

# CutBank

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Volume 1  
Issue 50 *CutBank* 50

Article 10

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Fall 1998

## Cunning Stunts

Kevin Canty

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### Recommended Citation

Canty, Kevin (1998) "Cunning Stunts," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 50 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss50/10>

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## CUNNING STUNTS

MAROONED in family life again: these stories always start the same, end in heartbreak. Dad the Bastard. Sleeping with Sis. The night that Mom did something crazy that hurt our feelings. We are the ants of the family, carrying our tiny loads.

What's the difference between the circus and the Rockettes? Uncle Wolf asks, and Mom hisses him quiet. Uncle Wolf invented the dirty joke, the rubber dog turd. He gambles. He drinks, bourbon and ginger ale, the occasional Manhattan. This is meant to be *affectionate*. He lives in Baltimore, a tiny apartment he shares with Aunt Angela. Nobody knows if they're married. She's six-two, a stewardess, fifty-something, a bottle blonde. Off duty, she dresses like a whore from 1958. We practice the word *whore* in the basement while they carve the lamb. We steal his cigarette butts and smoke them up.

I love my family, as I am supposed to. That first Thanksgiving—I wasn't born yet, nor were you—Mom dropped the turkey coming out of the oven and it exploded on the kitchen floor. Mom says, I tell you, that was one time I was grateful for Wolf. He kept the drinks coming while I tried to salvage it. They were all so loaded, nobody noticed a thing. Thank God for gravy. This is the part where I confess: the night I caught Wolf with his pants down in Sis's room, the creepy gray color of his skin. Sorry, it never happened. He never beat up Angela, or vice-versa, as far as we knew. He did borrow \$6500 from my father once and never paid it back but that was my father's fault. He never should have loaned it, everybody said so. Wolf was *innocent*. Dad was always wrong.

The night that Mom did something crazy that hurt our feelings: she threw him out in the snow for telling a dirty joke, then broke down sobbing in the kitchen. She was *inconsolable*. The serial number on his forearm, smeared blue ink, Star of David.

This is a dinner, cocktail couples, my father's boss. Angela's away, working the Indianapolis run out of Friendship International. Wolf's at loose ends. In his brown suit, brown shoes and overcoat, his three-day shadow he arrives. (It isn't like him to

improvise. Some instinct for the wrong time, the wrong place. Something loves a train wreck.) Dad the Bastard tries to turn him from the door. Flecks of snow in what's left of Wolf's hair. The taxi deliberating in the street outside, snow in the headlights. Solemn as a funeral horse it finally drives away.

At least let him call a taxi, Mom says. At least give him a drink. My father's boss is watching. Sure, sure, my father says, and introduces him around. (The usual parental mix, anger bubbling under congeniality, like ancient tar pits. So nice to see you.) Then:

Wolf starts to warm up, and the smell leaks out of his suit. (He *pees* in there, the children say.) Watching from the stairway, we catch the drift of his complex smelly stink: cigar smoke, anchovies, sleepless nights, unlovability, feet, baldness. The important guests search the corners of the room, looking for the chemical plant, the door to the flophouse, the grizzly den, hidden garbage truck. Then everybody... looks... at... Wolf.

What would *you* do? The guests are staring through you but you were born a performer. Gotta sing, gotta dance. A glass of whiskey and ginger ale in your shaking hand, for some reason it seems like a good time for a joke, a time to laugh and a time to mourn, a time to embrace and to refrain from embracing, a time to say the word *cunt* in mixed company, including my father's boss's wife. You grin around the room, awaiting the laugh. My mother—your niece, survivor—emerges from the hallway, weeping, bearing your vile overcoat.

The bum's rush, is the technical term. Out you go, into the dark suburban street, Indian country to a city rat like you; and you go where? We never see you standing again, though we attend your funeral, lined up in our Sunday best like Caroline and John-John.

This particular night, Dad spots us on the staircase. Get to bed! he shouts at us (thought it's only eight-thirty, we're in our rights). He shouts our mother's name, though we can all hear her weeping. We look past his shoulder, see the thin lips of his boss wrinkling, this *unseemly*... He wasn't born a bastard. Dada, baby pictures: we are the ants of the family. Meanwhile it's off to bed, the lingering smell of Mom's emotion (scorched, like the air coming off the ironing board), pot roast, every time it rains it smells

like pot roast and Lemon Pledge, potpourri. Marooned in family life again: these stories always end the same, ashtrays, coasters, silent butlers, frozen corn, ancient injuries. Would you like to see my scar? Sis has got a nice one but Mom's is bigger. And of course Dad. And of course Dad. And of course Dad. And of course Dad.