly wrong. Who cares? I'm a writer now. Math has no meaning. Except maybe to count all the money that's rolling in. Near the end of the hour, they announce the writing awards over the P.A. system. Two short stories pass then my name --

"Jeff Smeltzer: third place for the short story 'Visit to Another Planet'." Oh, wow! I forgot about that one! I guess none of the teachers watched Star Trek (and a lot of them are from the sixties). I guess that's symbolic too. I'm going to be raking in the dough now. Third place means ten more dollars.

"Jeff Smeltzer: second place for the poem 'A Special Girl'." I don't hear the rest. Second place? I won second place?! That was my poem about Karen! I ripped open my heart writing that poem and all I got was second place? Mike pats me on the back and a couple of people are snickering in the back of the class. Very romantic, I hear. I'll deal with that later. Right now, I'm mad.

I head for the office right out of class. No point going to my locker. I can do that before catching the late bus home. My poem and story are taped up on the front window along with the other winners. The first place poem is called "Our Town". I can just tell it's a girl's poem. I read it slowly then read it again; to make sure I didn't miss anything. No, that's all there is. My beautiful Karen, beaten by a poem about Schaumburg; subdivision, shopping malls, even the tollway is mentioned. For

crying out loud, the tollway gets its own stanza! So much for love. I'm getting twenty five dollars for the poem and ten for the story. That's not too bad considering I only worked on them for a couple of hours tops. But something's wrong. I feel kind of empty in my stomach; not just because I skipped lunch. I should have won. If I really loved Karen, I should have won.

There's going to be a little ceremony in the cafeteria. It looks so different with all the tables folded up and pushed against the walls. There are several rows of real chairs and one table left near the front with a little portable podium on it. I guess that's the place. Someone from the school newsletter staff takes my picture and asks me all sorts of questions. How did I get the idea for my story? I don't know. It just sort of came to me. What about the poem? I shrug my shoulders. What am I going to do with the money? I shake my head. I haven't really thought about it. Ms. Davies walks over to me to congratulate me. She says she's very proud to have me in class.

I'm supposed to sit in the front row, one seat from the aisle. The principal comes in with the awards and some of the other winners sit down by me. The other short story winners are eighth graders. Cool. I guess I didn't do too bad. They'll be gone next year, so I'll kick some butt. Some other teachers are sitting in the chairs behind me, the secretary from the office as well. She has a stack of papers which she starts to hand out. It's copies of the winning stories and poems; all typed out and stapled and everything. A guy in a suit comes in; I think he's the superintendent. He's the only one in a full suit; the school doesn't have air conditioning and the other male teachers don't wear suit coats. Some girl I don't know sits down next to me. She must be an eighth grader; she's wearing makeup. There are thick black rings of it around her eyes. I ask her -- quietly and

with as much respect as I can muster for an elder -- if she won the first prize poem. She takes one look at me and turns the other way without answering my question. She must be the third place winner. Ha! I beat an eighth grader. Too bad.

Maybe I'm the only seventh grader who won anything. That would be really cool. Next year, I'll own this contest. Someone taps me on the shoulder --

"Hi again." It's Karen! Eighty four thoughts jump into my head all at once and it almost gives me a stroke trying to wrestle them under control. What's she doing here? Why's she talking to us? Wow, she smells nice. She's so pretty.

"Hey," I say, plucking the word from the chaos in my brain.

"Did you win something too?" she asks. I nod. Karen sits down next to me; maybe she like me still. No, that's not it. The truth begins to sink in. It's like some warped sitcom on television. There I was, pouring out my heart to Karen; doing my hardest and she beat me with a poem about shopping malls and tollways. I guess I really care a lot.

Wait a minute. I shiver. Does she know? I take a quick look at her at my side. She's thumbing through the packet a little and looking around at all the people. She looks back at me and smiles, a little nervously.

"A lot of people here," she says. "And I think we're the only seventh graders." She turns serious for a minute. "You are in seventh grade, right?"

I nod. YES! She thought I might be an eighth grader! This girl is totally great. I've got to talk to her, but now the principal has begun to say a few words to the winners (a few million is more like it; he talks for fifteen minutes without coming up for air). Then it's time to get the money. We stand up

and wait in line. Someone wants to take our picture all together. I have to stand on my tip toes, so they can see me over the eighth grade girl. They probably can't see Karen at all. The principal announces my name for the short story. I walk up and he shakes my hand and gives me a certificate with his other hand. I turn to go, but the principal decides to say a few words about my writing. Is it science fiction? I nod. Apparently a name like "Visit to Another Planet" wasn't clear enough for him. The certificate has an envelope paper-clipped to the edge. Karen looks over my shoulder as I take out the check.

The rest of the awards go pretty much the same way. An introduction, a certificate, a joke and a check. The poetry awards are next. Andrea -- the eighth grade girl -- wins third place for a sonnet. The principal calls her "our budding Shakespeare", but Andrea doesn't smile. I guess she knows Shakespeare was a guy.

"Our second place prize goes to Jeff Smeltzer for his poem 'A Special Girl'" All the adults in the audience rise up with as collective "aww". I give them one good glare before I regain control. Smile. Remember to smile. Remember, check. Big check. The principal has a grin on his face pushing out his dimples farther than his nose. He hands me the certificate and puts a shoulder on my shoulder as I try to escape.

"Anyone we know inspire this?" he asks. Yeah, I'm standing next to her, but like I'd tell you that. The audience is laughing like crazy. I just mumble something under my breath and stand back in the line with Karen and the others. Karen gets her award then we all get to sit down again. The principal says a few more words about us young authors and we're finally free to go. I think about saying something to Karen, but she stands up before I have a chance to speak.

I walk back to my locker. It seems so different this time of day with no one around. The main lights are off already; long bright streaks split the hallway wherever there's a door open to a class that faces the sun. My locker door echoes through the school when I open it and again when it slams shut. The sports teams are already on the late bus; sitting in the back joking and laughing and swearing. I sit up front because I don't play. And I'm just a seventh grader.

"Hey, can I sit with you?" I look up. It's Karen.

"Sure," I croak out with a minimum of effort. I think it's getting easier to talk to her. I mean, I still have that funny feeling in my stomach every time I'm near her, but I can live with that.

"I liked your poem," she says.

"Thanks. Yours was good too," I reply calmly. There's no problems with talking to her now. It's like she was just another guy... except she smells so much nicer.

"I liked the way your poem rhymed," I add.

"Thanks," she says. Karen looks down at her handout; her blond hair falling in her eyes. She blows it away with a distracted breath upwards. "I liked your poem a lot. It's so -- you know, romantic."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. It's really great."

"Thanks." This conversation's going well. I could talk to her about anything now.

"So, did you write this for class or something?"

?

"I mean," Karen says looking right in my eyes with her really, really blue ones, "did you write this about anybody?" I swallow and laugh a little. This is the moment of truth.

So I was wrong. Karen thought the whole thing was funny and it's true. When a girl laughs, she likes you. We're going to the dance tonight. That was the easy part. Now it's ten minutes to six. Dad will be here any minute and I'll have to tell him I have a girlfriend. A real girlfriend. Even worse, that I'm going to the dance and won't be coming out with him to Algonquin tonight. The last time we didn't go out on a weekend was when I had strep throat. I was running a 104 degree fever all weekend, coughing and sniffing and wishing I was dead. The next weekend Dad met me at the door at five to six, looking hard at my hands.

"Your fingers don't look broken to me," he said coldly. Of course not, I had strep. "So why didn't you call? Forget about me?"

"Dad --" But that was all I could get out. Dad was on a rampage. He didn't hit me or anything like that, but it was almost as bad. I didn't make up with him until he had me up on a ladder helping him fix the siding under the eaves. Every time we'd hammer a piece back on, the piece underneath would fall off. It took two weeks to finish the job -- including staying an extra Monday at Dad's house. It was still summer and Mom never mentioned it.

Dad's car is in the driveway. I wait for the bell to ring before I get up off my bed. I haven't packed anything even though David has asked about it twice. No. I won't be going; no matter what. I answer the door braced for the impact I know will be there.

"Jeff..." I was going to just tell him outright and be done with it, but something's different. Dad's standing in the doorway. "Can I come in?" What? Dad actually willing to come into Mom's house? Then I know. Someone's died. That must be it. Grandma or Grandpa.

Dad won't sit down. He paces a little, but stays within one step away from the open front door like he doesn't want to be trapped. He wrings his hands together.

"Jeff, I won't be able to pick you guys up this weekend," he says with a little laugh. It can't be a death in the family. Dad seems kind of -- embarrassed.

"What's going on?" Dad doesn't say anything for a long time, but out of the corner of my eye I see something move outside. There's someone else in Dad's car.

"We can -- uh -- do something fun next weekend, okay?" he says. "I think we've done enough hard work for awhile." I smile and nod. It's what I usually do, but this I mean it as something else. And Dad understands this time. We hug before he leaves.