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## Seagulls

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# CHAD JOHNSON

## *Seagulls*

C heck her out. She looks all right, Dennis said.

Which one? Rod asked. The one with the crew cut?

It's not a crew cut, Dennis said, It's just really short.

We were cruising the strip, Dennis, Rod, and me. We always said we didn't want to, that cruising was for the desperate losers, but all the lanes at the bowling alley were taken and you had to be twenty-one to play pool. Besides, truth was, we were like everyone else, looking for something to happen, to us, to anybody.

We were driving in Rod's blue Mustang, a present for his sixteenth birthday. Dennis sat shotgun while I smoked in the back. Me and Dennis didn't have cars and, since Rod had been going out with Jennifer steady, me and Dennis were usually stuck at Dennis' on Friday and Saturday nights. We watched TV or played video games and drank Dennis' father's beer. Then, a couple months ago, Dennis' mother took off, just left one day without even a note. Since then Dennis was edgy about me staying at his house too long, about me sleeping on the couch like I normally did. It was more difficult to avoid home then. I'd walk to a 7-11 or something and play arcade games until I ran out of money. Then I'd go home to find everybody at home asleep. Just breathing, a little raspy breathing.

That's the ugliest bitch I've seen all night, I heard Rod say.

No, no, Dennis said. There's something about her, something right about her.

When we cruised the strip, all we did was look for girls passing by in cars or standing together on corners and tell each other how well we'd screw them and for how long. Hours, man, hours.

If any of them had actually singled us out, had looked at us with a beckoning pout of the lips, we would probably have shriveled into our seats and sped by. And there was no plan B. But we felt powerful inside that Mustang with a thick cushion of stereophonic noise around our heads, electric windows sliding up to shut off the outside world if we wanted. We were safe in that car, we were everything. I sat in the back seat picking at the dead skin around my thumb. There were no girls out there I wanted anyway, not even to brag.

Stop, Rod. Pull up to her, Dennis kept saying. This was new, this was different. I'd never heard Dennis push it so far. I found the girl he was interested in standing with a couple of friends in front of the glowing, pink Baskin-Robbins store. She had short black hair and her face was white, almost a glowing white, and her lips were painted a dark purple that looked black in the dim light. She was dressed all in black—leather jacket, leggings, and Doc Martens like combat boots. A real ass stomping, angel of death type. She was just standing there with her arms folded while her friends were calling out and gesturing to passing cars. Some Old guy in a Volvo looking for young love honked at them as he drove by. Her friends flipped him off.

Come on, Dennis said. Pull up, I need to talk to her.

Rod looked back at me. The headlights of cars behind us reflected off his glasses. Whadda ya think, Dylan, should I pull up?

Hell no, I said. What are you thinkin, Denny? That girl would kick your flabby ass.

We passed the girl by and Dennis tilted his head to watch her until she was far gone and out of view. He looked for her in the rearview mirror and sighed, a deep from the balls sigh. I felt a spike of guilt when I smelled the breath of that sigh, I hadn't thought he was serious.

Dennis twisted around to face me so I could hear him over the radio. He was Mexican, Dennis was, but his face looked more Spanish than Indian, his skin wasn't very dark. His black hair was short and cut with a bowl style. His eyes were black and bulged out a little from his round face. He had nice teeth but he didn't like to show them when he smiled. And he was always smiling, Dennis was, more than anyone I knew.

I wanted to talk to her, he said. The way she was just lookin at all the cars and stuff, like she was listenin for something real far away. I don't know, I just thought she was nice.

What? Rod asked. What'd he say? I can't hear for this damned radio.

Nothin, Dennis said to Rod. He looked back at me.

What would you have said to her if we'd stopped? I asked.

I don't know. Maybe what I just told you. Dennis turned his head back to the front and turned up the radio. My head was near the speakers in back and the music was loud enough now so that I could feel a pain in my ears.

I'm sorry, Denny, I said, but he couldn't hear me for the music.

We flipped a u-turn at the doughnut shop and headed in the opposite direction, towards downtown. Mexicans in neon colored low riders slipped by us and white kids in Toyota sedans. A few white kids were driving small pickup trucks with the windows tinted and the bass of hip-hop music vibrating the streets. They had their hats flipped backwards like black guys and the guys from Seaside, the real black guys, just shook their heads at them when they went by. Past the bowling alley, past the pizza place, the bank with the lights turned off, the Foster's Freeze, the 7-11, the Exxon station, all of it again and again and as slow as we could mangle without pissing anybody off, watching the people on the street move their legs up and down to keep warm. It was July, but it was still cold at night.

Where's Jennifer? Dennis asked Rod up front. I was the one who introduced Rod and Jennifer, sort of. Rod had transferred to our school from San Jose. His father was setting up something with computers in Salinas and had to transfer. Rod just happened to be in five of my classes so we almost had to become friends. I'd known Jennifer since junior high. She was all right. We talked when we had a chance and we sat next to each other if we shared a class. Jennifer was pretty enough with her smooth, brown hair tossed around her shoulders and her athletic body. What I liked about her was the way she cut through the bullshit. She didn't walk around school waving her ass at the water fountain or drawing little hearts in her notebook. You spend so much time killing your words before you speak to people, killing them so that the words become dead sounds that fall invisible at your

feet. But Jennifer only laughed when something was funny and cried when something was sad and when I talked to her my words shot into the air and wrote their meanings across the sky.

Anyway, I was talking to Jennifer one day after I'd met Rod. He's a good enough looking guy with his blonde hair slicked back with mousse and his dark eyes. He had a weight set at home and he filled out a shirt like I never would. While I was talking to Jennifer one day before class started, Rod said hello and I introduced them. Rod said a couple of things to me then leaned his elbows on Jennifer's desk and asked her if she liked movies. When she said yes he said Good. I have a car. A Mustang. And just like that.

What? Rod asked. Dennis turned down the stereo.

I was just askin where Jennifer is, why you didn't bring her along, Dennis said.

At home, I guess. We had a fight so I told her she could keep her ass home tonight.

Dennis picked up a condom from the dash. Since Rod had started screwing Jennifer he kept condoms everywhere. On the dash, in his locker, inside his books. His wallet was so loaded with them every time he opened it up condoms fell out. If he reached into his pockets for his keys, condoms fell out. When he picked one up after dropping it he would always flip it into his hand as if it were a quarter before putting it back where it came from. It was condoms from heaven any time Rod was around.

Dennis held the condom and said, So I guess you won't be needing this tonight, huh?

I was watching the street scene out the window. A Mexican guy stood up on a bench and whipped out his pecker. He started screaming and pissing on cars that drove by. People were flipping him off, throwing bottles and cans at him. His friends standing around the bench laughed or looked embarrassed depending on how loaded they were. He just kept screaming and pissing an endless electric arc. A car full of girls drove by and shouted out the obvious, Hey Tiny, and shit like that. Yeah yeah yeah, I thought. It would only have been interesting if somebody jumped up there with him, pissing along with him while they sang some old, forgotten songs. But now one did, no one in this town had any style at all.

Shit! Like you're ever gonna need one. Besides, there's plenty of time for Mr. Condom, Rod said to Dennis. I need a breather anyway. My pecker's about worn out. Jenny just can't get enough, you know. Hey Dylan!

What, I said and watched Rod's face watching me in the rear-view.

You remember what you told me about Jennifer when I first met you? About her eyes?

No, I said and took a deep drag that sucked down half my cigarette. I exhaled enough smoke to make Dennis cough and wave his hand in front of his face.

Remember? You said, She has eyes like cool summer hills. Remember that?

No, I said. It didn't sound like something I'd say, but then it seemed I wasn't always myself.

I told her you said that. Guess what she said. Rod's face in the mirror was wearing a wide smile, a giant, fanged crease between his ears.

No.

She said, Dylan's a poet. Dylan's a poet! Can you believe that. Dylan who got a "D" in English.

No, I said, I'm not anything.

There she is again! Dennis said. It was the girl with purple lips. We'd come back around her corner again. There were a couple of white guys wearing bomber jackets hanging out with them now. The girl Dennis liked wasn't talking to them, only her friends were. I saw what Dennis meant when he said it was like she was listening for something. Her chin was tilted slightly to the sky and her hands were before her with her fingers laced together. Listening for something maybe, or trying not to hear.

Do you want to stop, I asked him. He sighed again and reached back to grab one of my cigarettes. He didn't light it, he just rolled it around his lips then stuck it behind his ear.

Nah, he said. Not now.

A poet! a poet! Rod said and giggled as he reached to turn up the radio.

God, this is boring, Rod said: It was getting late, around midnight. Anybody who had a place to go, a party or somebody's house, had gone. Only the hard core were still on the strip, gangs

of Mexicans and Filipinos, a couple of hookers looking for easy johns, sixteen year olds that might be only five minutes work if they touched them right. There were a lot of cops patrolling now and when they drove by us they shined their lights into the car so we had to shield our eyes with our hands.

Yeah, Dennis said. Let's drive somewhere. Let's just go somewhere and hang out for awhile.

I don't know, Rod said. It's getting late. I told my mom—

No, I said, Denny's right. My parents don't care if I'm out late, Denny's pop doesn't care. Hell, Denny's pop is probably out late himself. Let's go to Carmel and get a bonfire going. A big ass raging fire to wake the sea gulls up.

Yeah! Yeah! said Dennis.

But my mom—

Look, Rod, don't be a pussy, I said. There's a pay phone at the beach, in the parking lot. You can call her from there. All right? Hell, it's only twelve. Let's roll. No way I'm going home yet. No fucking way.

I watched for his face in the rearview, but I only saw my blue eyes staring back at me. He didn't say anything. The CD in the stereo stopped playing and he let the local pop station come on the radio.

And turn that dance hall shit off, I said. It's rock n roll for a road trip or it's nothing at all. Rod still didn't say anything. It was Dennis that switched the radio to a college station out of Santa Cruz playing songs no one ever heard more than once, songs impossible to sing along with. I liked that, not being able to crush a song by memorizing the lyrics. Just let it all pass, let it pass. I put my last cigarette between my lips and sucked.

We were all quiet for the first half of the drive down Highway 68 except for Dennis. He hummed along with the songs and mumbled the words of the choruses repeated enough to brainwash. I stretched out on the back seat and watched the broken shapes the silhouetted oaks made on the top of the hills. During the day the hills here were blonde with dried grass and spotted orange with poppies while the oaks stretched from the ground like thoughts working toward some conclusion. But now, at night, the hill was a faded black and the oaks looked as if they were the bones of dinosaurs put together ass-side up, then left

frozen on the side of a hill to sort out their confusion. Up and up and down and down, or something like that, something twisted like that.

We drove for about twenty minutes, until we came down a hill and were on the Monterey side of 68. The lonely oaks were replaced by thick clusters of cypress and pine. The groves of trees pressed closer and closer until a dark, hairy barricade was built up along the side of the highway. We passed Laguna Seca and talked about going to see the Indy car races next month or the Supercross when it came. We were on the outskirts of Monterey when the signal from the Santa Cruz station died and was replaced by staticky country music. Rod turned the radio off and yawned a wide, dramatic yawn. He turned to Dennis.

What were you gonna say to Purple Lips, man? he asked.

I don't know, Dennis said. Ask her name, I guess.

If she'd taken you home would you have gone down on her, would you have licked her snatch? Would you have bent her over, huh, stud?

I don't know. Is this before or after she told me her name? Dennis took the cigarette from behind his ear and ripped the paper around the tobacco off.

You're such a fag, Rod said. You probably would have asked her to watch you jerk off, huh? Both you guys? Hey, Dylan, you still playin with yourself in the shower? Still growin hair on your palms?

I sat up and leaned my head over the front seat. We were merging from 68 to Highway 1, the Pacific Coast Highway. We were almost to the beach. I could already smell it. Dennis cracked the window and let the little pile of tobacco and paper in his hand fly into the night.

No, I said. How can I grab hold of my pecker with your mother's lips around it all the time?

Yeah, you're funny, Rod said. He looked at me in the mirror then went back to watching the road. I sat back in the seat.

Dennis and his purple-lipped whore! Rod said to no one in particular. No one offered him any answer, at least.

I should be with Jennifer now, Rod went on. I should be laying into Jennifer tonight. You guys just tell me where to turn off. I forget which fuckin turn off it is.



Just stay on One until you come to Ocean Avenue, Dennis said. Then make a right.

Highway 1 narrowed to two lanes with stop signs and lights to slow traffic down. There were houses now set back a little from the road and surrounded by trees, pines and cypresses and redwood. The houses were well lit and had stone walkways. A few of them had signs on their mailboxes with the family name painted in script letters. The Krause's, The Thompkin's. Rod turned left on Ocean Ave. and we headed for the beach.

Are we gonna be here long? Rod asked. I'm already tired. It's already pretty late.

That's OK, I said. I'll drive back for you.

The hell you will. Where's the beach?

Just keep going, Dennis said. It's just at the end of this street. Ocean Ave. was lined with trees and art galleries, restaurants and boutiques. Not stores, boutiques. A lot of antique places and tourist shops selling crap you had to be stupid or rich to want. The place was deserted now and, when we got to the parking lot for the beach, there was only one other car. Rod parked underneath and arc lamp and we all piled out and stretched our arms and legs in long, cat stretches. It hadn't been a long drive but we were all tired, the blood was slowing in our veins. My pack of cigarettes was empty and I left the wrapper on the floor of the car. Rod walked over to the phone booth near the bathrooms and called his mother. I couldn't hear what he said until he started yelling, But I'm already here, Mom, I'm already here! He came back and we started down the long sand slope to the water.

Man, I can't believe how clear it is tonight! Dennis said. No fog at all. Nothing. Check out all the stars! Which one is Pisces? That's my sign. Which one is it?

It's not a star, dipshit, Rod said. It's a constellation. But I don't know which one it is. That's the Big Dipper, though. Or the little one, I guess.

It was clear. The moonlight was free and made the sand look like a silver liquid, like a spread of mercury. And past the mercury was the black velvet of the ocean, solid black except for the broken, yellow pieces of the moon's reflection in the waves. Close to the water we found an abandoned bonfire with the coals still glowing. The waves were crashing with that comfortable,

irregular rhythm and the tops of the breakers were rows of white wild flowers exploding from the cracks of asphalt. And the smell, not just of salt, but of something else, something I couldn't give a name to, something I couldn't compare to anything else. You just have to know that smell.

Jesus, it's cold, Rod said. If I'd known we were comin here I'd've brought a damned jacket. I hate the cold.

We'll get the fire going, Dennis said. Rod and I sat by the coals while Dennis collected armfuls of firewood, logs and thin, dry sticks. He set the thin sticks on the coals and blew until little tongues of flame wrapped around the wood. When the fire was going big enough, he set the logs in the fire and fed more sticks around the logs so it wouldn't go out. In a few minutes, we had the raging fire we'd envisioned. Orange, white, red and dancing triangles.

There! Dennis said and stood watching the fire with his arms folded.

There! he said and just looked at it, grinning.

We talked for awhile around the fire about sports, the weather, girls we didn't care about. Dead things falling from our mouths to be buried in the sand. Then we stopped talking and watched the fire and listened to the ocean and the wind singing across the sand. Dennis was crouched on his knees throwing dried strands of kelp into the fire. They turned white then orange then black and disappeared with the ash beneath the logs. Rod spread himself lengthwise along the fire with his elbows tucked behind his head like wings. The fire reflected red and wavering across his glasses. I sat Indian style before the fire, digging a hole in the sand with my fingers, feeling the grains dig into the tender skin beneath my nail. The moon was high, the moon was straight up into space.

So what's the deal with your mom, Dennis? Rod asked. Dennis threw another piece of kelp into the fire then poked at a log with a stick.

I don't know. I haven't heard anything. My dad tells me she's trying to get a divorce.

Is she lying with some other guy, or what?

I don't know Dennis said. She's just gone, that's all. Dennis took off his shoes and socks. He stuck one sock in each shoe then stood and rolled up the cuffs of his jeans.

I'm going to go walk in the surf a little, he said.

You're crazy, Rod said. It's freezing. You're gonna freeze.

No, no. It's cold outside so the water will feel warm. I've done it before. It's OK.

Whatever, Rod said. Dennis took off jogging down the beach, almost skipping the way he does when he's excited and he thinks nobody is watching him. He'd been gone a couple of minutes when I heard him making sea gull screams at the top of his lungs. Aaaaahh Aaaaahh he was yelling in a cracking falsetto. I imagined Dennis running around with his arms outspread, wing-style, flying into the surf to pick off a fish to eat, then flying back through the flock of sea gulls resting on the beach with one eye closed. I laughed and threw a handful of sand into the fire because I knew that's exactly what he was doing. I'd known Dennis a long time.

Man, he's looney, Rod said. One crazy sonofabitch, Rod said.

Why don't you leave him alone about his mother, I said. He worries about her.

Rod sat up and crossed his legs before him with his body propped on his arms behind.

You know, he said, You've been on my ass all night. If you've got a problem with me, why don't you just say it. Right now.

I've got no problem with you, Rod, I said. Another handful of sand into the fire.

Good, because I was really starting to wonder.

No problem at all, I said. Down the beach, Dennis was still calling to the gulls.

I hit her, Rod said. The fire was waning so I was putting on another log when he said it. I sat back down and put my hand into the sand.

What? You hit who?

Jennifer. I told you we got in a fight. Well, I hit her. Once. In the face. Hard.

It's none of my business, I said.

No, no, Rod said. I want us to talk about it. We're friends, right? Friends talk about stuff like this, right? *We are* friends?

He was talking with his hands now, his shoulders, his neck. I raised myself to my knees and watched him.

OK, talk away.

Good, cause I want to talk to you about this, OK? About what we fought about. You know what we fought about?

How could I know that? I said.

Yeah, how could you? She said she liked somebody else. She said she was in love with somebody else, for chrissakes.

Is that why you hit her?

No. Not for that. I asked her who it was. She wouldn't tell me. Then I threatened to hit her and she told me. She said, I'm in love with Dylan, with Dylan.

That's when you hit her? I asked.

Right in the face. Jesus, I hit her in the face. Man, I hit her with my *fist*. He said it like he was asking a question. I almost answered.

Dennis must have been hassling the birds because a bunch of them flew over our heads and started to land somewhere on the opposite end of the beach. I watched one circle before it landed.

So now what? I asked.

I don't know, Dylan. I guess that depends on you. The ball's in your court. But I'm not going out like a pussy. I'm not going to just let her go. Not even to you.

It's none of my business, I said. I turned from the fire and looked at the sky over the water. The lights of a boat moved like a procession of torches across the bay.

What would you do for a boat like that? I asked Rod. To be out on the bay tonight on a night like this, fishin for salmon or drinkin beer or just sleeping on deck. What would you do?

Rod turned around and looked at the lights. He took off his glasses and rubbed the indentations on his nose. Not much, he said. I don't like the water and I hate fish.

I would do anything, I whispered. Anything. Rod grunted and turned back to the fire. I watched the lights until they passed beyond the point at the north end of the beach, the place where the golfers lost their balls playing the Pebble Beach course. I relaxed my fist and put my hand up to the wind and felt the sweat between my fingers turn cold. About then, Dennis came back from his walk. Water dripped from his hair and clothes.

His entire body was shuddering from cold, almost convulsing. Still, he was smiling that tight-lipped smile.

Uh guys, Dennis said, Let's go home now. I'm freezing my *cajones* off.

There was no argument from me. It was late enough now. Dennis picked up his shoes and we headed up the sloped beach to the parking lot. We left the fire burning. When we got to the top of the hill we could still see the flames, a small orange oval burning in the silver sand.

I told you were gonna freeze, Rod said as we got into the car. Dennis got in the back seat so he wouldn't get the sheep skin seat covers wet.

I know, Dennis said. But it felt good. I went in up to my ankles and that felt good. So I went in up to my knees and then my waist and then I just jumped in and let the waves push me back. It wasn't cold till I got out of the water. Then it was freezing.

Rod started the car. I turned off the radio. I didn't want to listen to a lot of noise. The engine hummed and Dennis' teeth chattered and that was enough. Dennis was the only one who spoke. He was telling us about the seagulls, about some garbage he found in the sand. We were almost at the turn off to get back onto the highway when I saw a car parked on the side of the road, a Jaguar.

Stop for a second, I said to Rod.

What?

Just stop the car for a second. And pop the trunk. Rod pulled ahead of the Jag and stopped. I got out and opened the trunk. I clawed around in the dark until I found an old blanket and a lever for a tire jack. I walked back to the side of the car and gave Dennis the blanket. If Rod didn't want it to get wet he didn't say anything. I walked over to the Jag. I knew it probably had an alarm so I didn't touch it. It was a beautiful car—a deep blue in color with those sleek, distinguished lines people pay so much for. The car was still new. The thick, chrome rims hadn't been scratched or dulled yet, the paint around the head lights had no chips or scratches.

Rod stuck his head out the window and told me to hurry the hell up. I gripped the lever, hard and tight, and brought it down like an axe on the hood of the car. It was a rifle shot followed by

the blast of a horn and sirens. The lights on the car exploded and began flashing. Son of a bitch! I heard Rod yell, Jesus Dylan, let's go! I swung again and knocked out the windshield. A million white cracks and a moment of pause before the pieces fell to the dash. Lights came on in the house the car was parked in front of. Rod was in hysterics, screaming at me to go. I swung again at the front grill and left a thick gash. Sparks jumped off the lever when it hit. I walked back to the Mustang and set myself in the front seat and put the lever by my feet. Let's go, I said.

You crazy fuck! You stupid, psychotic motherfucker! Rod yelled as he ran all the stop signs to get on the highway as fast as he could.

They saw us from the house! The cops'll know it was us. Christ! We're the only assholes even on the roads now!

Shut up, I said. Get off at the Monterey exit. We'll get onto Reservation Road and take the farm roads back home. Nobody's getting caught by anybody.

Damn! Rod said. He got off at the Monterey exit and did exactly what I told him.

I really needed a cigarette.

Rod dropped us off at Dennis' house then peeled his tires driving away. Dennis waved to the Mustang as it turned the corner down the street.

I got this funny feelin we won't be seein Rod again for a while, Dennis said. He was still shivering and he stuttered when he spoke.

No, I said. I'll be seein him again, once more at least. There were a lot of snails on the walkway coming from under the juniper bush next to the house. Their crossed trails were like a spider web painted onto the ground.

He's right about one thing though, you are a psychotic motherfucker.

Yeah, well, shut up before I kill you, I said. I followed Dennis to the door watching my feet so I wouldn't step on a snail. Dennis kept calling me slugger, Babe Ruth, that sort of thing.

I know I can't stay overnight, I said when he put the key in the lock. But let's just check the baseball scores, all right? I just want to see if the Giants and A's won.

Dennis didn't say anything. He just put his ear up to the door and stood there.

Come on, I said, Just a few minutes. Shit, man, just a couple of minutes.

All right, Dennis said looking down at his shoes. He turned the key and we walked through the door. The light was on in the living room and the TV was flashing, the volume on real low. Dennis' father was on the couch in his boxing shorts. He stood up fast. The man on the couch next to him was wearing green slacks with no shirt and didn't move. He looked over at us and blew smoke from his mouth. Dennis! his father said without noticing I was there. Why didn't you call? I was worried. You should've called. There was a bottle of something on the coffee table, mostly empty. A couple of plates with dried ketchup hung a little off the table's edge and an ashtray full of cigarette butts rested on top of a magazine. I tried to see if I could tell what brand of cigarettes they were. My eyes blurred for staring at the ashtray.

Dennis didn't say anything. The man on the couch stood up and brushed his hand close to Dennis' father's hip, his bare thigh. I'd better go, he said, his lips close to Dennis' father's ear, and he walked down the hall to the bathroom. I heard water begin to run from the sink. Dennis looked at me. His mouth began to move. It began to form a word but nothing came out. I put my hands in my pockets and closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see the word if it came out of his mouth. I counted to ten—ten crashes of a breaker, ten birds against the moon. One two three ... four five six....

I opened my eyes and Dennis was running out the door. His father was on the couch again with his head in his hands, the TV light flashing gray against his hair. I ran after Dennis without calling to him. There was only the sound of our shoes slapping the cement and the buzz of wires overhead. Dennis ran fast but I was faster. I caught up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders to make him stop. Dennis! I whispered. Dennis! He pushed me away and when I grabbed him again he swung at me with a fist. I didn't feel anything but he must have hit my lip because I tasted the warm salt of blood in my mouth. He swung again and I still didn't feel anything. I let go of his shoulders and he stopped. He was breathing heavily but his face had calmed. His

fists had relaxed at his sides. His face was wet with tears, but they had already begun to dry from his eyes. He wasn't shivering any more.

You're bleeding, Dylan. I'm sorry. Oh man, I'm sorry.

It's nothing, I said. It's nothing. It doesn't hurt. I wiped the blood away with my sleeve. I was surprised how much there was, what a thick smear of red came off on my sweatshirt. Dennis started walking, not to get away, just to walk. I walked beside him but I was only following his lead. He walked in the direction of the main boulevard and so did I.

We kept walking when we reached the boulevard. We came to the sidewalk in front of a shopping center. There were a couple of liquor stores like bookends on either side of the row of stores, a drug store, a taqueria where you could get a burrito the size of your arm, and a gas station on the corner of the parking lot. The gas station was still open. A man in a blue shirt was inside the glass cashier's booth with a newspaper folded out in front of him. We came to a bus stop bench with a poster for a sci-fi movie on the back and sat down. I tapped my shoe against the sidewalk and checked my mouth for blood with the side of my hand. It was starting to sting now, my lip was, and so was my cheek. Dennis stared straight ahead. His nose was dripping snot but he didn't bother to wipe it. He stared straight ahead until I could barely hear him breathing. I wanted to ask if his mother left because of the man we saw, if it had been going on for awhile. But that would have been a stupid question. It didn't matter. I knew it didn't matter.

It's not so bad, I said. I felt strange, as if a hand were reaching down my throat for something, a feeling like I couldn't breathe but there was too much air in my lungs at the same time. I mean, you're father's still all right. I mean...Shit, when I was nine I found this dog, the mangiest, ugliest dog I ever saw. I took it home and fed it chili from a can on the front porch. Just sat there on the porch pettin and feedin it. Then my father came home and I knew what would happen, I think I knew. He came up the walk and told me to stop touchin that filthy dog and the dog walked towards him thinkin it was goin to get more food. And my father kicked the dog. Kicked it so hard it was like the dog folded in half. And I watched and knew he wouldn't stop. What's wrong with me? He had on these cowboy boots and he



kicked it again so the dog flew against the fence and fell onto its back. And the dog kept whining while I watched. Jesus, what's wrong with me? And my father didn't say anything, didn't even curse while he did it. He looked like he was takin out the garbage or he was takin a piss. Like, like—

Dennis looked at me and I stopped. I was out of breath and my chest was swollen from fighting back something, tears I guess. Then the words came from his mouth.

Why doesn't my mother love me? Dennis asked. He didn't stop looking at me, he really wanted to know, he expected to know.

Your mother? Your mother? It was all I could say. I bit my tongue and dug my fists into my thighs. Dennis gave me a minute then looked straight ahead again. Across the street was another bus stop and a complex of square, adobe colored apartments behind it. The apartments had small, walled off patio areas and along the top of the walls of one patio somebody had lined up a bunch of potted plants—eyelashes on the bottom half of an eye.

We sat there until Dennis began to shiver again, his own foot tapping on the sidewalk now. I took off my sweatshirt and gave it to him. I was cold in just my t-shirt but I wasn't as cold as he was. He took his sweatshirt off and put on mine. He dropped his to the ground and it made a dull splash against the sidewalk. I started to laugh, a soft laugh almost like a cough.

What's funny? Dennis asked and smile.

My jaw hurts, I said.

Why's that funny?

It's not, I said. It's not funny at all. But I couldn't stop laughing.

We sat on the bench until we both couldn't stand the cold any longer. There was a Lyon's down the street, across from the mall, so we walked over to it to get some coffee, hot chocolate for Dennis. Dennis reached over to pick up his wet shirt. Fuck it, I told him, just leave it. He nodded and we walked down the street. The waitress at Lyon's was a Filipino girl who used to go to our school. I remembered her name was Lisa but she didn't recognize us. Long night, boys? she asked. You look like you've been through it. It was eerie how fast she'd adopted the part of a waitress instead of just a girl we saw walking through the hall

at school. She showed us to a booth and went to get our hot drinks while we looked over the menu. I was leaning towards pancakes with sausage.

It's her! Dennis said then. It's her!

Over by the register was the girl with purple lips. She was with her two friends, all three of them dressed the same except she was the only one with purple lipstick on. The rest of her makeup had worn off, her face was pink now without all the powder. But she still had the lipstick on, she even added another layer while one of her friends paid their bill. The third girl was sticking toothpicks in her mouth with one hand and tugging at her black leggings with the other.

It's fate talkin to you, Denny, I said. You'd better go over there.

Yeah. Yeah, he said. He eased himself out of the booth, half hoping, I know, they would leave before he got there or I would volunteer as a go-between. Nothing doing on my part, I wasn't going to step into his show. He finally managed to get out of the booth and walk over there. I couldn't hear what went on but there were a lot of smiles, a lot of looking at feet. The two girlfriends stood in the background and whispered to each other. He talked to the girl for a few minutes. The waitress, Lisa, came back with the coffee and hot chocolate and I ordered pancakes for the both of us. I put my nose over the coffee and breathed in the steam, breathed in the warm smell of it. When the waitress left again Dennis was on his way back waving a matchbook in his hand like a lottery ticket that hadn't lost yet.

Yeah? I asked.

I got the digits! I got her number! Her name's Sarah and she goes to Notre Dame.

Catholic, I said. Should've known.

Get this, she asked why I was wet and I told her the truth. She said she thought I was pretty cool. Except my clothes. She said we'd have to work on my clothes.

Yeah, you do dress like a dork.

I know, Dennis said. I'm wearing your sweatshirt.

That made us feel good, at least it made me feel good. Dennis didn't say what he was feeling and I didn't want to risk any guesses. Not any more. We ate the pancakes and kept eating until we didn't have enough money left for a decent tip. I prom-

ised myself we'd make it up to Lisa another time. I didn't want any guilt to sharpen the edge the food had dulled to almost nothing.

When we left the restaurant it was still about an hour before sunrise. The morning was in that frozen time when all the birds have found a wire and the stray cats fall asleep on the thick oil beneath parked cars. When a car passed by it filled the city with a mechanical howl and left us deaf for a moment. Me and Dennis walked home slowly, just talking and watching the light gather behind the Gabilan Mountains.

When should I call her? Dennis asked.

Wait a day or two, I said. You don't want to seem too eager.

But I am eager, he said.

I know, Denny, but it's all part of the game, the bullshit. He nodded and we walked for awhile in silence.

I'll call her tonight, Dennis said.

Yeah, I said and waited for my own planets to collide.