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I Chopped Down This House for You

Simeon Mills

The University of Montana

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I Chopped Down This House For You

by

Simeon Mills

B.A. Columbia University, New York City, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

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Approved by:

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Dean, Graduate School

May 1, 2004

Date
A roar. A diesel engine roar from under Ms. Itty-Hampton’s desk. And not just one
engine, but the whole outfit of rigs roaring to life. It’s the last day of school, after school,
and Mom and I are at Ms. Itty-Hampton’s desk, and with all that sweet engine sound I can
barely hear Ms. Itty-Hampton say to Mom: “A genius?” And then to me: “A genius?”
And Ms. Itty-Hampton shakes her cheeks back and forth. Man, they makes me sweat, her
cheeks, and that’s why I sat in the back of her class all year—not to draw the rigs, but
because I’d sweat through my pants if I sat any closer.

Ms. Itty-Hampton pulls my notebook out from under the desk. Mom’s heels are
suddenly tapping. The roar is crazy now. Good thing Ms. Itty-Hampton took the notebook
off her lap, or those revving rigs might have torn her dress off.

“A genius? Well, here’s what we’ve been waiting for, Mrs. Livery.”

Ms. Itty-Hampton opens to the middle and—Man!—the Green Machine. The tallest
and longest of any rig. I put an extra battery on top because he needed more lights. Red
and yellow ones. But the Green Machine’s so green otherwise. Man he’s green! So green
that the green pencil’s down to a nub from the Green Machine alone.

“Mrs. Livery, have you communicated with your son regarding his genius
project?”

Ms. Itty-Hampton’s got green fingers now. That Green Machine. Ms. Itty-
Hampton’s touching her face now. Now her chin’s green from that big rig. Mom’s heels
are gunning. She’s looking at the Green Machine too, but she’s too polite to say anything
about the Green all over everything.
“Because this morning, Mrs. Livery, I’ve been given the go-ahead to confiscate Jesse’s genius project. Honestly . . . these pages . . . They’re all trucks.”

“Rigs,” I say, because, “They’re rigs. Big rigs.”

Mom nods. Mom knows what a rig is.

“To say it mildly, Mrs. Livery--and I’m speaking for the whole Hectorville Middle School faculty here--we’re disappointed. But it’s more than that. I’m speaking for myself now. I’m stinking pissed.”

But her desk trembles. My notebook. It’s rattling out from under Ms. Itty-Hampton’s long fingers. I’ve got to take my hands off the desk. Oh Man. I put them back on, and--oh yeah!--the Green Machine’s going!

“Because a genius in your classroom can launch your career, Mrs. Livery. It can get your butt out of a poor, dinky school district. It can even get you a husband. But first, Mrs. Livery, your ‘genius’ has to be a genius at all.”

The Green Machine flashes his lights whenever he needs a help from his buddies, The Magic Truck or Shovel. And--Oh God: It’s the Green Machine’s yellow lights. His side panels are concave aluminum, lights above, lights below, so it’s yellow reflecting crazy in every direction. On Ms. Itty-Hampton’s fingers, arms, the shiny black buttons of her dress, her cheeks: banana yellow, thanks to the Green Machine. But Mom just frowns. Then Ms. Itty-Hampton covers the flashing yellows with her hand--but when she takes it away, now the tips of her fingers are flashing too! I crouch in my chair. Mom squeezes my wrist.
“Every two years you get one. That’s what the state says you ought to get. They’re just spewing statistics though. And the truth is Hectorville Middle School is experiencing a six-year drought of geniuses. Not a single genius since Jean Granger. Now there was a genius, Mrs. Livery. But we all know what happened to her. So maybe you should consider yourself lucky. The average life-expectancy of a genius is only 22 years old. Jean Granger didn’t even last that long. So you don’t have to worry, Mrs. Livery. Because if the state’s non-genius statistics are also correct, sometime this summer whatever had us believing Jesse might be a genius should die out completely. They say it happens over night.”

No you don’t! Not the reds! Are you crazy Green Machine? Are you stinking crazy! I made the reds just like a mohawk on the Green Machine’s trailer. Just imagine what that looks like from an airplane--Green Machine cruising down the highway at midnight! But there on Ms. Itty-Hampton’s desk, with all the windows open in the afternoon, I guess I messed up how that should look. Because now the reds just make everything pink--like Ms. Itty-Hampton was kissing the Green Machine and got her make-up all over him. And oh no. The Green Machine’s smoking out the back. Ms. Itty-Hampton’s eyes are watering! Oh Man, Ms. Itty-Hampton. Watch that Green Machine, Ms. Itty-Hampton!

“If you ask me, teachers should have unlimited access to a potential genius’s ‘project’ well before the spring of his eighth grade year. Not only to prevent parent-teacher debacles such as this, but peoples’ summer vacations are at stake here. Last year I spent five weeks in New York at a genius seminar just to get ready for your son. They
don’t invite the boys gym teachers to New York, Mrs. Livery. I’m a twenty-nine-year-old woman. My summers have an outcomes-based objective.”

“But you’re sure he’s not a genius?” Mom says. “In second grade they told us to spend his college fund on a new gas pump because Jesse would be making so much money by now with the space program.”

“That was the administration talking about his notebook. It’s been on Jesse’s file--a big sparkling sticker--since kindergarten. And then in fifth grade when Jesse, a boy, didn’t go to basketball camp? Well, the school board was on the phone all night about that. But these are just ‘signals,’ Mrs. Livery. They’re the administration’s work, not ours. Because all a genius stickers by the name ‘Jesse Livery’ means to us is that we can’t touch his notebook until he finishes eighth grade, when his genius has had enough time to develop naturally. That’s today, Mrs. Livery. And now we’re stuck with whatever we get. In this case . . .”

Ms. Itty-Hampton coughs up a cloud of exhaust and wipes her eyes.

“And, yes, Mrs. Livery, I feel for you. I feel for all the false-geniuses’ families. But the state has a very specific criteria for assessing these students. I could show you the hand-book, but take my work for it, Mrs. Livery, Jesse doesn’t even register on their point-system. If he’d just chosen a different subject for his drawings, maybe. A sports hero. War is always good. Me, even. God knows I read enough books and spent enough money on looking stimulating for him. But--”

“What’s Jesse been doing in school then? All these years . . . What’s my son got to show for it?”
“Don’t you see what I’m telling you, Mrs. Livery? It’s this! **Trucks!**”

But now the Green Machine’s tearing down the hallway, so Ms. Itty-Hampton flips it to Justin-Credible The Rig, who burns a hole through his page. Then he does donuts across the desk, blackening one of Ms. Itty-Hampton’s long fingernails. Then he jumps Mom.

“**Trucks!**”

And Man!—of all the pages to open. Aqua Truck! Just give him the chance and he turns himself invisible. Ms. Itty-Hampton slaps the notebook where he just was. But I can hear Aqua Truck—his horn, which was supposed be a laugh, but sounds more like a laughing whale—coming from under Ms. Itty-Hampton’s chair. And Aqua Truck was my third rig.

“**Trucks!**”

But when she flips to the next one—Oh, Ms. Itty-Hampton!—that’s when one of her long fingernails saws down the middle of a whole rig: The Praying Mantis. So now Mantis’s back-half—10 of his wheels—are floating over the edge of the desk. I push my chair away and kneel down to watch Mantis swooping in the air. It’s nothing Scotch tape couldn’t fix, but then I see the oil beading-up where Ms. Itty-Hampton cut him. Mantis bows from the weight of the little drops, folds in, and Man! Now I’m on all-fours back-peddling like crazy because that Mantis is just a swollen oil-bubble in free-fall! He hits—cargo explodes—a pulse moves through the floor—it’s a warm wind on my forehead—I close my eyes and . . . and it feels like Ms. Itty-Hampton’s teeth hissing on my ear.
There's a few chairs tipped over, but it's funny because Mom's just sitting there—not dead or blown through the window—just staring at me, holding a sheet of paper. Ms. Itty-Hampton isn't dead either. She's still right there by the dry-erase board, beneath the words: HAVE AN ACCIDENT-FREE SUMMER. And her cheeks never looked so big and red.

"Therefore," Mom reads off the paper in her hand, "On behalf of this fine state, I mandate that your son or daughter, Jesse Livery, be placed in double-intensive summer-school to repair the damage assumed by a false genius proclamation. Active immediately, student will engage in no genius-related exercises and will only be given projects with one correct solution. Please have Jesse Livery report to Hectorville High School, room 119, at 8:00 Monday morning. His teacher, Mr. Belt, will provide further instructions. Sincerely, The Superintendent."

My notebook's spread face-down beside Mom's shoe, everything inside it surely crashed beyond recognition. Its spine trembles a second, but that might be my imagination. The room is still echoing from the blast and everything seems to have a little jump to it. That was every rig I ever made. The ones that got away—good for them! Maybe they'll even make it through the night. The Green Machine, maybe, if he doesn't go crazy flashing his lights at every half-way decent Ford he sees. But these rigs have no concept of fuel yet. The ones who got burned up between the pages—sleeping, and suddenly their tires exploding—at least I won't be worrying about them tonight... worrying where they'll finally roll dead. The grass is wet in the dark. Even with a full
tank of diesel, how much of it will be spent gunning and moving nowhere? There’s dogs
too--

Mom’s lifting me by the thick part of my arms. I’m on my feet. We leave the
chairs for Ms. Itty-Hampton to pick up. Mom’s heart is pumping out of control. We’re in
some kind of hurry now. Still, I’ve got to wave Goodbye to Ms. Itty-Hampton, my
favorite teacher ever. She starts to wave, but closes her eyes in the middle of it, right
before a fit of sneezes drops her to her desktop.

And it’s funny how you can’t think a straight thought after you watch everything
you ever made get destroyed in ten seconds. Because it’s almost the best thing in the
world--for those ten seconds--when the rigs are doing wheelies, and the roaring--when all
you’re thinking about is miles and miles of open highway for them to cruise--how they’ll
finally be free. But right now all I want to be is alone.

Mom though, in the driver’s seat, keeps talking about what we’re going to tell
Dad. “I don’t care. You’re still a genius, okay? So keep drawing rigs. And show them to
your father. And act weird, like you do. So really, nothing’s different for you. I’ll handle
the rest of it. Leave the rest to me. Damn it.” But all I’m doing is keeping a look out my
window for any rigs. Because Mom’s crazy right now. Our town’s only got one stoplight,
and that’s where Mom nudges this little Chevy from behind, then keeps driving while the
Chevy pulls to the side, its driver pounding at us on his windshield. But Mom’s eyes are
way too small to see even a full-grown car. Some little rig merging in front of her
wouldn’t stand a chance.
Then Mom and I are both quiet, out past city limits now, out by the highway and the trailer park. When we see Livery’s, our gas station, Mom slows down, and I watch her face fall into private thoughts. Her eyes get bigger. She’s forming words deep in her throat. I see her lips start to pucker. Then we’re just sitting in the Livery’s parking lot and she says, “Jesse? Love? What happened in Ms. Itty-Hampton’s room, on the floor—that’s just fine. If you want fall down at home, you go right ahead. And if you ever want to talk? And it doesn’t make sense? The words? I’ll listen to you, Jesse. And when your father yells at you . . . if he yells at you—that’s another good time to fall down.” Mom reaches over and messes up my hair. “So all it is, Jesse, is summer school for geniuses, okay? Draw as many trucks as you can. Or rigs. Sorry. Rigs, Dear.”

But when Mom’s out of the car, looking back through the windshield at me, I’m already frozen to my seat. She goes around and taps a knuckle against the window where my head fell against it. Mom leaves the white knuckle there for a minute, in my eye, and I think she’s frozen too. But it’s just her personal thoughts again, and I read her lips, “He can still pump gas anyway.” Then she leaves.

I’m staring at the only rig in the parking lot. A big red one with shiny black sunglasses for a windshield . . . but I’m thinking: what if a rig was really a woman? Not just some rig’s girlfriend, or a rig like Ms. Itty-Hampton would be, causing major accidents and traffic jams just being on the road—but a she-rig that traveled alone? And traveled at night!

I jump from the car.
Nobody’s sitting at the gas station counter when I run through—but all I’m seeing anyway is that she-rig gunning it out of the smoke and blackness of my head. In the back of the gas station, between the COFFEE and the ICE COLD BEVERAGES, the door marked PRIVATE is stuck wide open. The sound of the TV slows me as I step into our apartment. Somebody’s turned off all the kitchen lights. The she-rig rolls in front of me—a huge white sail sticking out of her roof—and then back into the smoke. Her red-hot lights are the last to disappear. Everything’s dark again, and I’m just frozen in the kitchen, because what’s happening in the living room sounds like this:

“You think this is running a gas station? Sitting drunk in your underwear all day watching the surveillance cameras? Your thing’s sticking out! Why don’t you tuck it in?”

“I made some money today. I was just taking a five minute break. It didn’t involve you. Now I’m just trying to finish what I started.”

“You’re drunk, that’s all you’re involved with. God! Look at that limp dick!”

“It was different before you showed up.”

“I wish I would’ve caught you in your prime.”

“Fifteen minutes ago—then you would’ve gotten an eye-full.”

“I can imagine. I can just imagine what I would’ve seen fifteen minutes ago.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Are you trying to suggest something about something?”

“Look at me now, huh?”

“Oh, that? Whatever. So what? That’s nothing.”

“Is this nothing? Just you wait. Come over here.”
“I’m not coming near you.”

“Should I stand up and come get you?”

“Should I go in the bathroom and lock the door?”

“I wouldn’t want you having to pay for a new bathroom door when all this could just end peacefully.”

“God damn it . . . What happened to you? You’re a fucking animal. You’re a . . .”

“I know how to run a gas station. I know how to run a . . .”

When all that’s left are the final sounds of walls and doors and locks clicking, I go into the living room where the wall of TV’s are still flashing. Eight of those TV’s show the gas station--from every angle--but the one in the middle is a real TV. Dad’s chair is still reclined, his invisible feet and elbows still pressed into it, his glasses sitting on the cushion, so I take the couch. There’s paper and a pen on the coffee table, but every rig starts as a weight in my hands. This she-rig is lighter than the other ones--I think because her engine’s battery-powered--and her cab is thicker, and her wheels are stronger, so I don’t have to worry about her rolling off my lap. But it’s the huge white sail sticking up eight times higher than her height without it--that’s what’s going to need the most attention. I blow lightly into the sail to test it, not even a whistle’s-worth of air--but no!--the sail snaps off. “I’m sorry!” I say, but the she-rig screams and blinds me with her lights. I try to keep hold of her, but she’s too fast and suddenly rolling through the kitchen . . . There’s candy-bars crashing in the gas station, and she finally breaks through the big plate-glass window. Now I’m just imagining her: heading straight for the highway.
I never had a rig run off before. But I never had a she-rig either. I know I have two choices now. I can make a new she-rig—better than the last one! Or I can sit on the couch and watch these nine TV's. My mind takes a deep breath. The six o'clock news is suddenly yelling at me. But my hands are getting heavier and heavier . . .
FELIX: And now to Triple-R’s teen-reporter, Lizzy Hitchcock, for our final story of the evening--taking you back to the small town of Hectorville, where one year ago today the nation lost one of its most promising young geniuses--poet, basketball star . . . [Sniffs.] . . . beauty, Jean Granger. For those of you still wet with tears, please grab a tissue, take the hand of the nearest loved one, and relive--with the Triple R--this horrible event. Lizzy?

LIZZY: Oh yeah . . . Hi everybody! Hi Felix! I’m here in Hectorville--remember?--and I’m standing on the public basketball court where one whole year ago--can you believe it’s been a year? 365 days? God!--the crime of the century happened! It was on this basketball court that four young men were engaging in a sweaty game of two-on-two.

[Cut to reenactment: (Slow-motion) Basketball play: grunts, yells, dribbling, etc. PLAYER 1 rises above PLAYERS 2 - 4 shoots ball misses . PLAYER 2 rebounds . . . ]
LIZZY: [Voice-over.] It was a hot day, so these guys probably had their shirts off. I love guys, as you know, but I don't like sweat. Some girls think it's sexy, but hey, what are showers for then? Anyway--it was a close game, and tension was running high . . .

[Cut to reenactment: (Slow-motion) PLAYERS 1 and 2 yelling (muted) into each other's faces . (Zoom-in on) PAIRS OF LIPS, inches apart, screaming (muted) . . .]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Pretty soon the guys were using the ball as a weapon! In the words of the immortal Johnny Cash, who my boyfriend always makes me listen to in his car: Things were gonna get worse before they got any better . . . But wait a minute? Who's that driving past the basketball court?

[Cut to reenactment: (Slow motion) CAR rolling down street. (Zoom-in on) DRIVER: female, approx. 18 years-old, approx. 6' 4'', face blackened-out with shadow, blond hair curling in wind . . . HAND reaches through open window. Waves. Cut to LIZZY standing beneath basket.]

LIZZY: You know who it is! Jean Granger! The just-graduated star of Hectorville's state-championship girls basketball team! The state-certified genius at poetry! And okay--she was beautiful too. So what? Jean Granger!--who lived right across the street. [LIZZY points to two-story house--curtains drawn, grass un-mowed, newspapers piled at front door.] Do you see which house I'm talking about? That blue one over there? Or is that greenish-blue? I bet that window up there was Jean's bedroom. That's the one I'd pick. It's perfect
for talking on the phone and watching guys play basketball. As long as they don’t sweat
	too much . . .

[Cut to reenactment: (Slow-motion) PLAYERS 1 - 4 watch as DRIVER waves. PLAYERS wave
back. DRIVER leans through window (face blackened-out), yells (muted). Cut to close-up:
PLAYER 1’s face: LIPS open, EYES blink. Cut to CAR, pulling into driveway. Garage door rolls
up. CAR rolls in . . .]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] But on that day—before the Crime of the Century happened--Jean
Granger was Tom Workman’s new girlfriend. Tom was one of those four basketball
players. And suddenly, after seeing her drive by, fighting over a silly game of two-on-two
seemed pretty stupid. So everybody was best friends again and Tom and Jean got married
and now they have four kids and everybody lived happily ever after, right?

You know I’m lying. I’m sorry! I guess I shouldn’t joke about horrible things--but
that’s what I do, because sometimes laughter is the best medicine. And because what
happened next is so horrible I don’t even know if I can talk about it. But I guess I have
too. I’m a reporter, and this is my job. So okay . . .

[Cut to reenactment: Close-up: man’s bare, muscular CHEST: covered with TATTOOS: words
“BIG” and “BEN” on either side of belly button. Cut to (black and white, zoom-in of) Jean
Granger’s HOUSE. Cut to close-up: snarling, smiling LIPS.]
LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Oh no! It’s Big Ben Wallace, the twenty-eight year-old Hectorville thug! The players standing on the court recall hearing nothing, but suddenly being pushed out of the way—tossed, I guess, because Big Ben Wallace is 6-foot-7—maybe even taller! Ben stole their basketball and started shooting with it. The stunned basketball players picked themselves up off the cement and watched Wallace dunk and dribble, because, I mean, what could they do to stop him? He was huge!

[Cut to LIZZY standing on basketball court.]

LIZZY: But then the unthinkable happened. Ben Wallace noticed Jean in her garage! Maybe because she’s about as tall as him, or because she’s a blond. My boyfriend always says blonds are impossible not to look at. He might just be trying to make me jealous. But my point is that suddenly Ben Wallace was jumping—I’m not kidding, jumping!--over this fence. [LIZZY points to 5-foot chain-link fence separating court from street.] And then he was over at Jean’s house, pulling the garage door off the ground. Back on the court, Jean’s boyfriend, Tom Workman, and the other three basketball players caught one final glimpse of their town sweetheart before Wallace pulled the garage door back down.

Ben Wallace had been in jail for eight whole years before this, and do you know why? Because the FBI caught him selling under-aged girls’ poetry on the internet! Gross! But they let him out anyway. How stupid can you be? God! I know Hectorville is tiny, but bad people are everywhere! I’m from New York City—okay, the suburbs—but the thought of Jean—a girl my own age!--in those big dirty hands . . . being forced to write poetry for
his sick fantasies . . . and he was probably sweaty too . . . [LIZZY shakes head for five seconds.] Okay. I can deal now. Which is what Tom and his buddies had to do back on the basketball court.

[Cut to reenactment: (Slow motion) Close-up: HAND knocking on garage door . . .]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Like any good boyfriend--better than my boyfriend probably, God!--Tom Workman tied his high-tops tight and went over and knocked on Jean’s garage door. The other players watched as the door lifted--just a foot off the ground--and then watched Tom crawl in on his stomach. The door dropped again, and suddenly there were only three basketball players left on the court . . .

[Cut to reenactment: PLAYERS 2 - 4 look at ground. (Fade-into) STOPWATCH ticking . . .]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Fifteen minutes passed, and no word from Tom. It was almost dinner time. The three players took a vote and decided that Tom was a really tough guy, and he could probably handle Ben Wallace by himself. So these friends left. I’m not saying anything about these guys . . . just that they left the scene of a crime to go eat dinner. But that’s okay. I mean, so what? Whatever, right?

[Cut to LIZZY on basketball court, holding basketball. LIZZY frowns, staring at basketball. BALL drops, hits ground, deflates. LIZZY kicks BALL past camera.]
LIZZY: It’s so unfair! Just because Jean was pretty guys have to act like they own her. I mean, I’m pretty and nobody owns me! . . . Sorry--I didn’t mean to almost hit you with that basketball, Robert. I know you’re not like every other guy in the country. You’re nice, at least.

We know from police reports that approximately fifteen minutes after those other traitors left the court, Tom emerged from the garage alone. He was supposed to be going to get beer—even though he’s not old enough to—and then going back to the garage, where Big Ben and Jean were supposed to be waiting for him. That’s what he told the police anyway. But when he got back to her house . . . Surprise! Jean and Ben Wallace were gone! Duh!

[Fade into “Jean Granger year book portrait” (Courtesy: Hectorville High School). Zoom-in.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Since that horrible day we’ve seen high school gyms across the country wall-papered, floor to ceiling, with magazine-covers of Jean’s senior portrait. We’ve eaten the millions of pies, brownies and cakes donated to the FBI for their “Save Jean International Bake Sale.” And we’ve smiled, and then frowned, and then smiled again, as “Jean” was written on over sixty percent of our nation’s birth certificates!

[Fade into “Ben Wallace mug-shot” (Courtesy: Hectorville Police Department). Zoom in.]
LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Likewise, we’ve seen Ben Wallace’s name land smack on top of the FBI’s Most-Wanted List. We’ve changed our baby’s diapers with Wallace smiley-faces in the liner. And honestly—-who didn’t cry when our own President, on national TV, offered Big Ben a free chance to kidnap his own daughter from the White House in exchange for Jean?

[Cut to LIZ, standing on basketball court, arms crossed.]

LIZZY: But what we haven’t heard is a single word from Tom Workman, the supposed boyfriend of Jean Granger, who let Ben Wallace get away! [Pumps fist in the air.] Now who wants to get him!

[Cut to screen divided into four squares: each square displaying different footage. First square grows to consume entire screen.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] At least we’ve gotten statements from the other three basketball players. Here’s a press conference, the day after Jean’s abduction, where Darryl Lee addressed the nation.

[File footage: DARRYL LEE seated at microphone in large auditorium. Bulbs flash. Woman’s voice from off-screen: “It’s been rumored you were the man who took Jean Granger’s virginity. How do you respond?” LEE blinks, wavers toward microphone: “Tom and Jean are boyfriend and girlfriend. They’re in love forever. Because it’s Tom’s turn with her—” Roars erupt off-]
screen. LEE hides beneath table. Loud, microphoned voice: “This is not a trial! This man is not on trial!” Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Second square grows to consume entire screen.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] The all-time leading scorer in Hectorville boys basketball history, Voss Ostran, was willing to give a radio interview following the President’s address.

[File footage: “Jumpin’ Voss Ostran Highlight Reel” (Courtesy: Laura Ostran): VOSS OSTRAN jumps over DEFENDER, kisses rim with lips, dunks basketball with both hands, smooths back hair, lands on gym floor. CHEERLEADER faints in background . . . (Voice-over: INTERVIEWER: “How well did you know Jean Granger?” VOSS: “Jean asked me to marry her—I don’t know . at least once a week for two whole years. I just did what any morally-responsible person would do. I told her, ‘Wait until I make the NBA--then we’ll talk.’” Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Third square grows to consume entire screen.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Dicky Smythe, the last basketball player--and you didn’t hear this from me, but a known psychotherapy patient for being addicted to TV!--refused all interviews. But tonight we have a gas station surveillance recording that will blow you away! And if you’re wondering who those people are who just walked into the gas station . . . the answer is yes! It’s Tom Workman and new girlfriend Kathy King!

[File footage (Courtesy: Livery’s Gas Station): DICKY SMYTHE waves gallon milk jug at TOM WORKMAN and KATHY KING. DICKY screams: “I know for a fact you killed her! There’s proof in the woods! By the Gravel Pit!” KATHY flees through door. DICKY looks straight into camera:}
"He's a killer! He's a murderer!" TOM lunges at DICKY. DICKY smashes milk jug on floor.

CLERK runs on-screen, throws TOM and DICKY into parking lot. Locks door.

Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Forth square grows to consume entire screen.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.]: So who does Tom Workman think he is?

[Cut to “Tom Workman yearbook portrait” (Courtesy: Hectorville High School).]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] He was a high school drop out since tenth grade . . .

[Fade into file footage: Highway, congested with SEMI-TRUCKS.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] Who became a truck-driver. I mean, really! Who becomes a truck driver?

[Fade into file footage (Courtesy: Mr. Binsworth, Science, Hectorville Middle School): TOM WORKMAN, age 13, wearing plastic gloves. TOM pulls esophagus from pig's throat. (Frames slow . . . pause on) TOM, grinning, presenting PIG ESOPHAGUS.]

LIZZY: [Voice-over.] And did you know that back when he was a little kid everybody thought Tom was going to be a state-certified genius? Just like Jean Granger? . . . Boy were they wrong! But did he turn into a cold-blooded murderer instead? I can’t figure it

[Cut to LIZ, holding basketball on cement court.]

LIZZY: But I got him! You’re not going to believe this, folks, but this Wednesday--live in New York!--on my TV show, “F’in’ Around With Lizzy Hitchcock,” Tom Workman and I are going to take a stroll through my old high school! He’s going to give me the low-down on everything from his first date with Jean Granger . . . to his time of terror with Ben Wallace . . . and then--maybe--he’ll tell us exactly when and where he killed Jean! Oh, and if there’s time, we’ll even get into Tom’s new girlfriend--what’s her name? Kathy King! So don’t miss it! [Throws basketball over head, swishes through net.]

[Cut to “RRR Evening News with Felix Dalton.” FELIX seated at RRR news-desk.]

FELIX: Thanks Liz! And remember America--it takes more than a year to forget about the most beautiful girl in town. So don’t miss the most-watched news program in the nation, “F’in’ Around With Lizzy Hitchcock,” this Wednesday, only on The Triple-R, for Liz’s exclusive--live--interview with Tom Workman. As Lizzy would say, “God, I hope he likes me . . . but what if I like him back?”
Several hours before the previous RRR broadcast aired on national television, the following letter was placed in select mailboxes throughout the town of Hectorville.

Dear Mr. XXXXXXXX,

I know you’re busy, so let me be brief. First off, I’m as sorry as humanly possible about what happened to Jean Granger, and to your whole community as a result of it. If someone invented a time machine, I’d be first in line to go back one year and stop Ben Wallace’s dastardly deed. But hey, that’s not going to happen. And in my opinion, NOW is the time to start figuring out how to deal with this tragedy for once and all—specifically, by reaching millions of still-sorrowful Americans with a made-for-TV movie about the MEN in Jean Granger’s life, only on the Triple-R.

Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Merlin Hoffkins. Perhaps you don’t know me by name, but you must be familiar with my award-winning Triple-R daytime drama, *The Annoying Buzz*. The show’s success speaks for itself, but let me share some figures with you. Last year the Triple-R grossed over $44,000,000 off *The Annoying Buzz* in advertising and merchandise alone. (That’s more than Lizzy Hitchcock will earn in her whole life.) But I’m not bragging here. These are just the facts.

Another fact is that, frankly, the American public is getting sick and tired of hearing about Jean Granger and *only* Jean Granger. Aren’t you? Personally, I want to know the stories of the MEN who surrounded—no, who *shaped*—this girl’s life. The stories of the brave MEN who must live with their painful memories of Jean long after
the rest of America has forgotten her face. Who are these MEN? . . . These men are YOU!

But we’ve got to move quick. Interest in Jean Granger is still topping the charts, but it won’t be much longer. So, next week I visit Hectorville. Just me. No crews, no cameras, no body guards. I’ll listen to anybody who’s got a mouth. You, however, Mr. XXXXXXXXXX, have been sent this personalized letter because you were a huge MAN in Jean’s life—one of the select few. Now my question is: Are you THE man?

I’ll be honest. Several of your fellow townsmen have received similar letters today, and right now I have no idea whose story will be the star of my script, and whose story will merely sit in the basketball bleachers with the rest of Hectorville. That, Mr. XXXXXXXXXX, will be decided by my interviews with you.

Please call XXX-XXX-XXXX immediately (you’ll probably catch me on the plane from L.A.) to establish a meeting time and place. Remember: YOU may hold the key that will unlock my film--AND unlock you from your small-town existence. WARNING: Do NOT regret being too lazy to tell me YOUR story when you see some other guy buying half the town with the millions (billions?) he’s made off this thing. But also, in the big picture, this film ought to brighten the lives of all who see it. Again, that’s up to YOU. Call me.

Eagerly,

Merlin Hoffkins
thought you might like to know

my wife moved out today

took my 18-year-old daughter

BUT DON'T WORRY!!!

in this business we say “Depression Begets Great Scripts!”

HECTORVILLE HERE I COME!!!
SOMETHING HAPPENS TO HER LITTLE TOE WHEN A LITTLE GIRL SMILES

Cab Driver
1:05 a.m., Sunday. Taxi cab, moving west on Meech Road, Hectorville.

Ben Wallace must be a sick bastard to want to harm a nail on that girl’s toe. That’s my opinion for your movie. Not that I knew Jean personally, but I saw her from a distance plenty. My little girl used to be friends with her. I’m going way back now. But it was in the newspaper I saw her most. Sports section. Wallace used to play basketball too—years before--always grinning for the camera, that guy.

But back before he went and killed Jean, I used to collect her clippings from the paper. Kept them right in the glove box. It wasn’t strange or nothing. It ain’t like I carried them around in my socks like a sick bastard. But there was this one picture a couple years ago. One of the blondie dribbling down the court--except, see, she was dribbling so quick that she was dribbling two basketballs . . . that was the picture the guy took! The little girl playing defense on her was going cross-eyed trying to watch both those balls. Two basketballs at once! You could look at that picture for hours. Number 44. She had some enormous feet too.

And hell, I should’ve kept that picture around. I guess it started spooking me though, having it in my Ford here. That ain’t strange, is it? Burning a picture because it’s spooky? It’s like when somebody’s dead, you sort-of figure they’re watching you right over your shoulder all the time, you know?

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Her yearbook picture, though. I put that one up just like everybody else in the world did. Right in my back window. Thing was a driving hazard, but at least if she was looking down she saw I cared. I had it up right until her face started getting too yellow. And so what if I took it down? I wasn’t the first one. John Viol, principle of the high school—he took his off his living room window a whole month before I did. I say if the damn principle can be done grieving for her, then somebody who only cut her picture out of the newspaper has the right to get on with his life too.

I gotta say it. That’s a nice suit. I used to have a suit just like that one. Nice. I’m serious.

You want to listen to a book-on-tape or something? I got a pile of them at your feet. Hey, pick that one. That’s Japanese poetry, read by real Japanese college girls. You got to hear it.

But what does some old picture in somebody’s car window have to do with how much they loved her? I bet a single ray of sunshine can’t get through the windows of that house right there. I’ll slow down so you can see it. Mr. Belt, her high school teacher. Queer, but who knows what to believe? He even plastic-coated the bastards so his wouldn’t get yellow. If there’s a person around who really knows how to mourn, it’s that guy—queer or no.

That’s some funny junk, that poetry, isn’t it? I just like the sound of their voices. They sound more like ten-year-olds than college-aged, but who knows? I got another tape of Vietnamese poetry. We’ll do that once next.
I could write a movie. I stay up all night. I don’t even drink Mountain Dew. Up this late you don’t see people at their best. I’ve seen folks—people I used to know—standing out in their own yards, looking in through their own windows. I’ll come back an hour later and maybe now they’re sitting in the hedgery. What’s the worst is getting eye-contact with them. That’s when you just gotta drive away. But I don’t have too many close friends anyhow.

Forget this poetry. I’m sick of it. I can’t even tell what they’re saying and who cares? You probably think I’m some kind of sick bastard, listening to it. I told you, though. I don’t even know what they’re saying. You want to hand me one of those King Kobras down by your feet? Suddenly I’m feeling pretty good. You grab one yourself. I bet you ain’t in a hurry, and I got something to show you. We’re gonna take a cruise by my wife’s place if that’s alright. She enjoys company around now.

You want my theory? Here it is. Jean Granger was dirty. You know what that means? Being dirty? I’m not talking about saying dirty things, or thinking dirty thoughts. I mean she didn’t wash her feet in the morning. And she didn’t wash her feet at night. You know what size shoe she wore? Take a guess.

Off by four. And she’s in the men’s sizes. They don’t make women’s that go big enough for her. Fourteens. That’s a lot of foot, especially when a girl’s responsible for cleaning her own feet in the tub. My daughter, Lace, she had big feet too. Women’s size tens. But she was just big-boned. Hers were nothing compared to Jean’s.
This is my house right here. Funny, though—there’s no place for me to park.

Whose Chevy you guess is filling up my driveway? Hold on a second . . . I CAN SEE YOU UP THERE! . . . I CAN SEE YOU! . . . I’ll be right back. Listen to that poetry if you want.

* * *

Changed the damn locks on me. We’ll just wait here then.

Did I tell you I’ve got a daughter too? That’s Lace. Same age as Jean Granger. She’s not the kind of girl that any Big Ben Wallace would steal away, but did I ever hold that against her? I mean, the way I see it, she gets two dollars for every one I keep just so she can go to college in New York.

WHO GET’S MY MONEY?

She hears me. She just don’t want to answer. That’s fine with me. You ain’t in a hurry and I got all night. We got . . . how many King Kobras is that down by your feet?

Just don’t ask my wife about Jean Granger, okay? You’re looking for stories, but just don’t ask my wife, okay? Because she might tell you . . . SHE MIGHT TELL YOU . . . ABOUT ME AND JEAN GRANGER!

OH! OH! YOU COME ON DOWN HERE! THAT’S FINE!

You here that?

ME AND JEAN GRANGER, BABY!
But you can ask my wife about that. I don’t need to talk about it. I’m not gonna change just because some women don’t like having their toes washed for them. Because some woman do. Because I was driving by my house one day--back when my little girl was still friends with Jean--and I stop my Ford on the side of the street, because there’s #44 standing right in my driveway. She was average back then, an average girl, and not even beautiful yet. But those were the biggest feet you ever saw on a female. You ever see a girl who’s so funny-looking you wonder what she smells like? But that’s not weird, I’m just telling you what kind of sensibility I got for that certain age. And she was just walking barefoot around my driveway--that’s what made me stop my Ford on the side of the street--because what’s a driveway always got on it? Always?

Broken glass! Well, I knew this driveway had glass on it, because it was my driveway. And it still is. I was watching her from right were we are now, and I hollered up to Jean, because I was worried about all that glass. I told her, “You might put some shoes on,” but I could already see how black her feet-bottoms were. And sticky--you could see how sticky they were all the way from the street--because it was summer and it was 90 degrees all day. My wife’s Chevy wasn’t in the driveway, so I got out and walked over to her. I said, “Look at that,” because there’s this huge chunk of glass an inch from Jean’s heel. I don’t remember how many bottles got smashed the night before, but my wife sure never cleaned any of it up. That just goes to show--okay, wait a minute . . .

I’M TRYING TO HAVE A CONVERSATION DOWN HERE . . . OKAY?

But Jean didn’t know who I was. Some guy--that’s who I was. But there was so much glass down by her feet, I had to take off my hat and start cleaning it up. First the big
pieces, which took a while—and then all the little ones. I filled my whole hat that way, and I got a big head. But then I started to notice those feet. I mean, they were all tore-up. Dead skin. Black toenails sticking out way too far. Nasty little hairs on her ankle. And dirty. *Too dirty.* . . . so dirty that I had to pretend there was some little piece of glass by her big toe. And they smelled bad! Like she’d been smothering them in her shoes all day with no socks. They stank. And I told her that. I said, “You gotta wash these.”

Because anybody could’ve said that. It’s not like it was a weird thing to say.

Hers . . . well, they weren’t so ticklish, if you were wondering. At least, not until I got my finger way up cleaning the stuff between her big toe and the second one. She flinched a bit there—and I can’t remember what she said—but I said, “Just look at the sky,” and I don’t know if she did that or not, but she seemed to loosen up then, so that was a good sign.

Another good sign was her second toe—that long skinny one—which was longer than her big toe. Some people say that means a person’s a bully by nature, but I never saw that in anybody. My take on a too-long second toe is just that you’re meant for something different than what you’re doing. If that makes anybody a little pissed off, then okay. Because that’s my problem too. I got a second toe like that. I got two of them like that.

I bet you think I’m a sick bastard. I don’t care what you think. You might as well go on up there with my wife. My wife. Didn’t matter what kind of soap or what kind of fine brushes and Kleenex I bought that woman. Didn’t matter that I had her gin and tonic ready. That I had the pan of warm water waiting in front of the chair. “No way.” That’s what she said. “You’re a sick bastard.” Then—like I didn’t feel low enough—she told me
to look at my own feet. But let me tell you something. My wife didn’t really have the kind of feet to be saying that.

But why are yours tucked under the seat? What do you think I am? Some kind of sick—*take your feet out where I can see them!* You ain’t a woman. You ain’t some little girl with pretty feet for me.

Lace—she had ten times the feet of her mother. And she wasn’t so negative on letting me wash hers. Not that hers ever got so dirty at school, doing nothing, but they can always be cleaner, right? I don’t know. I’m not proud of that time. I was still living in the house with them. Lace. She was just a girl figuring herself out. I knew she liked to buy certain things, and she didn’t get an allowance from her mother, so what happened was Lace and I arranged a little something to keep her feet clean. We even made some rules. One, it had to be after school, before her mother got home. And two, it couldn’t take longer than fifteen minutes.

You’re looking at my feet now?

Well, I wish I could say those couple fifteen minutes with Lace were the best times I ever spent with her. Times when we were honest with each other and maybe she told me about some boy—some Voss Ostran—she was head-over-heels for. She was so tense about it though. And because it was her watch we always used, I think I only ever got nine or ten minutes. Maybe eight. Then there was the day I was short on cash for her. That’s when I saw how much Lace resembled her mother. Locking herself in her room. Saying things that were coming straight out her mother’s mouth. I thought mothers and
their daughters were supposed to hate each other. But then my wife gets her these basketball shoes and I never saw Lace’s feet again.

Okay, I asked her a couple more times. You know, doubled the rate we had going. But Lace said it never felt good for her. She said she never smiled while it was going on--not even once--and I would’ve known that if I ever looked at her face instead of at her feet. And I’ll be honest. I knew the whole time she wasn’t smiling. See, something happens to your little toe when you’re smiling and . . .

Which is how I knew Jean Granger was loving every second of it! She just giggled when I spit on my fingers and started smearing the dirt off her heel. I had that girl balancing on one foot . . . Listen. Sometimes you find yourself in a situation--something you never dared to daydream about--and you don’t realize it’s really happening until way after the fact. You don’t realize what it looks like from across the street. You don’t think about the Fords and Chevys going by. Or whose driveway you’re on. Or . . . because suddenly you’re holding it. Making it clean. Jean didn’t even make a noise. I was almost dying every time I brought those sour fingers back under my nose. I didn’t even hear Lace or her mother pull in the driveway behind me, just felt that tall girl tip. One big step, right into my hat full of glass.

That was my first week out of the house when all that happened. I was still in the hotel, not even looking at other women yet. Maybe I could’ve fixed everything if I’d just . . . well, a man shouldn’t make a big production in front of his wife and daughter out of licking a girl’s blood off his fingers. If I could take one thing back it’d be the blood and the fingers and--
Okay. See that up there? That’s crying, and that’s all I wanted you to see . . . I’M LEAVING . . . HERE I GO. YOU GO TO SLEEP, BABY . . . I LOVE YOU TOO . . .

So we’re working on it. Lace is doing just fine in New York. We’re not really speaking yet, but we’re getting there.

But the glass went straight up Jean’s heel—right to the bone—and Jean’s family wouldn’t put me on the list of emergency room visitors. I send her some flowers I don’t know if she got. I didn’t expect an answer, but you never know. The girl was probably in some kind of shock, which I understand. I finally read the newspaper and found out she was okay. This little article about her. I wasn’t in it or anything. It was for donating plasma. But the picture had a clean look at all her toes poking through the bandage. I bet the bandage person got them so clean you couldn’t even taste them anymore. That’s how they do it in a hospital.

You can bet they ain’t that clean right now.

What do you say we try some of that Vietnamese poetry then? I didn’t mean to make you sad. Really. Jean probably ain’t even dead. Probably just hiding out somewhere. We’ll stop at Livery’s here and get some gas. I’ll buy you a Mountain Dew. We had a good talk! And I know your movie’s going to turn out. We’re both just sad right now is the thing. Give it a minute. You’re looking pretty divorced, to be honest. I can’t imagine what I look like.
Part 2
Through the night I started five new she-rigs, but all of them escaped—the last one using the claws I gave her to rip a hole through the living room floor and screech along the gas line that feeds the pumps outside. Then, at noon today, Mom walks into the living room, arms stretching, eye’s winking, and says, “Genius.” Dad follows her, and then it’s all business.

My summer job is to sit on the stool. Watch the register. Stare into the eyes of everybody who comes through the gas station door. Don’t avoid their eyes. It’s their eyes, Dad says, that tells you if they’re good customers. When people give you their items, say to people, “Is that all today?” or, “Is that going to do it for you tonight?” and when somebody kicks the door open and then holds their stomach and walks sideways up to the cash register and says, “Where’s your bathroom?” say, “The bathroom’s out of order,” and when they say, “What about the woman’s bathroom, man, because I really gotta go, alright?” say, “We don’t have any bathrooms,” and when they put both hands on the counter and do this—the thing where they knock their fingers against the counter-top all in succession, like this, and they stare upward, like they’re looking for cigarettes?—don’t do anything. That’s when you wait ten more seconds. Wait for them to say, “Alright buddy. ..”, then you press this button. Right here. My little yellow button beneath the counter, and Dad and Mom will be out here as quick as their feet can carry them. BUT if I ever see this kid—this kid Dad’s holding a picture of, thumping the kid’s black-and-white face with his thumb—this kid who calls himself “Johnny,” if I ever see him for even a split second in the parking lot, then don’t wait for anything, hit the power switch on the whole
station, lock the doors, swallow the key, close my eyes and hold my breath. This kid’s
wanted for loitering.

It’s 1:00 p.m.

The owl-hoots three times every minute, and sometimes it doesn’t hoot for five
minutes. People come into the gas station with the money already out of their pockets.
Everybody buys a candy bar. When choosing a candy bar everybody stands with their
mouth open. They take their money and swat their empty hand with it until they find a
candy bar for their empty hand. Sometimes four people do this at once. If the person is
younger than Ms. Itty-Hampton they walk into the gas station with one hand scratching
their belly underneath their t-shirt. While they choose a candy bar the belly-scratching
hand crawls up their belly, out the hole, and scratches their neck. That’s the same hand
they grab the candy bar with. It happens like this for forty-five minutes, and I say, “Thank
you” to every customer.

Then it’s different because while everybody pumps their gas, the wind doesn’t
blow, so when they open the door, the owl hoots, but the mobiles hanging from ceiling
don’t spin. The mobiles promote the hamburgers for sale, two for two dollars. I ask
everybody, “How would you like a hamburger?” Everybody says, “No thank you.” But
there’s one guy who says, “I’d like mine medium-rare.” He isn’t buying gas. He’s one of
the people Dad warned me about. He stands next to the door for ten minutes, then lets out
a breath and leaves. Then the wind starts blowing again.

Then, for two hours after that, people come into the gas station only in pairs. This
is from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Once they’re through the door the pair splits up and searches for
items separately. Everyone during this time period is the same age as Ms. Itty-Hampton. Sometimes people of the same pair run straight into each other. They always say, "Excuse me," then keep moving. When it’s time to pay for the items, both people met and set them down in front of me. When I say, “thirty dollars and eighty five cents,” they each take out their wallets—one from the front of the pants, one from the back--and split the bill exactly down the middle. If the bill ends with an odd number, I pick a penny from the tray and say, “Thank you.”

Only rig drivers pull into the gas station after this, all the way to 9:15 p.m. The noise of the rigs is so much that the owl hooting--now up to thirteen times a minute--no longer has a point. There’s a line of rigs releasing brakes and relaxing engines all the way down the driveway. Left arms hang out the window and wave to each exiting rig. The riggers are happy, like they’ve gotten somewhere. But all the same, my eyes are constantly on the door to judge their faces. My hands take the money, handle the items, and my mouth covers any other problems needing to be dealt with--which there aren’t any. The riggers know the operation. The busiest time happens at 8:30 p.m., when the line for the register is curled back beside the phone, which hasn’t been used all day. Riggers stand in separate lines for the coffee machines--only three coffee pots, so only three men taking the wall at once. They’re also using the bathroom, which means one, or all, of them have a key to it.

Mom comes in. I give her the same look everybody else gets. Nobody has spoken a word in the station for the last hour and a half. The door is now opening every six seconds, falling closed for one second, and then getting kicked open again by another
rigger, so there isn’t any silence for talking in anyway. But once Mom is inside, barefoot, in
her white bathrobe that’s not even tied but held together with one hand pressed to her belly, the riggers hit pause. She leaves little footprints that disappear behind her. The riggers watch these, but step back when she gets near them. Her hair is black and wet, and she nails a rigger in the eye with a drop of water when she suddenly glares at a surveillance camera.

“Genius,” she says to me. “Do you need a hamburger? Your father and I have been watching you all day. You haven’t screwed up once.” Riggers are now collecting outside the door--unwilling to open it--just standing with hands on each other’s shoulders, watching Mom inside. The hugest rigger of all day is right behind the door. I know which rig is his. It barely fits between the pumps. The Huge One watches Mom and flexes his hands while the other riggers strain to look past him. They’re piling up. The place will be surrounded in a matter of minutes.

“Okay,” I say, and do some quick math as Mom’s bubble of separation follows her to the microwave--where one rigger has already prepared a burrito on a paper plate. Mom’s bubble squeezes this guy away. She takes a hamburger from the shelf and tosses it in the machine. Now, for me, it’s a matter of getting the next rigger in line’s attention where it should be, on paying for items. I stand on the stool and say, “Free Mountain Dew for the next ten paying customers.” This would’ve worked if Mom wasn’t suddenly in the cosmetics aisle, looking at rubbers. “Diesel at half-price for the next thirty seconds!” I yell, and realize that these riggers are sweating hard now. They all shuffle a bit, but go nowhere. Then Mom tucks a box of rubbers into her robe. The owl-hoots, and the next
thing I know the Huge One from outside is grinning down at me. The door stays open, and now all those riggers stopped-up outside are rushing in behind the Huge One. I try to catch every face, but the store fills to capacity in a matter of seconds. The only air left to breath is up near the ceiling, but even that air seems more rigger than air at this point. I hook my ankles around the stool legs and grab the counter-top.

“I’ll take that half-price diesel now,” says the Huge One. “Should be fifteen dollars and I don’t know cents. And why don’t you run back and get me my Mountain Dew that you owe me. What’re you working here, some kind of zoo?” When he rests his elbows on his side of the counter, his fingers dangle off my end, smelling like sawdust.

“Yes sir.”

Back among the riggers I tip-toe to see above their round shoulders, repeating “excuse me” over and over, and as I step back out of the cooler with the Mountain Dew, I hear: “It wasn’t a zoo until you showed up.”

It’s Mom, behind the counter now, legs crossed on the stool. The riggers still respect her bubble—all except the Huge One, who leans over the counter, reaches past Mom’s head, and grabs a pack of cigarettes off the wall. He puts them in his shirt-pocket, and sawdust is sprinkled over everything. Mom and this rigger are just staring at each other when I slip in beside her and set the Mountain Dew next to the Huge One’s hand. Mom has my hamburger down in her lap where her robe is bunched together. The burger has a Mom-sized bite in it. And right then I inhale a nose-full of sawdust and sneeze myself invisible. The door swings closed, and the riggers go silent.

“Lady, you got some nerve sitting on that stool like you are.”
“Like what?”

“Let me put it this way, I do a lot of imagining out there on the road, but tonight when I’m hauling up through Wisconsin, deciding I want to imagine you, there ain’t gonna be much left to imagine. See?”

“Yeah, I see what you’re saying. You got a problem with imagination.”

“I’m saying I got as much imagination as I can handle. And if I wanted more imagination, it wouldn’t be hard to conjure some up. Yeah, imagination’s the least of my worries.”

“We all got worries. I got a gas station full of customers, and nobody’s giving me money. You think I’m sitting behind this counter for fun?”

The rigger glances at me—or, at where I should be, since he can’t possibly see me, but maybe just remembers where I was before I went invisible. Or maybe he feels my breath on his big bear arm. I get closer to Mom. She recrosses her legs.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” The Huge One says, and now he’s the opposite of grinning. “I’ve got half a mind to reach over there and--”

“Please,” Mom says, then takes a bite of hamburger and covers her mouth while she chews. The whole station watches her chew, and waits as she keeps chewing, until there’s a fine brown paste where her lips meet. She asks The Huge One, “Are you sure you could handle that?”

“I’ve handled myself in tighter situations than yours looks like.”

“It’s a long way up Wisconsin.”

“Not if you’re rested for it.”

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“Maybe you should take a nap.”

“If I could just settle down a minute. Just settle the hell down. And now I’ve got a free Mountain Dew to drink on top of it.”

Mom used her pinky to press a button on the register. “Nothing’s for free in here.”

“Maybe you should ask the boy. He’s got different ideas. Your Mountain Dew’s free, and your diesel’s half-price.”

“Are you talking about my son?” Mom drops the hamburger to her lap, then reaches for the back of my neck and pulls me up beside her curly-wet head. I’m still invisible, so the rigger doesn’t look at me. “Does he look like he owns this place?”

“He looks like the kid of any of these guys behind me.”

“But he doesn’t make the rules. That job belongs to my husband.”

“Then maybe you should bring the husband out. Because I’ve got fifteen bucks right here—that’s my gas and my free Dew. And if those two legs move so much as a millimeter, I’m going to make sure your knees never touch again.”

Mom recrosses her legs, then taps the counter with a toe. She scratches her knee. “Diesel’s full price, but Mountain Dew just went up fifty cents a bottle. Sorry boys, but business is business.”

And that’s when I know: After the riggers fill their rigs with every last item of the store, all the way down to the neon signs and cardboard platters the candy bars come in, what I’ll remember is this: That when The Huge One uproots the counter with one hand, and grabs the middle of mom’s foot with the other--but before she’s pulled clean through her robe, before the robe drapes softly over the stool--when she still has a grin aimed
straight into the Huge One’s eyes, before the riggers lining the aisles, all the way back to
the frozen pizza coolers, all take a hop . . . and all land square—when the lights blink, and
before the windows crackle—I’ll open both hands, and out of Mom’s hand will drop the
last bite of hamburger. And I’ll always remember her as the Mom I always thought she
was.

But this is what I actually see: A line of riggers falling like dominoes around the
back of the station. Dad, in the door marked PRIVATE, naked, dripping wet, holding a
baseball bat with two six-inch nails criss-crossing the tip—Dad, also holding a bucket.
The riggers regaining their feet, then walking single-file through the front door (where
Dad has run to), dropping money into his bucket, because this is something they’ve all
done before. Mom standing beside the cash register, her robe pulled tight now, double-
knotted. The Huge One twisting the cap off his Mountain Dew, taking a swig. His hand
squeezing at the bottle so slowly and evenly that when he takes it away from his mouth it
isn’t crushed at all, just empty, and his eyes are watering.

The Huge One is last to go. “Thirty-seven dollars,” he finally announces, a brand
new smile for Dad. The Huge One then wants to shake hands. Dad, whose mustache is
still glistening, leans his battle-bat against the door and takes the huge hand. “Thanks for
shopping Livery’s.” I cannot watch this.

Then the door is locked and my family is collected at the counter: Mom on the
stool, Dad where the customers stand. All eyes are on Dad’s bucket. Mom says, “I know
what you’re about to say.

“I haven’t said anything yet. Shut your lip.”
“I’m warning you. What you’re about to say, don’t say it.”

“I’ve got every right in the world to say something. I’ll say something and you’ll listen.”

“Don’t.”

“Or what?”

“Or you’ll see.”

Dad leans over the counter and looks at Mom’s hands. They’re folded tightly in her lap. He says, “I don’t think you even know what I’m going to say. You’re bluffing.”

“The hell I don’t. It’s written all over your face.”

“Why don’t you tell me then, if you’re so smart?”

“Because if I say it, then it’s been said, and in that case you might as well have said it yourself, because then we’ll be talking about it, and I don’t want to talk about it, so I’m not saying a damn word.”

“And the boy’s standing right there.”

“I see him.”

“So maybe we should go back to the apartment.”

“So you saw everything on the surveillance cameras, right?”

“Is that what you thought I was going to say?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What if that was the thing I was going to say?”

“Then you would’ve said it already. That’s if you really saw anything.”

“And what didn’t I see?”
“Come on,” Mom says. She reaches for a pack of cigarettes and they disappear into her robe. “Come on. Let’s go to the apartment.”

“Did you get the . . .”

“Can’t you see where I hid them?”

Dad looks confused. I’m staring at him and he doesn’t even realize it. And there’s his bucket of money sitting on the counter. Dad’s butt cheeks clench as Mom touches the door marked PRIVATE. His spine rises through his neck and his head separates and follows Mom through the door. And when the door latches shut I hope, for Dad’s sake, that Mom is carrying his head gently through the living room.

But back in the station, Dad’s body stumbles in a half-circle, straight-legged. A whole arm points, and points repeatedly at my stool. I get the idea. I sit down and say, “I’m working, Dad.” Then a hand moves to scratch the top of his neck-stump. A breath gets caught in my throat, and Dad’s other hand wanders, finding a place with his privates, and starts scratching. “Dad,” I say. “No, Dad.” Then it becomes a matter of grabbing him and getting him pointed toward the door marked PRIVATE, and then kicking the backs of his heels until they move.

The kitchen light is broken, but this is a scene I don’t want to see anyway: Dad, with one hand planted on the kitchen faucet, the other scratching away. “Mom!” I yell. “Please!” But I hear nothing. And Dad seems to be standing comfortably in place, so I decide just to get back on my stool and wait for the next customer.

I hide the bucket below the counter, and I notice it’s the dimmest hour of day inside the store. Everything’s stuck to everything else, which is why the parking lot is
empty, and out on the road there are no Fords or Chevys or anything else. The falling sun, in the distance, is the only movement. That's what I'm watching through the plate-glass window. But on closer look even the sun's stuck, like a beach ball lodged between the overpass and the highway.

Finally, when daylight is gone, a machine clicks overhead, then whirs. Two or three degrees of heat throughout the station releases the items from their shelves. The newspapers are free to curl now when I walk past them. I do five laps around the candy bars before a kid walks by the door.

He turns and faces me, but his eyes are off from where I'm standing. I check my arms, and sure enough I'm fully visible. The kid smooths back his hair, then sits on the curb. Suddenly there are cars on the road again, and that's where he's focussed.

I'm back on the stool when the others arrive. Boys. They appear from behind the gas pumps. From around the corner of the station. Walking down the long driveway. The parking lot is still empty of cars. But the boys approach, look at each other, then sit down on the curb. Some boys have bikes, which they stow out of sight, but most walked here. Their t-shirts are black, but besides that, they're all a little different. In another moment there's no sitting-room left on the curb. The parking spaces are all filled with boys. Some lean against the plate-glass. Two lean against each other--but only for a moment--then move on. Suddenly they all stop to light cigarettes. Then they lean even lazier. I'm leaning now too, against the counter. A boy leaning on a gas pump sees me. He blows smoke at me, and when it clears there's another boy in his place. It's 10:00 p.m.
At ten-fifteen a single black Ford rolls down the driveway, then stops just inches from the boy who arrived first. The window slides electrically down, revealing nothing but more blackness. I’m on the other side of the counter now, knocking a pack of cigarettes against my forehead. The Ford’s engine guns—the first sound I’ve heard in hours. Everybody flinches, but nobody moves. A hand flops through the driver’s window. Everybody reaches to slap it. The hand disappears. The window slides up. I’ve learned to read their lips now too.

#57: “And in the backseat?”

#3: “New face.”

#57: “Name?”

#3: “Michelline.”

#57: “Hair?”

#3: “Long, brown.”

#57: “Education?”

#3: “Passed eighth grade.”

#57: “History?”

#3: “Unknown. Initial sighting: this morning, bus stop. Initial verbal contact: this afternoon, bus stop.”

#57: “Resistance?”

#3: “Moderate.”

#57: “Physical contact?”

#3: “The windows are currently sealed.”
"Johnny's feelings about this one?"

"Come on. Does Johnny like her or not?"

"That's classified."

" Classified, assified."

"You didn't hear this from me. Yesterday Johnny was placed in summer school again. His current objective is to fit the entire summer into one night. That's tonight."

"Oh crap. The backseat ... She has no idea what's about to happen to her."

"All we can do now is pray."

The Ford's back door flings open. Boys fall. A girl's feet hit the pavement running. She chops her feet--turning!--straight at the door to the station. When her palms meet the plate-glass door, the glass bends. The Ford's headlights flare then, swallowing her up, all except her palms, which remain black against the glass, bending it. Her feet keep chopping. The door gives way first, bouncing hard against a candy bar display--she's in--then firing back through the door-frame, clipping a boy, spinning him, until he topples against the hood of the Ford, knees and ankles still crossed.

But the girl's inside. Michelline.

And face down on the corrugated rug. I could reach with my shoe and gently step on her fingers. She doesn't move. Her black t-shirt is halfway up her back. I know she's alive from the chubs of flesh contracting toward her spine. Outside, all the hands and
faces are pressed to the plate-glass. I haven’t even removed the pack of cigarettes from between my teeth. That’s the first step.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“He’ll be here any second. Please!” Michelline sits upright. Her hair is still curtained in front of her face. When she speaks I get a peek at her chin.

“You mean Johnny?”

She wipes her hair away. “You’re one of them too?”

An engine screams: a car going fifty miles-per-hour, going nowhere. It’s lights flash across the station. The boys against the plate-glass all dive for safety. The Ford’s headlights spin a full circle every two seconds. But I’m still staring at Michelline, and there’s only one thing about her: She has the biggest cheeks I’ve ever seen.

“God! Are you going to stand there and let him kill me?”

But by the time I find my key at the bottom of my pocket, and I’m standing in front of the plate-glass door, those two headlights are staring me down. Then they’re growing bigger and bigger—a fart, louder and louder—the key becomes a wet noodle in my palm. All I can think to do is look straight at the headlights—cross my eyes hard!—and suddenly it’s two Fords racing. The sound doubles, which drowns out Michelline’s screams. The Fords are neck and neck, ramming each other for position, then bouncing apart—but never more than a couple feet. And Michelline--she better get right behind me--right behind me!--because Man, they’re zeroing . . .

The last crossing of my eyes cranks them so hard that I’m staring at myself--which looks like one giant eye--inside my skull. All idea of direction is completely gone, but I
feel the small tornado of two Fords racing by me--hear their howl, which weakens down to nothing. I massage my eyelids in order to right my eyeballs, and when I'm blinking at the painful strips of light, I hear her:

“Johnny? God, let me explain. I wasn’t trying to get away and never come back. I'm just really ticklish, that's all. I'm just--Johnny? What a minute, Johnny. Don’t worry about this guy. Who cares about him? Jeez. He wasn’t trying to lock you out of Livery’s. He was just checking out your Ford. I was just telling him--Johnny!”

But Johnny doesn’t have a shirt on. He’s smoking inside the station. His hair is spiked just like it was in black-and-white earlier today, and Johnny’s long white arms are covered with goose bumps. His hands, though, are monstrous, and reaching for me.

“You,” he says. “You dare attempt to rape my girl? Playing pocket-pool inside your pants, while Johnny watches from outside--watching you with your look on your face? The back seat of Johnny’s Ford empty of his girl?”

“No.”

“No!” says Johnny!”

“Come on, Johnny,” says Michelline, who’s cheeks are white one second, red the next. “He’s not so bad. He’s--”

“Not bad? Not bad? As in, Johnny’s good, and this guy’s bad?”

Glancing over Johnny’s shoulder I see the hundreds of faces and hands on the plate-glass.

“If you mean bad as in good, then no,” she says. “In that case, Johnny, you’re the baddest, and this guy’s the best. I mean--”
“Damn you, Michelline. This is what I mean.” Johnny’s hands begin spinning and clawing at the air. I take a step back. Johnny goes forward, asking, “Bitch? Bitch?” The hands are a whistling cloud, and Johnny’s eyes suddenly become interested in the sound they’re making. He blinks and looks at them, which ruins his balance, and suddenly his fingers slap each other, and his hands fall limp to his hips. “You,” Johnny points to Michelline. “Johnny doesn’t care if his woman’s a genius or a kindergartner, if Johnny’s got school tomorrow morning, the woman’s got school too.” He wraps her up with one giant hand. Then he pulls the other one on me like a gun. “But tomorrow night,” Johnny says, “you better remember who spared your life on this day of our lord.”

I nod.

“Johnny said, ‘You better remember who spared your life on this day of our lord!’”

From her place, huddling in Johnny’s armpit, Michelline rolls her eyes and mouths the word.

“Johnny?” I say.

“Lord Johnny,” Johnny tells me again, followed by a wink from Michelline, which I tell myself to make sure really happened by watching the surveillance cameras later tonight--the cameras Mom and Dad must not be watching right now. The boys outside have already reclaimed their smoking spots, and they don’t acknowledge Johnny or Michelline until the two are back in his Ford. Johnny bangs twice on the roof and guns the engine. The boys scatter into the darkness, leaving nothing but cigarette butts and hand-prints on the plate-glass. Johnny points his gun-hand out the window and shoots
down a stop sign, then he's blasting over the highway—followed closely by the identical black Ford he raced with earlier, who makes a move to cut Johnny off at the top of the over-pass.

I stand and watch the overpass for the next hour. No customers. No sign of anything. My breathing won't slow down.

It's one-thirty and I'm back on the stool, watching a taxi driver pump his own gas, when a small photograph blows, for no reason, across the corrugated rug. I go and pick it up—it feels warm—and next thing I know I'm smiling back at a school photograph of Michelline. She looks at least three years younger than she did tonight—like Michelline's mom took the time to dress her up and brush her hair for the picture, and was then waiting in the flanks of the camera room—making the camera-guys take extras, because Michelline's smile wasn't perfect . . . not until they shot this picture—and only then did Michelline's mom take her straight home. I suck on my finger for a second, tasting warm acid in my cheek, then scrub a shoe-print off Michelline's white dress.

The owl hoots.

I close Michelline in my palm and jump back behind the counter. A customer in a suit walks in and stops on the corrugated rug. He also has a ponytail, but it's the suit I'm watching: Light blue, stiff, and very small on him. The Suit surveys the store—eyes blinking rapidly, as if clicking pictures—then begins to shop.

Michelline starts squirming in my fist, but I ignore her in order to seem normal in front of the Suit. I pretend to fall asleep, head against the cash-register. I guess that's when I accidentally bend Michelline in half, because the next thing I hear is a high-

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pitched scream. That's followed by coughing. Then gurgling. I'm fully awake again. The Suit still has his back to me, though, staring at ICE COLD BEVERAGES, tugging his ponytail, so I raise my fist to my ear. She's wheezing now . . . or is that gentle breathing? No--it's just the pulse in my thumb beating against her head. I'm afraid to look. I open my fingers one at a time. Michelline's face is no longer there. The surface of the picture is nothing but a red splotch, and when I try to feel if she's still beneath it somewhere, my thumb comes back warm and wet. The Suit drops a Mountain Dew on the counter. I drop both hands to my lap, cupping Michelline. For the next twenty seconds I stare at the Suit and he stares at me. His light bluejacket is even tighter now, and the Suit has to loosen his neck tie before he says, "You alright, kid?"

I'm afraid I'll cry if I open my mouth, and my hands are a nothing but a pool of Michelline's blood, so I use my nose to peck out the price of a Mountain Dew. The register dings, opens, and the Suit extends a twenty dollar bill, which I bite from him and then spit into the tray. The Suit takes a deep breath, and a button pops off his jacket and hits the wall of cigarettes. He then itches his elbows, which rips something I cannot see, because my eyes really are watering now--Michelline is cooling off and dripping over my thumbs--and my face is deep in the money tray, licking up singles. I've got all the Suit's nickels in my cheek, and half of his dimes, when he finally says--between huffs of breath--"Keep the change, kid . . . Looks like you need a good time . . . worse than I do."

When the Suit's off and staggering back across the parking lot, I quickly pour Michelline into the trash and start picking through the hamburger wrappers for any sign of her smiling face. I'm still crouching there when Mom wakes me up at 2:30 a.m.
“Oh, Jesse! Dear, did you break another pen?” Mom sets me up on the stool. She covers my red hands with tissues, then rubs her thumbs in circles on my forehead. “You did such a wonderful job today, Jesse. Maybe someday we’ll ask you to do it again . . . someday. But tomorrow you’ve got school, remember? Genius school? I told your father all about it, and he’s so proud of you! But now it’s bed time, isn’t it? Dear?”

I want to close my eyes and sleep right here in Mom’s hands. But every time I try to see darkness, it’s Michelline’s school face instead, telling me it’s all okay—that I didn’t murder her just now. Her face won’t stop winking at me either. And right then my hands feel heavier than ever before. The weight almost crashes me off the stool, but I jump to my feet instead. My hands . . . they’re holding something now . . . it’s Michelline’s cheeks! I’ve got her whole healthy head in my hands, and it’s smiling and winking like a freshly greased machine. The night suddenly seems dark and silent enough to be endless, and I’m nearly running to the door marked PRIVATE, to get to my bedroom where a perfect white notebook is waiting to be dented. But I stop—feeling Michelline’s warm breath through my shirt—and turn to give Mom one final grin goodnight. But her eyes are stuck to a surveillance camera on the ceiling. She raises a leg over the counter and points her big toe straight at Dad.
Mr. Belt
Monday, 7:35 a.m. Hectorville High School, Room 119.

Allow me to say, before we dive into . . . everything, that I’ve seen all six seasons of The Annoying Buzz, sir, and it’s an honor beyond comprehension to be in this kind of one-on-one with you today. T.A.B. has made such an impact on me and my . . . wife, that if this were a private school—well, sir, if this were a private school many things would be different—but if this were a private school I’d have every student in Room 119 debating the question, “Will Diane Chianti have Sylvester Anthony’s child? How and why?” And I’m not just saying that because of your unbelievable presence here today. I’ve approached the school board on this subject, not to mention the State Director of Curriculum, a very familiar enemy of mine who--

I need to settle down is what I need to do. I’ve got Merlin Hoffkins in the room! And did I mention?--wonderful suit, sir. You can’t get that style around here. Trust me. But settling down. Okay. Can I offer you some candy? I’ve got Snickers, Hershey, Smarties--please excuse the irony there. Jeez. What else? Haven’t got gum, sir. My apologies but it goes direction onto the walls, desks, body-parts, you-name-it--but I see some Reese’s Peanut--

No?

Well, it’s not my candy, sir. It’s for the students. Ten years ago you wouldn’t have found this candy dead in my classroom. But what’s left to do when the state enacts a
“sugar reward incentive” for grades 6 through 12? And that’s not just on Fridays like they promised. It’s five days a week, sir! And what do you think happens to a student who doesn’t turn in his homework? Do you want to know the “official” stance of the State Department of Education? “Award half the candy bar ration and cross your fingers.” I’ve got some kids--don’t get me started--on six bars per hour. And I’ve got some kids on . . .

But what was it like for you as a student, sir? Being a genius? Were you spanked because of it? I’ve heard childhood in Germany is terrible. Did they beat you with a paddle when you tried to . . . ignore all the bullcrap and do what you were put on this earth to do?

I thought so. Because I wanted to paddle that girl myself. He! He! But seriously, sir. Jean Granger made me want to shoot myself in the head with . . . a shotgun! And call a substitute for the rest of my life. Because this is what goes through a teacher’s head the moment he realizes that a “you” or a “Jean” comes along: I’ve been waiting for this student my whole life. This is the one I’ll track through the newspapers as she slowly makes a name for herself, as she publishes, as she travels through Europe with letters to the New Yorker, as she marries some famous Hollywood actor . . . then divorces the clown! And when she comes back to her old Alma Mater to give the graduation speech, I’ll be the one who introduces her. Oh, I won’t say anything fancy. It’s her day. And when she rises, gorgeous, to give her talk--when she hugs me and holds on just a little too long, sir--I’ll whisper in her ear, “Go ahead, Jean. I always knew we’d be here together.”
That was my dream. And suddenly there’s two months left in the whole school year and I don’t know what color the girl’s eyes are because she hasn’t looked at me once.

You’re a liar if you say you were any different with your teachers, sir.

I had her for freshman English. Second period. The back row. I guess there was no place else for a girl to sit who was already six-foot-whatever-inches by her thirteenth birthday. And being so blond, well . . . well, the point is she had a notebook, sir, and from the first bell to my dismissal her nose was buried in it, writing her genius poetry.

“Jean!” I’d yell to her. “Who was Chinaski’s lover in the story ‘Six Inches’?” See, we hadn’t even read ‘Six Inches’ yet. We were still on Bukowski’s biographies, and to tell you the truth, I didn’t remember who Chinaski’s lover was.

“Sarah,” she’d say, without looking up.

What I’m saying, sir, is that the rumors were true. She was a genius, and it was all happening in that notebook of hers. That notebook that needed to be replaced every two days because she was emptying her soul into it . . . That notebook that had nothing to do with me.

I’ll be frank, sir. I’m a poet too. Unpublished, yes, but I refuse to write for the mass audiences. I’ve got a very specific style—masculine, but not quite. If you’re interested I could show you some . . ?

Maybe when we’re finished.

But do you see? She was ruining my life, sir. I’d been teaching ten years and I wasn’t deaf. I knew my reputation—and not just among the students, but the faculty too. It
didn’t matter that I had a wife, or that she accompanied me to every school event. Or that I was the assistant JV soccer coach. Or . . .

But I don’t need to lecture you on what it’s like to be misunderstood. In your case, it still upsets me to think about the manor in which TV Guide reviewed the second season of T.A.B.—a very complex season, sir. If the blame were to lie with anyone, it would be with the actors . . . or at the very least the woman in charge of wardrobe.

But my point is that when my wife left me that Easter and I was already mad. When you spend your entire day with children—teenage children—you start to realize that even though your wife wants a baby more than anything in the world, the chances that she’ll produce a Jean Granger might as well be zero. So . . .

So I overhauled the curriculum is what I did! Freshman English was now Freshman Poetry. Screw the masses! Right sir?

Oh, the calls from the parents! The principal was on the phone with the school board. The school board was on the phone with the State—who was sending their man out immediately. Because who was this Mr. Belt? This man who said, “Nuh-uh!” to a curriculum that had been tested in eighteen states with satisfactory results? What about all those volumes of “The Complete Charles Bukowski” the State bought for a song? And don’t get me started on the teacher’s union . . . But to tell you the truth, sir? Watching my back in the school parking lot was the most exhilarating experience I’d had since my college days. And come Monday morning, I’d be holding an original Jean Granger poem. Oh boy did my bedroom ceiling get an earful that weekend . . .
But I made it to Monday morning, sir. And suddenly I’m standing in front of Jean’s locker. And suddenly she’s walking towards me. And . . . and who, of all boys, grabs her in the middle of the freshman hallway? Who sticks his tongue so deep in her ear that he’s tasting brain cells? None other than—

But how did you know it was Darryl Lee? Don’t tell me you’ve agreed to interview that . . . illiterate . . . hairy . . . long-fingered . . . well.

Then I suppose you should know just a thing or two about that . . . boy. Darryl Lee was just one grade above Jean, but because of his mustache you had to assume he was at least three years older. I had him the year before in freshman English—a terrible class all together. It was the first day of school and already Darryl was betting five dollars with everybody in the room that he could break his own finger. Of course all the boys got out their wallets. Some even agreed to cover the girls who wouldn’t go along with it. And I was the “pussy” because I said I could only pay him in candy bars. These quality assurance laws are something else, although I’m sure Darryl had no idea he was protected by them. We had to memorize all 240 at a mandatory summer seminar. “Law #15: If a student shows enough self-motivation to organize a classroom activity, yield all scheduled activity to said student and reward him or her with three times the candy bar ration.” I wasn’t even allowed to stop smiling and nodding my head. Darryl told everyone to shut up, then began flexing his muscles. I couldn’t watch it, but there was no ignoring the crack of his middle finger, sir. Then it was the boys cheering and the girls fleeing into the hallway. When I finally looked at Darryl he was howling, scooping up his pile of
money—and nine candy bars—off the floor. The principal found him later that day with his shirt off in the girl’s bathroom, moaning at himself in the mirror.

But what you need to understand about Darryl Lee, sir, is that nobody can refuse him. Even though a person of your . . . mental caliber will recognize his tricks and lies for what they are, he’ll say things about Jean that will make you want to castrate him. They only dated for one year, but believe me, sir, I know for a fact it takes that boy less than ten minutes to defile a girl so thoroughly that even New Orleans won’t take her.

I hope you don’t mind if I have a Snickers real quick. It’s hard to get through the morning without one. Excuse me while I just . . .

So anyway, back to the freshman hallway. Jean’s locker. Her poem! Darryl finally releases her. I take Jean by the arm and politely ask for her homework.

“What homework?” she says.

The attitude! Can you imagine if somebody—I’m talking about me here—hadn’t taken the time to cultivate this student? You, sir, must have had a teacher just like myself when you were growing up. A teacher who you hated, yes, but who was the single person in the whole world that understood your genius. And did this teacher didn’t treat you fairly? Of course not! How you must have resisted . . . her? A genius of your sensibilities was inspired by a woman—an old bitch of a woman—am I wrong? You genius are mysterious, yes, but not as mysterious as you’d like us to think . . .

Oh, eventually Jean rips a piece of paper from her notebook and makes me promise I won’t show it to anybody. I think I blacked out for the rest of that day. But I
still haven’t shown it to another soul, sir. Not even the police, who confiscated all my records pertaining to Jean. The police! They’d probably spill beer on it...

You’re holding the original. Please be careful with it, sir. I’ve decided not to expose it to a copy machine, for the obvious reasons. One can’t be too careful.

For the purpose of the film you’re making--I hope you don’t mind--I’ve compiled some notes on this poem. Take them, leave them, do whatever you wish. But I think you’ll have to agree that only a dream sequence could possibly capture the rawly innocent sexuality. The--are you folding the poem? Wait-wait-wait a minute, sir. Wait just a minute. Let me take a breath, because now I see it. You’ve just folded the only copy of “Oh, Detroit.”

Oh.

Please take the poem out of your pocket, sir. I’d hate to have to call the principal and...

Sir, I am surprised by your actions. I am emotionally injured by your actions. You are a man I have respected since my sophomore year of college. I am...

Oh I’ve got an idea! Let’s pretend nothing happened! Let’s pretend you want to show me the poem, because it’s your most prized possession and I’m a spoiled, rich Hollywood writer who can buy whatever I want! Because do you know what just happened? What just happened is that all of a sudden The Annoying Buzz SUCKS MY ASS! And not just the fourth season--which everybody thought sucked their ass--but all of them! Except the fifth season. You got lucky there... but the third and definitely the fourth seasons? SUCKED!
I got you, sir! You really thought I was mad, didn’t you?

No! Please, put the poem even deeper in your pocket for safe keeping. I meant it as a gift from the beginning. From your biggest fan. Because really, sir, Jean didn’t know how to write poetry when she wrote ... *that*. I hadn’t taught her a thing yet! Oh, technically she was a genius back then, but just read it! There’s absolutely no *pain* whatsoever in that poem. No, I am absolutely certain Jean would want you to have it. She would be embarrassed to know that her favorite teacher was still holding on to such an amateur effort. The poem doesn’t even mention Darryl Lee. Yes ... it was written way before I opened that girl’s mouth, reached down her neck, and squeezed her heart until she knew what writing poetry was really supposed to feel like.

So you take the poem. I don’t think Jean ever saw *The Annoying Buzz* once in her life. But you have to admit how good I got you!

It’s okay to smile, sir.

The memories are enough for me. You know, I couldn’t teach Jean poetry with the rest of her class. It was a room full of soccer players and boys like Dicky Smythe ... now there’s an example of what watching too much TV will do to you! No offence, sir. And besides, I was on triple-secret probation after that stunt I pulled with the curriculum. There was a man from the state--sunglasses and everything--standing in the back of my room, hand on his walkie-talkie, ready to call the governor directly at my slightest reference to poetry ... besides Bukowski, of course. Oh, I was down, sir. But I wasn’t out yet.
There was a genius seminar the next weekend in New York City. It promised the newest techniques, and it promised instant results, and I was a desperate man. I bought the tickets for the plane and the seminar out of my own pocket. And when I got back to school on Monday, I casually informed Jean that she would fail my class if she didn’t receive some immediate individual attention. For the rest of the year we would meet at lunchtime at this desk. I told her to bring her notebook too. But Jean was such a... happy genius, sir. When I told her she was failing she just said, “Okay, Mr. Belt. Do you care if I drink a Mountain Dew in here?” So I had the girl right where I wanted her. But I don’t care if you’ve got a Ph.D. in Genius Development--there’s nothing that can prepare a teacher for that first session with a real live genius. But if there’s one thing I learned in New York, it’s that Jean needed me, sir. And I wasn’t going to let her down.

She arrived right on time. All I had to do was lift the notebook from her hands. It was that easy. I read it right there in front of her--genius, yes, but my God the innocence! They were all poems about how much she hated tomato sauce, or how good it feels to roll wet socks off your feet. There was one from the perspective of a pillow, sir. But they warned us about that at the seminar. Because it’s the innocence that makes a genius so hard to break. And that first day Jean was rock-solid. She didn’t even cry when I slowly tore out each notebook page, crumpled it up, and threw it at her forehead. But I remembered what I learned in New York--don’t get discouraged if they don’t cry right away. Because the thicker a genius’s skin, the fuller she’ll be of raw, gooey genius potential.
And I bet you were just as full of it, sir... so cheerful and blind, thinking you’d write your sweet little radio-plays forever. You’re lucky that old woman cracked you open when she did.

But Jean! I had to tape her fingers together to stop her from writing those awful, happy poems. It was twelve days before she finally stopped smiling. Oh, the smiling... getting that out of her system was the first step. After that, our routine went like this: She’d come in for lunch, sit down right where you are now, sir. I’d grab her hands, checking to see that my bandages hadn’t been tampered with. Then I’d lean back in my chair—just like this—close my eyes, and say, “Speak!” You might not be familiar with the Shapiro Speaking Method. Back then it was the cutting edge in genius development. It took Jean twenty-eight straight days of talking about basketball, different kinds of tools in her garage, how many cracks there were on the sidewalk in front of her house—all before she finally mentioned Darryl Lee. But once she did... it happened just like they said it would! She paused for five minutes, and even though the first rule of the Shapiro Method was that Jean should never, under any circumstances, ask me a direct question, she said, “Mr. Belt, is my belly button supposed to hurt when Darryl—” And that’s when I smacked my desk. “Write!” I said. Jean suddenly burst into tears—I think for the first time in her life. It was... wonderful! I smacked the top of her little blond head. “WRITE!” And, sir, when she finally pulled off her bandages... when she got the pencil to sit still in her fingers... when she touched it to paper for the first time in twenty-eight days, what was left afterwards was Jean’s first genius poem. So you see, sir, all you have in your pocket right now is a...
But you’re teasing me with it, aren’t you. Ooo, you’re just sticking your fingers in your pocket like that. Oh! Don’t you dare try to give it back to me now! Put it in your pocket! I never want to see that poem again!

I can see it in your fat face. You think I’m the animal! How could I do what I did to such a young and beautiful girl? You tell me. What did that old woman do to you? Tie your foot to your neck until you couldn’t think anymore? Blindfold you for a year? Poor, poor, sir.

You think we enjoy this position in life? Developing geniuses isn’t the kind of job you ask for. Suddenly you’re at the seminar with a thousand other teachers just like you and nobody’s saying a word. Nobody’s screaming out that it’s torture. Nobody’s puking on the floor when they show us how to perform a proper choke-hold. And do you know why, sir? Because we love geniuses. You’re are the reason we teach at all. You’re the reason our spouses leave us. You’re the reason we agree to teach double-intensive summer school . . . which starts in fifteen minutes.

Without us, Jean Granger is married to Darryl Lee. She’s got four of his kids, and she’s changing their leaning-disabled diapers as we speak.

Without us, The Annoying Buzz is just a cold you got ten years ago that went away after a weekend in bed. The only thing we pray for, sir, is that someday you’ll thank us for what we gave you. Because there’s always a day—always!—when you don’t need us anymore. There’s always a day when you—
But who wants to focus on all these negatives, huh? Not me! Am I loony or something? Honestly, teaching Jean to write poetry was the most . . . brilliant experience of my life, and that’s the truth, sir. But it wasn’t just Jean. Everything was turning around that spring. I even met somebody new. An art teacher from another school—a wonderful artist who appreciated my poetry too. Who kissed me every night when I got home. Who told me I would be loved forever. I pity any man who doesn’t know what that feels like, sir.

And yes. At school there was my Jean. She had a way--when she finally saw a glimpse of her own potential--of getting a few feet taller all in one second, until her head smacked the ceiling! But you know what I’ll remember most from that year? The day Darryl Lee caught me in my classroom after school. It was the week before summer vacation, and I was spending all that time his girlfriend--well, I expected to be thrown to my desk and choked until my eyes popped out! But what did Darryl want, sir? Of all things? For me to help him write a poem! For Jean! Oh, it was beautiful how destroyed that boy looked. Every day Jean’s poems about him were getting darker and more violent, and I could see it on him. He was so skinny you couldn’t help but count his heart beats--and let me tell you, sir, the poor boy should’ve been dead. Jean had told me, of course, that she was dumping him the next day. But I still sat down with him, and together we wrote a perfect, rhyming love poem for her. And don’t tell anyone, sir, but I made sure Darryl addressed her as “my lovely towhead” in the first line--which is what I’d been calling her lately. I could hardly keep a straight face when the boy stood up and wanted to shake my hand. Of course, later that week he beat up Mr. Emmonds at a school assembly.
Mr. Emmonds. Fine social studies teacher, but really, it was about time he was brought down a peg.

But me and Darryl Lee. *That* was a perfect day, sir—and I was feeling so great there was only one thing that would make it better. I stayed late after school, drank three Mountain Dews and pulled an all-nighter writing a love letter to Jean. It wasn’t until six in the morning that it finally had the perfect amount of misspelled words and unneeded punctuation. Then I ran up and down the freshman hallway a few times—working up a good sweat—and rubbed the letter over my chest so it would smell like a basketball player wrote it.

It was signed Voss Ostran, who I was nearly 100 percent sure was uncircumcised. He sat next to Jean in my English class. He had blond hair too, and was exactly her height. He didn’t need to shave yet either, and as far as I was concerned Voss Ostran was the only boy in school capable of loving himself more than he could love her. A boy like that couldn’t hurt Jean *too* badly, I figured, and they just might have some fun together. So, at sunrise, I slipped the letter into Jean’s locker, ran back here and had just enough time to drink another Mountain Dew before the buses arrived. I tell you, sir, I was so exhausted that day... by the time Jean showed up for lunch, I...

Don’t give me that look! This is just one hilarious story to you, huh? *Poor* Mr. Belt, huh? The genius knows what’s about to happen to the teacher! But what about you, sir? What about the day that poor old woman said goodbye to you? After she taught you everything
she possibly could? When it was clear every time she opened her stupid mouth that you were the genius and she was just like everybody else?

How did she let you go? Was it with a kick to the groin? A book slammed on your thumb? Or was she nice about it? Did she just tell you to get the hell out of her classroom and never come back?

Or do you even remember?

By this time Jean was coming in every day with two full notebooks of poems, and I just didn’t have enough tears in my eyes to keep up with all of it. But I only had to read one poem that day to know I had nothing left to give her. It was her first real love poem . . . and it was for Voss Ostran. Yes, the beautiful boy I’d just given to her. But did she thank me? Did she, sir? I set the notebook on my desk and Jean’s hair was the first thing I could reach. Oh, I didn’t let go until I heard the girl repeat my name so many times I would always remember what it sounded like. I’ve still got a few of those blond hairs, sir. Right in this desk. And no, you can’t see them.

I pray that old woman got you good. So good you can still feel it. You probably don’t even remember her name, but someday you’d better find her grave and thank her for The Annoying Buzz. Believe me, she’s waiting for it.

Jean didn’t even cry when I let her go--that’s the kind of genius she was. She just walked out of this room and went on to tenth grade. She would’ve left you in the dust if she’d just had more time. But everybody knows a real genius don’t live to see twenty. Now that you have everything you came her for . . . sir, please get the hell out of my classroom and never come back.
But no! Wait a minute! Wait a minute, sir! I can’t believe I almost forgot this! I’m so stupid sometimes! Okay. I promised Colin I’d ask you—because we’ve honestly been fighting over this since we watched last Friday’s episode . . . But when Sylvester sneaks out of Diane’s bedroom at four in the morning—was that really to fly to Denver to see a women’s basketball game?

That’s what I figured.
Did you just wake up, Mr. Hoffkins? Why aren’t you eating dinner?

I just need to tell you that Darryl’s a new man because a year ago God saved his life and said, “No more Scotch whiskey, Darryl. And no more beer either. And no Wayne Summer.” So if you see Wayne Summer tonight at The Bucket, Mr. Hoffkins, don’t let Darryl near him. Wayne Summer’s a big guy and he’s got a red face and Darryl calls him “Fat Wayne,” so watch out. And don’t let Darryl buy any drinks. First of all, Darryl doesn’t have any money, and second of all he only drinks Mountain Dew. And if Wayne Summer gives him a Mountain Dew, Mr. Hoffkins, you need to smell it and make sure it’s a Mountain Dew. And when Wayne sits down at the table, you might say, “Hey Fat Wayne, you got work tomorrow, just like Darryl.” And Mr. Hoffkins, keep an eye on your watch because at nine o’clock--on the dot, Mr. Hoffkins-- Darryl takes his pills. He usually takes two, but tonight be sure he takes four. And if Wayne Summer’s sitting there and Darryl says he forgot his pills at home then just look in the back pocket of Darryl’s jeans, where I put an extra baggie with some pills in it. Because if Fat Wayne’s sitting with you guys, you need to give Darryl all six of the pills in the baggie. Of course no eating after he takes the pills, just more Mountain Dew. But listen--there’s nobody in the world nicer now than Darryl. Still, somebody in The Bucket might want to kill him for something he did before the pills and God, then you’ve got to throw your drink in that
guy’s face and run Darryl out of there, and shame on you for taking him to the Bucket in
the first place, Mr. Hoffkins. Because--

Darryl wants me to tell you that he’s really, really excited, Mr. Hoffkins. We just ate
dinner and it’s time for his next pill. But remember, nine-thirty, no Fat Wayne, Mountain
Dew, no food, straight home, and Darryl’s really excited . . . And Mr. Hoffkins, just
between you and me, I saw that blond girl once. At the store, a couple days before she got
herself killed. And I know size fourteens when I see them. She had no fourteens, Mr.
Hoffkins. That girl had thirteens.
[File footage: DARRYL LEE seated at microphone in large auditorium. Bulbs flash. Woman's voice from off-screen: "It's been rumored you were the man who took Jean Granger's virginity. How do you respond?" LEE blinks, wavers toward microphone: "Tom and Jean are boyfriend and girlfriend. They're in love forever. Because it's Tom's turn with her--" Roars erupt off-screen. LEE hides beneath table. Loud, microphoned voice: "This is not a trial! This man is not on trial!" Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Second square grows to consume entire screen.]
Strange? Strange about that day at the basketball courts? Strange like that blue suit you got on? Okay. But I never noticed something strange that day--just nice, normal 2-on-2 basketball. Not wet or windy, or too sunny, or the sun too far down in the sky so somebody can’t shoot the basketball without squinting. Everybody there--me and my best friend Tom Workman, that guy Dicky, and the great basketball player Voss Ostran. Except--okay, suddenly there’s a Killer on the court with us too. The thing you notice about him first is tattoos. I got a tattoo on my arm but not like this guy. Arms, neck, up to his ears--all tattoos. Killer’s big too. Real big. Not like Fat Wayne Summer--who’s a fat guy--but Killer’s got muscles and tattoos, and I notice the other guys noticing too when I don’t hear the basketball bouncing anymore, just guys breathing and swearing under their breath.

That was strange.

But did I say Killer’s got no shirt on? Just jeans? In the summer? It’s hard to do anything besides look at him walking straight at you, no shirt, tattoos, muscles on top of muscles--and did I tell you, smiling?

Because I don’t got enemies in this town anymore. I used to, but I worked out all those problems. Think about high school. Think about the kids you beat the stuffing out of. Because when Killer is walking towards you, tattoos, and then raising his arms--it’s
you and only you—suddenly you’re thinking, who took this Killer’s front tooth off his 
smile?—could this be me? I’m talking about those high school days, the days when this 
Killer could’ve been any number of brothers, any number of cousins of some poor girl 
who didn’t know what it meant to go on a date with me. But you have to understand also.

Everybody else on the court’s thinking Darryl’s finally going to get what he 
deserves. They don’t understand that a guy can change, once he’s got a family and kids 
and other stuffing to deal with. Tom understands this, though. Maybe Voss understands.

But Killer’s suddenly holding his giant hands out for me. To kill me. Flashing his 
fingers, like casting his spell. “Give it,” Killer says. This high-pitched, wrong voice, he’s 
smiling, hunched down—can you picture?—like he’s about to rip me open. “Give it,” 
Killer says. And it’s only right then I remember I’m holding the basketball. That’s all he 
wanted, nothing else. So I give Killer the ball.

But see, I’ve been in fights before when my life was just a question. People, these 
men, in the moment, try to kill me. Beer bottles. Baseball bat once. Some guy pulled a 
gun over a pool table. But since those times I’ve done nothing but work for Sally Brothers 
Destruction, and I been working for them a whole year easy. Now they’re leaving me at a 
house all week—just me and the house—and I’ll get the house pretty near tore-down 
because Sally Brother can trust me. But also, I got all kinds of thinking-time to compare 
and contrast my life. What happens is I’m hammering, been hammering the same roof for 
a couple hours—got a good hole in the roof for Sally Brothers—and I freeze right there, 
suddenly, in my memory, sitting in Fat Wayne Summer’s house, drinking, and suddenly 
grabbing Fat by the armpits and driving his head through the drywall. And I freeze with
the hammer, and I have to flex all my muscles at once, squeezing my muscles like this, because it’s like reversing the things my muscles once did. But then comes the worst part on the roof—the hearing in my ears Fat Wayne, the next day, on the phone, telling me what it was like to have his head busted through drywall. Fat Wayne telling me about me-somebody he always called his friend, but somebody he always is scared of—because all we’re doing is sitting in his house, drinking, laughing and suddenly Fat Wayne’s seeing the Crazy in my eyes, seeing somebody able to kill somebody in a moment. This is what Fat Wayne said to me, in my head, on the roof, asking me a question. “Do you think you wanted to kill me, Darryl?”

And I say, “No.”

And he says, “Okay.”

But do you get it? Both me and Fat Wayne know in our brains that I would’ve smashed his head inside-out if I’d hit a wall-stud instead of just drywall. So up on the roof that’s when I turn the fists on myself. Up there, nothing but sky, and God’s got nothing else to look at. I say to God, “Now you gave me these fists, right? You can knock me off this roof if you want to. So that’s fine if that’s what happens.” And I let God punch me now. Knock me over the peak. Knocked out. I’m sliding down a 30-pitch roof. But--and this is God--I stop on the gutter. My foot, my hand caught in the gutter and God saves me. You can imagine how it felt to know God did that for you.

I’m different now, since then. I still got friends, somehow. I got these Sunday basketball games. These guys I call my friends. Tom Workman. Fat Wayne, if you can believe him still wanting to be friends, and yes, Voss Ostran, who always guards me and I
always guard him. I got a wife, kids. I want to be good for them. I want to be good for Sally Brothers. So my life's good for the first time ever.

So when I see Killer come for me, it sets something off that I can't stop. But it's different, because it's not the Crazy in my eyes. It's Fear. And that's how I know I'm a better man. And the Fear doesn't go away after I give Killer the basketball. It just gets bigger and bigger while we all watch him shooting, making three-pointers, watching him dunk the ball, and he can dribble too. I can't speak for the others, but I'm saying the Fear didn't leave me.

Then it was Tom Workman, my best friend, who steals a rebound from Killer. And you have to understand about Tom—who doesn't come up to this Killer's armpit—Tom takes the ball and starts shooting his own three-pointers. What it is about Tom's three-pointers is that they're five feet behind the line. I'm saying Tom doesn't miss them. He's the best shot I've ever seen and he's my friend.

Killer, though—Killer starts rebounding for Tom. Killer says, his high-pitched voice, "Good shot. Good shot." But see? It's making me cold. And every time Killer says, "Good shot" it gets even worse. And Tom isn't missing any. But then--catching the ball clean through the net before it hits the blacktop--Killer doesn't throw it back to Tom. Killer just says, "You're done."

"Give me the ball," Tom just says. Then Tom goes and says, "Give me the fucking ball," Tom says, "Point at any spot on this fucking court and give me three shots, because that's all it takes. You son of a bitch. Fucking son of bitch. Whose court do you think this is?"
What just happened is that Killer got under Tom’s skin. We’re great friends, and we’ve knocked the stuffing out of each other too. Tom ain’t no Fat Wayne. Me, I’ve got that Crazy in my eye, but in Tom the Crazy is when his eyes get half-closed and it looks like he might fall asleep on you, but suddenly the railing is broken off the porch and thrown in the street. That’s when we both drank Scotch whisky. I wish Tom changed like I did, but I say it’s only gotten worse for him. He drives his rig all week, then at home you look at him and it’s eyes-half-closed-Crazy all the time, ready to soak somebody’s head with blood on the basketball court on Sunday. Which is how I’m seeing him now, looking at Killer. But still like anybody you’d want to call your friend.

Killer spins the ball on his finger. He says, “You’re done.” He rolls the ball to Tom’s foot. But then it’s strange now because Tom can’t stop feeling the ball, like it’s got a few extra bumps in it, like it’s not his ball, even though it’s the ball he brought in his rig. And Tom’s the best shot in the world, but Tom misses two shots in a row, and Killer is smiling, and I’m freezing to death, and Tom’s eyes are almost closed now--

But Tom’s girlfriend lives across the street. Her Cutlass Supreme stops in the driveway. Jean Granger. Tom misses his third shot too, but everybody is watching Jean, because suddenly who cares about anything else anyway?

We all know the Cutlass Supreme. You see Jean down at Livery’s, or at the stoplight. Windows down. I don’t know. I always roll my windows down too when I see the Cutlass Supreme.

But Tom and Jean will be married someday. Tom loves her so much his rig is called Jean. But I don’t see them these days too much. Tom, on the road. And Jean? . . .
Maybe I don’t see them because they always go to parties and I’m married with four kids.

But someday we’ll all be married—and God will save Tom’s and Jean’s lives too . . .

Because sometimes I get happy for no reason in the world. No reason except it’s dark outside and I never see the dark anymore. Usually I go straight to sleep, but if I’m not asleep, I’m happy when it’s dark outside. That’s another thing since I got these pills—happiness just comes all over me.


What goes in that, in case Bee doesn’t know how to make it?
HELLO, JACK? I'M COKE

Woman With Real Blond Hair
Monday, 9:36 p.m. The Bucket.

*Divorced? Did you just say divorced? Do I look divorced to you?*

Well, you look very divorced. I never saw a suit like that on a married guy.

She did that to the rest of your clothes? . . . Wow. Sounds like a pretty good divorce to me. My parents got divorced about like that.

No, my parents. I'm not divorced. I'm happily . . . What are you drinking?

God. Are you trying to impress me or something?

*Bee? . . . Bull-blaster for me, and would you get this divorced gentleman a XXXXXXXX?*

. . . Right. He says it's got XXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXX with XXXXXXXXXX . . . I know . . . *Thanks, Doll* . . . You must be from somewhere, huh?

Ha! *This one's got a sense of humor, Bee! This one's*--
No . . . You’re not really from Califor-- . . . Because my brother drove through that state once! All his hair all fell out the next day and . . . and I bet that’s your Honda in the parking lot!

Don’t touch me! . . . Bee! Did you fix the soap in the bathroom yet? . . . Yeah, he’s just another one of those guys. Shit, what do I look like, Bee? I ain’t no-- . . . I ain’t no Jean Granger.
But back before Jean and Tom were perfect in love, Tom and I drank whisky every night. Tom always wanted to drink whisky because even Fat Wayne got to kiss Jean once, but she won’t go with Tom yet. I probably said something to Tom about his thingy being too small for her, or why do you want to stink around with somebody that everybody’s stunk around with? Those were the kinds of things I said, and my whole reasoning was—why not? Who’s going to stop me? But Tom was drinking so much whisky back then—me too—that all he wanted was something nice to think about for once. That’s why he always wanted me to tell the story about the love letter from Voss Ostran.

I was Jean’s boyfriend once. A long time ago. Maybe she had other boyfriends in eighth grade, or seventh grade, but I was the first guy she stunk around with. But I’ve got three little daughters so don’t say I’m happy about how old Jean was when we did it. And I’ll say it was my first time too. But when I told the story to Tom I made sure there were thousands of ones coming before Jean. But that just wasn’t true. No more lies. I’m setting it straight right now.

Voss and Jean were both younger than me, so maybe it’s true that they were right for each other. But Voss lived right next door to her, so I pretty much wanted to smash the stuffing out of him even before the love letter.
See, Tom loved this story because it had someone who was a lot worse off than he was. That’s Voss, when I get to the part about him. Because I wanted to kill him all day, because in my mind Voss was always peeking through Jean’s windows. And in the summer-time the windows were open so he could crawl in. Not that I ever caught him doing that, because I always had to pick up Jean down the street, because everybody’s parents always said I was bad news. Then I took her out on the back roads. Farm land. The dead-end out by the highway. I drank King Kobra in those days. I was always drinking. But I will say this—I never gave any beer to Jean.

She still watched cartoons sometimes when I asked her what happened over the weekend. She didn’t have to shave her legs or anything, but there are some women who are like that forever. Not my wife, though. But Jean and I always had fun talking about her homework. Hers was easy. But what I remember most about Jean was that she never cried about anything—which I didn’t even know was an amazing thing yet.

But then came the day of Voss’s letter. I was feeling sad that day—I never told this part to Tom, okay? This is the honest version of the story. I just wanted to hug her so hard. Not even stink around, but hug and go swimming. Toss her around in the water. To put her on my shoulders and laugh. I wrote her a poem—but don’t tell Tom. I remember everything about that day, and when I saw her standing on the corner—the wet marks in her armpits—I wanted to destroy the whole street.

Understand she was my first love, okay? No one knows that, but I’m telling you. I never stunk up anybody before her. I wrote her a poem.
But when you’re thinking about swimming with a girl—and it’s all you want in the world—what you never remember is that there’s another person, the girl, that isn’t thinking about swimming. So when I rolled down the window and said, “We’re going to the Gravel Pit,” Jean just kept standing on the corner and sweating, so then I honked the horn at her. Finally I just grabbed her and put her in my Ford, but then swimming was suddenly just a stupid idea, and I just needed a King Kobra, but a second later all I wanted was blood because I took the letter Jean had in her hand. It was from, “Your SHOULD-BE Boyfriend, Voss.”

It said that I was a ball-hog. It said if she really wants to love someone who’s a basketball player, he bets a million dollars he can beat me one-on-one. Just wait until he’s on the varsity next year. Then he talked for a minute about how he doesn’t drink King Kobras and he never will. Love, Your SHOULD-BE Boyfriend.

So that was how the Crazy happened to me. And what about Jean? Her mood was all sadness. Now—being a married guy—I wonder if she was reading and reading and reading the word “love” in Voss’s letter. What did Voss know about love? He was a freshman! Which is also what I think about sometimes on the roof.

So I stop my Ford down from Voss’s house. The plan is—first off—nobody should see the Ford. Then the plan is Jean needs to knock on Voss’s door and take him for a walk. But she says no—she doesn’t want to talk to Voss, or do anything I’m planning. That’s when I tell her I love her. If she was ever about to cry, that was the time. I say it over and over and finally she says, “Okay. I’ll go get Voss for you.”
The rest of the plan works like this. Jean takes Voss walking by the Ford. I honk the horn. “Look who it is!” I say. “Don’t you need a ride?” This is when Jean is supposed to say, “Okay,” but she forgets her lines. Voss is really scared though, so I say, “Get in, asshole,” he gets in, so the plan is still working.

But the one fact I cannot lie about—Voss and Jean are the exact same height. In my Ford, both of their heads are too tall for the roof. It looks funny, but it also looks like maybe they’re meant for each other, and in those days thoughts like that just made me drive faster and faster. Suddenly we’re at my dad’s house, way out over the highway. I put my arm around Jean—but there isn’t any sweat on her anymore, and I don’t know if she got all those goose bumps before or after I touched her. I want to say “I love you” again, but there’s Voss.

I drive right up on the basketball court behind my dad’s barn. The backboard’s nailed to the barn and the only one’s to see us are animals and corn. I tell Voss to grab my basketball in the back seat and get out. I say, “So what if you’re gonna be on varsity next year? You still need practice. Start practicing.” And Jean and I sit on the hood to watch.

I say, “Nice shot!” every time he makes one. But then Voss finally misses one—so okay—and I say, “Nice try!” and I pick up Jean and set her on my knee. He misses one more and I start kissing her, and I after that I can’t say anything to him.

Pretty soon Jean’s skin’s feels so cold it’s hard. It’s probably because I tossed her shirt down on the cement. She’s too little to wear a bra, but that doesn’t mean I can’t press her little ones together and make them look bigger. But I’ve still got to keep one eye on Voss. He misses again and I say, “Don’t you see how cold she is?” Then I have to take
her underwear off. I try to do it with Jean still sitting on the hood, but when her bare bottom touches it—cooked in the sun all day—she makes a little noise that almost kills me. “I love you,” I tell her, and I lift her up and put her on the cement. The underwear’s still hooked on her feet, but it finally comes off with some stretching, and then all her clothes are in a little pile. I keep telling her “I love you,” and that’s when I realize the cement is burning her feet too, so I get her shoes out of the pile and we put those on again.

But listen to me. Listen, because I’m not this man anymore. If you’re telling this story about me you need to also tell the one about my wife’s birthday, when I got her an ice-cream cake with “Darryl Loves Denise” on it, and when she came out of the bathroom in the morning I got the kids and we sang happy birthday—and I remembered film for the camera. We took pictures of the party. Now they’re on the fridge and in the Ford. So tell that story when you tell what I said to Voss. Because Denise was late for work that day, but you know what she said? Do you know? She said, “I don’t care, Darryl. I love you.”

But I say, “Voss, look at this, huh?” I don’t look at him, but the ball’s not bouncing, and so I know he’s looking at Jean. I say, “You can score every point of every game all season, but you have to kill me to ever touch this girl.” Then I do something I never did before. I get on my knees. Do you know what I’m saying? I kiss her down there. It’s hard to do because Jean’s standing with her legs pressed together, but I lean her against the Ford and then it’s easy. The plan is that Voss sees the look on Jean’s face. I want her face to go crazy.

But I can’t think. Suddenly I hear the rim almost getting ripped off the barn. Again—a few dribbles, big steps. Then nothing. Then the backboard’s breaking. And
Jean's goose bumps go away. She puts her hands on my head. It happens over and over again--Voss slamming. I want to look because the nails are falling off the barn, but Jean's toe is tapping. She's pulling my hair. But Voss jumps one time--he jumps and in my head I count, one ... two ... three ... four ... and I turn just in time to see him throwing the rim at the cement.

That was it. I stuffed them both back in the Ford.

I'm speeding them back to town, and that's right when Jean becomes a little kid and won't shut up. I even say "I love you" in the middle of her sentence, but she keeps going. This stuffing about her friend who's still in middle school--about a vote for student-council president. Jean helped this girl with buttons, and the buttons say, "Don't Pick A Nose, Vote Rebecca Rose," and Voss laughs, and I want to punish him, but Jean keeps talking--tells us that she made up "Don't Pick A Nose, Vote Rebecca Rose," and it's funny because the other middle-school kid running for president is this kid with a giant nose. But she says it's a sad story because the vote was today and the kid with the nose won.

The Crazy was all gone when they jumped out of the Ford. I was thinking so many thoughts that I forgot to drop them off down the street from Jean's house. It was the first time I ever saw Jean's mom and dad. They were standing in the yard with Voss's mom and dad. But I didn't really stop or anything. The two dads were walking over, and after I speeded away I didn't see Jean again until the next year. Then I didn't talk to her again until one night I called her house drunk on Scotch whisky and told her I was getting married and that I was going to be a dad.
But the letter from Voss—that stayed under the seat in my Ford all the way until
my forth kid was born—finally a boy! Then I threw away all that old stuffing from my life
when I . . .

And Voss Ostran is still the best basketball player I ever saw. Put that in the
movie. Every week we still guard each other. Put in the movie that Voss and I are best
friends. I play hard defense on him, and after the game we shake hands. After the game I
just go home and—
You’re ham-boned, man! Open your eyes! . . . Man? . . . Okay--you gotta NOT tell Denise about this, man, 'cause, oh man, this ain’t good. Did Darryl say anything about those pills, man? About the pills he’s gotta take ten times a day? Can you even hear me, man? You awake? You’re head’s just wobbling, man, but Darryl, man, he’s down for the count so you gotta sobber up! I didn’t mean to clock him so hard, man, and I really don’t get along that swell with Denise, and I just know she’ll pin all this on Fat Wayne. ‘Cause Darryl’s under that table, man, and he ain’t moving. Out, man. I mean, I saw you two come in here--you and that suit you’re wearing, man!--and I was thinking, man, I don’t need to deal with Darryl tonight, man. Not on a Monday night. Because it’s embarrassing now. It’s even embarrassing for people that ain’t his friend. I mean, it’s even embarrassing for the cops now, man. Because what’s Bee back there behind the bar supposed to do about it, man? Bee’s my woman, and she already warned me, like, two nights ago that Darryl Lee ain’t nothing but trouble, man. But I’m like, “Bee, baby, he’s just, like, this little harmless dude.” And Bee’s like, “You’re drunk, man.” So I’m on her bad side already, man. So I really gotta get out of here, man. Because Bee back there gets on the phone with Denise, man--they’re friends--and they talk and talk and talk, but Bee usually don’t say nothing about Darryl being at the bar or nothing--but that’s until Darryl falls under the table and now I’m, like, responsible for him, and then and it’s almost like
the only way you can make Bee happy, man, is go back to the bar and drink even more
bull-blasters and start leaving more dollars for her, which is what I been doing all night,
you know? Because she gets on the phone--I mean, look man! She’s holding the sucker
right now. And it’s either Denise or it’s the cops, man. I mean, Denise would just fly
down here and tear the place up . . . ‘Cause Bee’s looking at me now, man, and--Okay,
Bee! Alright, baby! Wave to her, man. Now smile, alright? Okay. We just got to get
somebody that’ll take Darryl back to Denise’s now. Because I really got to go, like, right
after this bull-blast, man, because all my friends already left and I’m just sticking
around to give Bee a few more bucks and, like, to make sure Darryl gets home alright,
because it ain’t even the first time this week, man. And I wouldn’t’ve decked him so hard
if he didn’t ask me to deck him. But sometimes it’s the only to get him to quit asking you
to deck him. But then he flops down, and I’m thinking don’t you ever eat food, man?
Because Darryl’s trying to starve to death. What’s he doing wearing clothes like this in
the heat of summer? I mean, Denise--does she even see the sorry dude naked anymore?
Because last week I was in here and Darryl was down on the floor again and I was just
gonna pick him up and put him in the street for somebody else to deal with. It was do or
die--I mean, he’s my friend and all, but Bee had two fingers on two buttons on the phone,
man, and she was gonna use both of them, like, to call the cops and Denise, man, and just
imagine that kind of party, man! We’re talking about the old days then! But, like, minus
the fun we used to have, you know? So I got Darryl up on my shoulder, and it’s like what
the hell, man? I thought I had him backwards, grabbing his wrist, but that was his calf
muscle, man. I’m not kidding. He was as skinny as a little girl, man. And I felt so bad I
had to, like, carry him home to his porch at least. But you, man—what’s your story? It’s like you’re divorced the way you’re sloshing ’em down, man! Because didn’t Darryl come here with you? And why’d you get him so sad, man? Because all of a sudden it’s “Jean this” and “Jean that” and “hit me just once in the face, Fat Wayne,” but man! I really gotta hit the road, right? I mean, now! So I’ll just leave Darryl here with you and you’ll do the necessary thing, right? And you’ll make sure that Bee back there doesn’t dial any numbers, right? And you’ll make sure Denise, man, like, thinks he just, I don’t know, fell down, or something? Maybe you gotta sprain his ankle and make it look real, because I don’t like the looks of that bruise I put on his chin, man. And a sprained ankle is something that Denise is gotta believe, and especially coming from somebody like you—and that’s another thing, I mean, that suit, man! That cologne! I bet you got the power to make things happen, so let’s snap to it! Because now look at him, under the table and, like—he’s sucking his thumb! God, I’ve had at least ten bull-blasters tonight, man, whoa, I’ve got to sleep, but it’s getting so late, and there’s Bee, man. I mean, how late is it? I mean, how long until Bee gets off work, because sometimes we, like, walk home together if she’s happy. And all Bee needs to know is that I got fourteen singles left in my wallet man, and if she wants to play her cards right, then all of them can belong to her, man . . . But Bee! Put down the phone, baby! It’s nothing! It’s just a catnap! It’s nothing! Here you go. I’m getting him up on your shoulder right now . . . I said, here we go, man! Bee, baby. This dude here—this dude’s gonna take him! Ain’t nothing to worry about, Bee! . . . Okay, you can set him down now. In the seat. Push him up against the wall. Right, like . . . Because why’s this damn dude always my responsibility? I didn’t ask him to come out
here tonight. I don’t . . . Bee, would you just, like, put the damn phone down, honey?

These bull-blasters. It’s, like, they suddenly wear off, man. And it’s like I’m going down the road of Darryl there. Poor dude. Man. Seeing him, you know, makes you want to hug the guy even if Bee says he’s the worst drunk she ever saw. Because Darryl needs friends these days. Other than me all he’s got, man, is that rigger Tom Workman, man, and everybody knows he killed Jean, man. Because, like, one time in, like, high school, man, before Workman dropped out, I was, like, part of that whole Sea of Dudes that, like, got to kiss Jean after she split-up with Voss. Because, man, it was like everybody, like, Joe Zeman, David Kowatch, like, Morgan Bowen, like, Dean Gaffner, like, even Forrest Formsma, man! And me. So I kissed her in the hallway man. Like, unbelievable, man! But there’s Workman. Standing there. Watching, like. And he’s got a list of every dude in school in his back pocket, and, like, he crosses my name off it when he sees me kiss her. That’ll creep you out, man. He’s just, like, waiting for you to finish up, so he can, like, get her and . . . and, like, well, I guess he, like, got her then.

But you can’t drive, man! Hold on! I got singles! Let’s get a bull blaster! I mean--

Because I didn’t hit him that hard, man. He’ll wake up. Wait for me, man!

Because Bee, man, she’ll get on the phone if it’s just me and Darryl when she’s locking the place. I mean, your eyes ain’t even open, man! I mean . . . Bee, what’re you dialing, honey? Bee, that ain’t kosher, man! That just ain’t--
Part 3
I spent all night before my first day of genius school with Michelline’s giant cheeks sitting in my lap. She eventually became a drawing, like I knew she would. But later, at genius school, she got destroyed. After that I was sworn in as Johnny’s “Man-Child,” and now I’m sitting in the passenger seat of his Ford, smelling what he’s doing to Michelline behind me. At first, when Johnny’s legs were still up in the driver’s seat, the smell was just regular things: leather, King Kobra, Johnny’s shoes, the spicy breath of two people breathing. I wasn’t able to breathe. Then, after Johnny crawled back with Michelline, the Ford took on the rotten smell you find suddenly when walking through a woods. That smell drifted off, and then it wasn’t so bad—like a bathtub after Mom took a long hot bath. Now it just smells like the little hairs on Michelline’s cheeks combing the inside of my nose. I sneeze, and that makes Johnny yell from the back seat, “Jizzy, prove your status and go get Johnny and this girl some smokes so this girl knows that Johnny loves a girl . . . Is Johnny smushing your legs, play-thing?”

Getting smokes means stealing them from Livery’s. At genius school, Johnny explained that this had never been achieved, and thus it was my first test. But in the parking lot, with all these boys leaning on everything—not smoking—I see Dad through the plate-glass window and I go frozen. He’s up on the stool, crumpled down to the counter. Smoking. And Dad doesn’t smoke. He takes a deep suck—I see how it kills him to do this—but Dad swallows the smoke anyway. He swishes it around in his chest, then bubbles it back out his mouth. It floats over to the plate-glass window where there must be three or four packs of it already collected. The boys all turn their heads and snap their teeth. Dad probably thinks I’m in bed.
I hoot the electric owl, then wade through the smoke, but Dad just eyes me like I’m any other paying customer. I’ve got no money in my pockets, and maybe Dad realizes this too, because his gaze falls to the floor—not in a thinking kind of way—but in a way when someone’s neck and eyeballs suddenly stop working. Dad lets out a breath of smoke—even though his cigarette is already smashed out on the counter—and it’s then I realize that this is just the robot version of Dad that sometimes runs the store for him. A relief, kind of, because the Robot doesn’t care who he sells cigarettes to, or care about anything else, which was the problem with the Robot in the first place, and the reason why Mom made Dad shut it off. But seeing it now, working—smoke clouding around its eyeballs, groaning to itself—this means Dad’s mad at Mom. I’ve heard the fights this thing’s caused, and now it’s just a matter of time before Mom glances at a surveillance camera and stomps into the station to get the Robot by the hair and drag it through the door marked PRIVATE, back to their bedroom, and into the closet where it sits when not in use. She’ll probably dismember it completely when she sees it’s smoking inside the station.

But that has nothing to do with me—the Robot, Mom, Dad. Because earlier tonight, when Johnny and I pulled into Michelline’s extra-wide driveway, skidded through the tall trees, and then honked at her dirty white house—and two seconds later she jumped out the front door—Michelline saw me in the passenger seat and sucked her cheeks in, smiling, standing there, and Johnny had to tell her she was a fool woman about to get run over. Now I’m stealing cigarettes for her.
“Hi Dad,” I say, because that’s how you get in good with a Robot—calling it by what it’s supposed to look like.

“Hey genius,” it says, before fumbling a cigarette off its fingers, then smashing it with its mechanical fist. “What do you want?” It watches the floating cigarette particles for a second. Then it zeros on my face.

“Nothing. I just came in to say Hi.”

The Robot tries to smile, but it’s obvious there are parts of it that don’t work—because Dad definitely would’ve programmed the Robot to smile when dealing with a customer. I pick up a candy bar and stick a hand in my pocket, but the Robot says, “Forget about it, Jesse. Genius. That one’s on the house.”

“Thanks.” I open the wrapper right there. I bet this Robot’s given away half the store tonight. Seeing how it’s only turned violent toward small things like cigarettes, I decide it’s okay to lean against the counter, elbow to elbow with the Robot. “Can I ask you a question, Dad?”

“Have you seen your mother at all, in the house?”

So it’s got a busted ear devise too. That’s just one more thing on Mom’s long list of things wrong with it. I haven’t seen her since I left for school this morning. Of course, telling the Robot that won’t help matters, so I just say, “Mom’s in there on the couch. Mom’s just watching TV. Unless she fell asleep. In that case she’s just lying there, not doing anything.”

The idea of Mom sleeping on the couch doesn’t seem to cool the Robot’s wires at all. Instead, a bit of smoke escapes from the Robot’s shirt-sleeve. The Robot notices me
noticing, so it takes out another cigarette and lights it. But it’s starting to get awkward, because in its hurry to hide its smoking arm the Robot forgets to use a lighter on the new cigarette, instead using the inside of its nose, where it must have a wire loose. I decide to change the subject.

“I’ve got a girlfriend, Dad.”

It turns out the Robot can hear. But I guess it wasn’t expecting to hear that, because while its eyes react, dilating and jittering, the cigarette between its lips crackles down to the filter. The Robot spits it to the counter, looks at me, and I guess it remembers how to smile too: “I got just one thing to say. First of all, that’s great, Jesse! And second of all--because I know she’s the prettiest girl-genius at that whole genius school--never tell her she’s the prettiest girl-genius. You tell her how pretty she is . . . well, it’s been nice thinking you were a smart guy, genius.” The Robot leans back from the counter and crosses its arms. It says something else under its breath, which I decide to ignore.

“She’s not like that,” I say, “not yet.”

“I forgot who’s the genius here. Sorry, smart guy. You must know exactly what you’re doing.” The one thing Dad never got right in the Robot, and maybe that’s the reason Mom hates it so much, is that the Robot always licks its mustache. The mustache is always slick and wet, and I get the feeling the Robot wishes it didn’t have a mustache at all. But I guess it can’t really wish anything. “Hey, I’m sorry, genius. I’m not being fair to the genius’s girlfriend. Why don’t you tell me her name? Maybe that’ll clear it all up. No--” and the Robot licks its mustache, “first grab me a Kobra out of the cooler.”
So this is what I think—and it’s not the first time I’ve thought this—but somebody owned this Robot before Dad bought it. Or at least somebody else built the brain, and then Dad bought that piece, probably for cheap, and made the rest of the Robot around it. Once I almost asked Dad about it—about the Robot—but I ended up not doing it. Because, all in all, I’ve gotten more free things from the Robot than from both Mom and Dad combined.

Walking to the ICE COLD BEVERAGES, I see the boys watch me, sucking on the end of their fingers. Then I have the King Kobra, and they all take the fingers out and slap each other’s hands.

“That’s a boy,” the Robot says. “Boy genius. I’m working. I can’t leave the counter, because I’m working.” It unscrews the bottle, then takes a good drink. A couple seconds later, somewhere deep inside its casing, I hear a small fire getting extinguished. “Man,” it says. “Okay, so now you know where I’m coming from right? I’m your father.”

“Yes.”

“What’s this girl’s name?”

“Michelline.”

“Huh,” says the Robot. “She might be alright. Michelline? It’s hard to know. Older or younger?” The Robot’s eyes are closed. It’s impossible to know what it’s waiting to hear.

“Older?”

“I knew it. You’re finished.”

“She might be younger.”
"Doesn't matter. Finished." The Robot's arms are suddenly bouncing with laughter—laughter at me—until I notice something in its eye, a gleam that wasn't there a second ago, and I start laughing too. Then it's obvious that we're both laughing together.

"I got you, Jesse! Oh, I got you!"

"Yeah, you got me, Dad."

"Alright," it takes a drink. "Now we're having fun. Now we're having fun! Why don't we do this more?"

I don't have an answer to this, but deep down I think the Robot's not all that bad. All the same, I'm starting to get a feeling that things are developing in Johnny's car. And there's definitely such a thing as too much time around the Robot—where the Robot starts to look at you, and notices things that a human being wouldn't notice. Things that you're thinking, for one. But I can tell we're a long way from that point, so I decide to go for broke: "Actually, Dad, Michelline's in the parking lot right now."

The Robot licks its mustache. "My parking lot?"

"Out there."

"With all those kids? The ones who just sit there and scare away the regular business?"

"She's not friends with those kids, Dad. You should see how those kids treat her at school. You should--"

But the wires are busting apart in the Robot's neck, waving and glowing under the fake skin. The Robot blinks its eyes, but it can't think thoughts or start to wonder about
itself—it just reacts to things—so it says, “You’re afraid to introduce your girlfriend to your gas station father?”

“Dad,” I say, and I’ve never felt so bad saying it, because the Robot has no idea how unlike Dad it looks right now. And the worst part is I can’t say the Robot’s all wrong. I want to say it’s just a Robot, so who cares? And yeah, I’d never introduce my girlfriend to this Robot. And the look in its fake eyes right now—I can tell the Robot knows this. And it’s just a matter of time before Mom sees the cigarettes and the King Kobra, and the Robot gets destroyed. I guess that’ll be sad, but I’ll get over it. Because right now all I need are those cigarettes—to pass my first test as “Man-Child,” and to give them as spoils to Michelline—and as long as I get the cigarettes, I promise I’ll come back and thank the Robot a hundred times. Or I’ll find him in the closet and turn him on and hug him, or . . . “You got it all wrong, Dad. Of course I want to introduce you. The problem is that Michelline’s dad sent her to Livery’s to get a carton of cigarettes, and she feels too embarrassed to come in and buy them herself. I was just trying to impress her, so I told her I’d get the cigarettes for her. We’ll come by the station tomorrow. After school. How does that sound, Dad? Dad? Then we’ll all get a candy bar and—”

But the Robot’s already spinning around on the stool—and Man, I lean forward and see what’s already happened to it . . . enough to make a real person puke. I know it was Mom who did it. She probably found it working earlier. I can just see it trying to hide its empty Kobra bottles, accidentally smashing one on the floor. That’s probably when she . . . she probably took an ax and chopped off the Robot’s legs—because it’s not clean, the way the circuitry and metal-work are mangled. And the more I stare, the more I’m
sure Mom used an electric saw. The sharp edges where it used to have hips are tearing through the stool seat. The Kobra’s already draining through the leg holes too, causing sparks and fizz. The Robot’s upper-half is still functioning though, filling its arms with cigarette cartons—almost perfectly—and I can hear the chorus of a hundred boys cheering me to victory from outside the station.

“Dad.”

“You want cigarettes? Is that what you want? Old enough to screw, and old enough to smoke, and old enough to . . . Here’s your cigarettes!” The Robot throws a carton at me. I catch it easily, but pretend to be hurt by it. Its power is almost down to nothing. “Cigarettes!” And I don’t want any cigarettes to break so I try to deflect the incoming cartons softly to the floor. Then the Robot can’t lift its arms anymore, so it clunks the rest of the cartons in stock down to the counter and pushes them off. By some miracle its Kobra is still standing.

“Dad,” I say, even though it’s face down on the counter now—not crying, just conserving energy with small heaves. I open its fingers and fit them around the Kobra, then press them tight. The fingers are still warm. I decide to tell myself maybe the Robot will be okay. Maybe he can be repaired somehow. But the truth is, aside from having to call this robot “Dad” sometimes, I don’t know anything about robots.

Or no. I know one thing—the thing I’m telling myself over and over right now as I cradle the cartons in my arms—the thing the very tall scientist came to our school and told us—the thing that made me put down my notebook and markers and decide I’d better
listen for once: that robots don’t die, only people do. And the scientist said that God told him that, and that’s why we couldn’t ask any more questions.

But in the parking lot all the boys have their backs to me. No cheers or parades for the Man-Child. Finally one turns my way—only after I nudge him with my cigarette-full arms—but he just wipes his eye and bows his head. The slam of a car door is the next thing . . . but the car is a Chevy. I drop the cartons to my feet and swim past the rest of the boys. Then I’m right in the middle of it—the thing that changes everything: Michelline is kidnapped.

* * *

I slouched in my chair as Johimy approached my desk. It was still morning, but Mr. Belt, the genius school teacher, was down the hall trying to collect all the other geniuses who walked out of the room when they realized Mr. Belt was nothing but a “Mr. Pussy.” I could hear Mr. Belt asking them: “Where are the adults? Where are the adults?” But this left his classroom empty. The over-head lights were off. A window was open. The carpet was sticky from the heat, and Johnny’s nose was an inch from the surface of my desk, where a perfect drawing of his girlfriend lay. He sniffed it, as if checking to make sure it truly was Michelline. His hair was wet, either from a shower or from sweating, and one quick jerk of Johnny’s head would send a thunder storm down on her. That’s the reason I didn’t drop my fist on the back of his neck, driving his nose into his brain, killing him. But also because things like that never worked. Not even in my own head. When I tried to
imagine it happening, all I could get was this: Johnny catching my hand—with some third hand of his own—and then using my own hand to punch my own nose up through my brain, killing me. So I tried to stop imagining everything, and just hoped Johnny would stay frozen until someone with authority came in to rescue my drawing from his face.

But Johnny had only been leaning over to kiss Michelline. He whispered something only she could hear, and his red tongue stayed fastened to her a moment after his lips rose away. He finally took hold of the edges of paper and pulled himself off of her—but did it very slowly, keeping Michelline perfect. I just waited, because that’s what Johnny implied I should do when he’d spotted me and my drawing from across the room:

“Oh, Bitch! If that’s Johnny’s woman?—down there by your genitals, where she has no right to be?—then you are deader than a turkey, Mr. Pussy!”

But now, holding Michelline between myself and him by two of her tiny corners, Johnny smiled at me, revealing his large, white teeth. I tried to return Johnny’s smile, but I kept getting thoughts about Johnny’s third hand exploding through Michelline’s face, continuing toward my face, touching my nose, driving my nose into my brain, killing me. But I smiled anyway, until Johnny finally said, “Do you understand the reason for your life to still be in this room?”

“Because of you?”

“Who?”

“Johnny?”

“Yes. But why is Johnny allowing this kind of life to fill this space that otherwise wouldn’t be filled?”
"Because of the drawing?"

"The drawing?"

"The one you’re holding?"

"Who?"

"Johnny," I said. "The drawing in your hands."

"Yes, but whose drawing is the drawing in Johnny’s hands?"

Now the business was serious because I didn’t know the answer to Johnny’s question. Of course, the drawing was no longer my drawing. To even think about it was to have your nose punched off of your face. I was pretty sure the drawing wasn’t God’s, or somebody like that’s. It was either Johnny’s or Michelline’s. And as I wondered about it, Johnny grew more and more impatient, gritting his teeth and flexing of his third fist, where it was tucked underneath his shirt, down by his belly-button. And when my nose got broken again—from some thought I can’t even remember—and I waited, blinking, while the blackness became redness, and redness became the thin lines of Michelline’s face—her face made older by the plumpness I gave her cheeks—which was held up by Johnny’s impatiently red thumbs—those cheeks were the reason I said this to him: “It’s Michelline’s drawing.”

“Oh!” Johnny said. “Are you suggesting that this is actually Michelline in this drawing? A.K.A., Johnny’s Michelline? A.K.A. the woman who—”

“Will you just give it to her?”

“Mr. Pussy? Tell Johnny you did not just ask him . . . well, actually, Johnny’s sorry. Johnny doesn’t understand. Who are you talking about again?”
“Michelline.”

“No, no. Johnny’s saying, who should give what to who? Johnny is confused, because you are not calling Johnny by his--”

“Johnny, please give the drawing in Johnny’s hands to Michelline the next time Johnny sees Michelline.”

Johnny looked at the drawing. He nodded. “But it’s Johnny’s drawing.”

And this isn’t imagined: My fist stops one inch short of Johnny’s nose. I can still hear the pop of Michelline’s cheeks when they exploded. Tiny shreds of paper swirl through the air. I withdraw my hand, checking it for blood, but find nothing. I almost smile then--almost--at seeing Johnny’s confused cheeks where Michelline’s beautiful ones just were, Johnny’s thumbs still hold the two small bits of paper until they, too, waver back down to the desk-top. This should not be funny--how close I am to dead, and that I just killed Michelline for the second time--but what I can’t shake from my mind isn’t the instant pre-play of Johnny exacting his revenge with a three-fisted punch to all sides of my nose--but instead: a more prefect vision of Michelline: cheeks even rounder, cheeks even bigger.

I’d already gotten out the next sheet of paper--drawn my two half-circles to start it--when Johnny whispered: “Are you bringing her back?”

“Michelline?”

“My girl?”

“Yeah.”
“It makes Johnny want to whip your face, because that’s Johnny’s girl you’re drawing, and maybe you’re raping her in your head before you put her down on the paper—before she’s so pretty . . . But Johnny thinks no. Because you treat her right when she’s on the paper.”

“Thank you.”

“Until you break a hole in her face!” Johnny was suddenly angry enough to pull two finger-shaped guns out of his pockets, and point them straight at my eyes. But in the next second he became interested in how I was doing Michelline’s chin. It was the single part of her that always got smudged off in my head. “Fuck, bitch! Why can’t you even do it right? My baby doesn’t have a chin like that! Give Johnny something to hold onto when he’s talking to a woman in the face!” So the barrels of Johnny’s guns suddenly become a pencil and eraser, and he made the corrections himself. “Well shit,” he said, then moved around to my side of the desk for a better look. “Johnny doesn’t think you’re raping her. That’s what Johnny’s trying to believe, right?” And I heard him go, “Aww,” as Michelline grew a nose. “So tell Johnny quick, Mr. Pussy—are you raping her or aren’t you? Because if you’re even touching her ear, or her little elbow, man . . . Johnny could whip you in so many body-parts in the next two minutes that—”

“I’m just drawing her,” I said, and blew the pencil dust off the drawing—accidentally inhaling some of it. The dust went straight to the back of my eyeballs, and for a second I saw nothing but a horizon-line of rigs flashing their high-beams at me—and that’s when I must have said what I said to Johnny, because afterward I couldn’t remember saying anything at all—I still don’t—but at the end of the school day Johnny told
me to give him the drawing, insisting I’d said this earlier: “And actually, Johnny, I want 
Johnny to have this drawing. I trust Johnny to give it to Johnny’s girl tonight.”

I don’t know. So when it was finished, perfect, I gave the drawing to Johnny.

Johnny’s desk was pulled back next to mine—we were the only two students in 
class—and Mr. Belt was lecturing us on how not to be taken to jail like the rest of our 
class had been. But I felt scared then for a different reason. I wanted to be on the couch 
with Mom and Dad, sitting in the bird nest of their legs. I didn’t really know what to do 
now, being another person’s friend--Johnny’s--and being dubbed, “Jizzy, his Man-Child.”

But my fear flipped to toe-tapping energy when Johnny leaned in close and outlined the 
rest of our day: #1. Spying on the enemy, the White-Haired Kid, at Rheener’s Party Store. 
#2. Rescuing Johnny’s queen, Michelline, from her dungeon home in the sticks. #3. 
Livery’s Gas Station, where the Lord Johnny commands the night.

* * *

But the White-Haired Kid is at least twice as big at Livery’s than he was earlier today at 
Rheener’s Party Store. There’s no way that pretty little White-Haired Kid we saw that 
afternoon—who didn’t even get out of his white Chevy as Johnny pointed his finger and 
yelled, “Mr. Pussy-Pants!”--could’ve one second ago pulled Michelline through the open 
window of Johnny’s Ford, then held her steady with one big arm, staring down at Johnny 
with such beautiful badness that all Johnny could do was roll up his window and lock the 
door before any other crimes were committed. No--this kid has to be a different white-
haired kid, even though both kids wear the same white t-shirt, and both look like famous statues at all times. His white Chevy is still running, the door left open, binging quietly. The boys--us boys--all stand quietly too, watching The White-Haired Kid toss Michelline into his back seat. There are other girl-like heads back there, and their girl-bodies seem to catch Michelline no problem. The back door to the white Chevy is slammed. The White-Haired Kid pounds a knuckle on the hood, looking like a bored statue, then barely fits into the driver’s seat. The Chevy drives slowly away--painfully slow--but still not slow enough for any boy at Livery’s to chase it down and reclaim Michelline. There must be ten girls with her in the back. And that was the thing about Rheener’s Party Store--where this white Chevy was certainly trudging now: the place was infested with girls. That afternoon they sat on everything flat enough for them to sit on--beach towels spread across the cement, newspaper machines, wooden fences. The small White-Haired Kid was the only person in need of a car seat. He was the only boy too. I’d never been to Rheener’s before today. I never had a reason to visit a party store. But now--as I feel myself getting bigger by the second--I know I’ll return to Rheener’s as many times as necessary to get Michelline back where she belongs, Livery’s Gas Station.

Johnny’s mouth is on the steering wheel, weeping. The boys scatter--not even in groups, but each boy in a different direction, confused, tripping on his own shoes. I take a carton off the cigarette pile, bring it over to Johnny’s Ford, and tap his window.

“KIDNAPPED! ... and would’ve even let Johnny touch her in the underwear--not one last time! And oh!--didn’t even take Johnny’s gift for her that proves Johnny’s love!”
It's my drawing in Johnny's fist. I'm afraid to look at it, but I know that if I don't take it back quick, Johnny will probably eat it. I pull Michelline from his fingers... And Man! There's her cheeks, huger than possible with a smile I never gave her. Her eyes are wet from too much laughing in too little time. And she's not wearing a shirt anymore. I never drew a shirt to begin with--I just stopped at the bottom of her neck--but now the little bumps on that neck prove that wind's blowing over her entire body. I've got to fold her up so Johnny doesn't hear her howling.

"In love! Johnny and a woman!"

"Johnny," I say. "We're going to get her back." I hand him a pack of cigarettes, which just makes him cry harder. "Tomorrow night, Johnny. Rheener's. We have to--"

"We have to rape her back! That's what a man does when his little girl... our little girl... because you did prove yourself tonight, Jizzy... and now she's raped!"

I can't stop myself from peeking at Michelline again--to see how red her cheeks have gotten--but when I try to unfold her I find she's gotten stuck together. Only a lock of hair still shows, and it's impossible to know if this glue is something she's done to herself, or if it's someone else's work. A touch of the stickiness gets on my thumb. I taste it--and I know instantly that I'll do whatever Johnny tells me to do.

"And the Lord chooses you, Jizzy. Tomorrow night. Man's most terrible test: To slip into Rheener's and bring back the little girl to Lord Johnny. So safe. So warm. But first, Mr. Man-Child, give Johnny your concentration now, and when you leave this parking space tonight, be imparted with the ancient art of rape!"
The lights of Livery's go out. The gas pumps whir to silence. A wild she-rig creeps through the shadows. And my hands are heavy with the teachings of Johnny.
File footage: "Jumpin' Voss Ostran Highlight Reel" (Courtesy: Laura Ostran): VOSS OSTRAN jumps over DEFENDER, kisses rim with lips, dunks basketball with both hands, smooths back hair, lands on gym floor. CHEERLEADER faints in background. (Voice-over:
INTERVIEWER: "How well did you know Jean Granger?" . . VOSS: "Jean asked me to marry her--I don't know at least once a week for two whole years. I just did what any morally-responsible person would do. I told her, 'Wait until I make the NBA--then we'll talk.'" Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Third square grows to consume entire screen.]
Merl! How was the trip? You were gone so long Mother and I figured you fell in and flushed yourself back to California! Mother—she was so worried she started calling plumbers, and . . . You know I’m just riding you, Merl. Take a seat on the couch. Make yourself comfortable. If I know one thing, it’s that you can’t go wrong with a man that wears such a good-looking suit to do business in the morning. That’s how I do it down at Steals On Wheels. That’s how I do it at--

Mother, you read my mind. Coffee, Merl? But I need to warn you. Once you drink this little lady’s coffee you won’t be the same man. It’ll knock you on your butt twice in a row. And I mean that in the best way. Mother’s famous clear on the other side of Crossfield because of this coffee--aren’t you, Mother? I’ll take sugar and lots of milk.

But before we get to the nuts and bolts of this movie we’re making, I must confess, Merl, on your way back from the bathroom I caught you checking out my wheelchair. Don’t deny it. You were looking. But I’d be insulted if you weren’t checking out this Seatmaster 2600! Get over here for a closer look. And feel free to touch it. Most people do. That’s “Stiffium” you’re feeling. Scientists in Canada invented it for dog-sleds, so you can imagine how I’m rockin’ and rollin’ all winter long in this baby. And I know you, Merl. Single man, can’t be restricted by anything, so don’t open your mouth--
just let me answer the question that’s all over your face—Yes! You can tear up the beach on this baby! I got a buddy down at the shop—as bachelor as they come—who rode his seat all over Los Angeles. Same model you’re looking at. And do you know what he said when he got back? And I do not exaggerate? “Friendliest people in the whole world down there in Los Angeles.” And I don’t think he was referring to those male bodybuilders you see on TV. Heck! But that’s Craig for you—Craig’s by buddy’s name. And he’s just like you, Merl. Walks fine on two legs. Better than most people. And unless you read *Time* magazine—two months ago, page 35, lower left corner—you aren’t gonna know that today most customers purchasing wheelchairs are *not* disabled . . . are *not* elderly . . . They’re good-looking folks just like you, Merl. I just wish you could’ve witnessed the scene down at Steals On Wheels yesterday afternoon. I sold four seats to a gentleman from Each Crossfield—not a rich man, Merl—who saw Jumpin’ Voss on TV and needed to outfit his whole family. Oh, we always have a good time at the shop, laughing, joking, eating popcorn . . . but when those kids took their first rides across that showroom floor . . . just ten and twelve years old, Merl, on those shiny new seats . . . *excuse me a moment, Merl*. . . . I would’ve given . . . my right arm just to be a kid again . . . so I could do it all over . . . sitting down like this. But don’t say a word because I know what you’re about to ask and the answer is not nearly as expensive as you think. This week only at Steals On Wheels we’re offering a No-Interest-For-Two-Whole-Years-Plan, and that means I could have you rockin’ and rollin’ through L.A. for just--
For future reference, Mother, when I’m doing business in the living room and you need to interrupt, wait until you hear five complete seconds of silence, and when you hear five—not four, but five—seconds of silence, that’s when you should try to get my attention with a hand wave or a sneeze. We all square on that, old girl? And thank you for bringing out my scrapbook. You were just a couple minutes early with it. But you know what? We’ll put that behind us. You’re a saint.

Truth, Merl? Mother’s worried she’s going to foul-up our movie deal somehow. I keep telling her, “Just let Voss handle it”—who’s the salesman, right?—but the old girl hasn’t stopped moving since we got your letter. You don’t want to see the state of affairs in the kitchen right now . . . But you know what I call that? Adversity. And isn’t adversity the only test of a good business partner? So how about we ask Burke Caleb of the Crossfield Journal about Jumpin’ Voss Ostran’s response to adversity on the basketball court. Open that scrapbook to page 64. The whole article’s right there. And Merl? That scrapbook’s yours to keep. It’s Mother’s hobby, and she’s sure proud of her binding job on these books. And I happen to know it would just make the girl’s whole life if Merlin Hoffkins said a kind word about her binding. Think it over.

Yep. Adversity.

Did you know I dumped Jean Granger? To me—and you’ll read all about this in my scrapbook—responding to adversity is doing whatever it takes to win. Doing the thing everybody says is a crack-pot idea. Starting a wheelchair store, for instance. Or—to give an even more personal example—the day after you lose the use of your legs, breaking the heart of the most beautiful girl in town, even though she won’t stop screaming how much
she loves you. So let me ask you a question, Merl. When you’re making a movie—when there’s billions on the line, and crooks behind every corner plotting to steal it—who do you want on your team? Someone who gets wooed by sweet talk? Someone who faints at the sight of tears? Or do you want someone who says, “No, Jean. You don’t know what love is. And until you grow up and learn, Voss Ostran can’t be your boyfriend any longer.” That’s what you’ll get from me, Merl, an undefeated record against adversity. So what do you say we get out the contracts right now—do you have a pen, Merl?—and just get these formalities out of the—

Dicky Smythe? Mother, did you just say Dicky Smythe? Is today your first day on the job? Is this not Merlin Hoffkins in the room? Are you not interrupting two men conducting serious business in order to bring up Dicky Smythe? There’s simply no excuse for . . . I apologize you have to witness this, Merl, but—Mother? I need to ask you to wait in the kitchen until Mr. Hoffkins and I are done conducting our business. Thank you for trying to help, but that’s all for today. Please, now. Dicky Smythe . . .

Enough small-talk, huh, Merl? I know you’re a business man at heart just like me, and that’s why we’re gonna roll up our sleeves and close this dang movie deal right now if you don’t mind. I can barely keep seated! Because we’ve got a statement to make, don’t we? Because our movie’s not gonna be your average “I love you”-crazed, teenage free-for-all. We’re gonna send a message to all those kids out there about all the death and destruction those three little words cause every day. Because Jean was as reckless as they come about using the L-word. The girl’s poems were one thing—laying five or ten new
ones on me every day about how beautiful my leg hair was. But it was the girl’s absolute refusal to be a role-model for kids that convinced me I could do much better. And a scene depicting that exactly is how we’re gonna open this movie. This one’s free, Merl. The rest are yours when we sign that contract. How about it?

It’s the summer before our junior year. Jean and I are across the street, playing our nightly game of one-on-one. As always, the court’s lined with middle-schoolers--kids with dreams of being the next Voss Ostran or Jean Granger. And, of course, underneath the basket is Mother, keeping score like every night. And tonight it’s 49 to 48 in a game to 50. Jean’s lead. My ball. And Merl, I’m scared to death because the girl’s just been killing me on defense. When my back’s to her it’s like she’s got four legs and a dozen arms all going after me. Then I think I might just plow through her--she’s just a girl, right?--but suddenly she’s fat as a rigger, and I’m knocked to the cement, blinking up at her slamming it through the hoop. So now that it’s my ball, with a chance to win, all those boys and girls go silent. I fake right, spin left, and there she is! Twelve hands reaching for the rock, and what happens next might break your heart, Merl. Jean disappears. Suddenly I got no defense on me at all. I just walk up to the basket, shoot an easy lay-in, and win the basketball game. Everybody’s speechless. And they still are when Jean comes out of nowhere, taps me on the shoulder and says loud and clear, “I love you, Voss.”

I can only imagine the dinner tables all over town that night. “Daddy, what does / love you mean?” It makes me happy to be an unmarried man, just thinking about how I’d answer that question. And I know you agree, Merl. How’s a twelve-year-old supposed to
understand what love is? Heck, he probably thinks “forever” really means “forever” just because somebody said it to him. And what about all those occasions when loving a person means smacking them in the face? But I tell you, Merl, that day on the court I was a hundred times more concerned about Mother. She heard Jean too. Now imagine being me. Without a word, the only woman who could begin to try to love you just takes off walking across the street. Then she’s locking herself in the house. And Jean’s just smiling away. The fool must’ve thought love grew on trees.

But stay tuned, Merl! Because this movie has a happy ending and I’d hate for you to miss it. That’s right. Jumpin’ Voss Ostran comes through in the clutch! After an all-nighter of setting Jean Granger straight about love, the next day she’s all set to--are you getting that contract ready?--make a public apology to the whole town! Now, If that’s not touching . . . if that’s not morally satisfying, I don’t know what is. Jean’s a changed woman! Because of whose response to adversity? Don’t sit there like you don’t know the answer, Merl! Where’s your pen? None other than JUMPIN’--

Go home. It just isn’t working out for you here. I took a chance on you. Then I took a second chance on you. And here it is again. Dicky Smythe. So just gather your personal belongings and . . . Mother, do you promise to keep your mouth shut for the rest of this meeting? I mean absolutely no more Dicky Smythe?

I’m putting you back in the kitchen for the rest of the day. We’re going to have a little talk when I’m all done in here.
We’re going to have a little talk when I’m all done in here.

Merl, I’ve got to be honest. Mother has never acted this way in a professional setting. But you know what? Sometimes it takes a little adversity—a little *response* to adversity—to find out just who you got working for you, and I can see it in your face, so I’ll say it. Who the heck is Dicky Smythe? Looks like I’m trying to avoid the issue. Well, let me tell you something, Merl. Dicky Smythe was the story I was gonna make you pay for. Jean Granger? Okay. But Dicky Smythe? There’s the meat and potatoes! Because why do people watch movies on TV? Because they don’t have friends. And what were Dicky Smythe and I? Friends, Merl. Mostly. So let me tell you about our movie.

Hectorville High School. Eleventh grade. Who’s seventeen years old and doesn’t have a driver’s licence? Dicky Smythe. Why? Because he’s afraid—afraid of everything, Merl. Dicky Smythe watches so much TV that TV’s the only thing he trusts. Dicky Smythe watches so much TV that his own father threatens to shoot the TV if he doesn’t join the basketball team. Enter Voss Ostran. The only man who’s got what it takes to give Dicky Smythe a lift home from basketball practice so he doesn’t have to walk three miles in the dark and snow. Because Dicky would’ve died doing that, Merl. That’s Voss Ostran.

Mother? Are you listening in there? Copy down what I just said so Mr. Hoffkins can take it with him.

See, Merl, I wasn’t anticipating having this movie be about me. But the way things are falling into place I can’t imagine a bigger climax than me losing the use of my legs giving Dicky a ride home from basketball practice. So you might want to see about a “Viewer Discretion Advised” label. But that’s your side of things, isn’t it?
Voss Ostran is a giver. He wants to give Dicky Smythe the gift of driving. It’s the last day of basketball practice before the state championships, so on the way home Voss pulls his Chevy into the clearing near the Gravel Pit. It’s a good hundred yards of nothing but dirt and grass, and Dicky’s already grabbing his car seat because he doesn’t know what’s going on. Voss patiently explains that before they leave this clearing--it might take an hour, it might take a week--Dicky will know how to drive a car. Now Dicky doesn’t so much agree as know that Voss Ostran is a man of his word, so he better give driving a shot if he wants to get home for dinner. Still, it takes Voss another forty-five minutes to convince him which peddle is the break and which is the gas. But I’ll tell you what, Merl--it’s all worth it when Dicky finally gets behind the wheel and lets the Chevy roll from one end of the field to the other. Voss is just as proud as can be because here’s a kid that’s been known to fall down and play dead when something really scares him. But Dicky works it up to twenty miles-per-hour, and Voss decides he’s about ready to try driving alone. Voss hops out and wanders over to the Gravel Pit to skip some rocks. He can’t wipe the smile off his face, but when he glances back around . . . Man alive! There’s Dicky doing forty, windows down, radio up, and a cloud of dust behind him for good measure!

But okay.

Voss realizes, in all this excitement, that he’s neglected to mention a single word about safety. And now Dicky’s doing fifty miles-per-hour and gritting his teeth, aiming straight for the Gravel Pit like he might just fly right over the thing. I wouldn’t say it makes Voss upset . . . upset’s too strong an emotion. Worried? Concerned? Okay. Voss
seizes the opportunity to teach the kid a lesson about the danger of a motor vehicle, so—and this is when you hold your breath, Merl—Voss steps directly into the path of the speeding Chevy. Can you imagine how this is gonna look on the TV screen? I’m on the edge of my seat just remembering it! You know what we ought to do? Cut for a commercial right then—right when the front bumper’s about five feet from my knees. Oh man! They got awards for TV movies, don’t they?

But since you know Jumpin’ Voss, Merl, you know that after the commercial-break he just hops that Chevy lickety-split. He could’ve hopped two Chevys. But here’s where things get funny. This the comic relief aspect of the movie, right before the big drama. Are you seeing it in your head? Close you eyes, Merl. Now watch: The Chevy’s spun out. Voss approaches the window. He looks in. And the kid . . . the kid’s ears are pinned white against his head! His mouth is bleeding—like his tooth got so scared it tried to jump out of him! But what makes the moment—I just love this—is when old Voss leans in close to Dicky’s face and whispers, “Boo.” That kid thought I was a ghost coming to claim his soul! Merl, you should’ve seen him jump through that car window. He took off for those woods faster than fifty miles-per-hour! I never saw anything so funny in my life. And, of course, being his only friend, good Voss gives chase through the woods too. And here’s where things get--

_Dicky’s version of things?_ Who told you to come back in here? What are you selling, Mother? _Dicky’s version of . . ._ I knew it! My own mother and Dicky Smythe! Teaming up to undercut me! Oh, that’s shrewd, Mother. But you forgot just one little thing about
business . . . If it looks like crap, if it smells like crap, if it feels like crap . . . YOU CAN’T SELL CRAP, MOTHER!

But here we go! Did somebody say adversity? Because this is my whole life. Nobody beats Jumpin’ Voss Ostran when it comes to adversity, and that’s a guarantee! You’re selling Dicky Smythe’s movie? Let’s take a look at her.

We got Voss Ostran, who’s one day away from the state-championship MVP award, who’s got full-ride scholarships coming out his ears, who owns the sweetest Chevy this side of Crossfield, who was unanimously voted “best catch” by his entire class . . . but most importantly, who’s dating the picture-prettiest girl in Hectorville history, Jean Granger.

Now we got Dicky Smythe. Who doesn’t have a friend in the world. Who writes poetry. And so what if he got to date Jean for two whole days out of his life? That was after . . . Who claims that Voss Ostran got so insane about him treating Voss’s Chevy like some old Ford that Voss yanked him through the car window, then tripped him to the ground, then pulled him up by his hair, then . . . then Voss leaned back on the hood, then Voss unzipped his--What’s wrong, Mother? Isn’t this what you wanted? Then Voss made him . . . made him . . . and that’s why Dicky took off running through the woods.

Now there’s the woods. Voss is stumbling around, hollering after his friend. Voss is worried to death about the poor kid because he knows how scared the kid gets. Voss looks all night for him. Voss collapses under a tree. When the sun finally comes up, Voss crawls back to the Chevy. He’s got poison ivy so bad he can barely drive it home. Forget the state championships. It’s over.
Which brings us to you, Mother. What does this woman say when her son gets home, puking from all the poison ivy he’s got? I’ll tell you what she doesn’t say. She doesn’t say, “I don’t know the first thing about treating poison ivy.” She doesn’t say, “Let’s go to the doctor, Voss.” No, Mother. Do you remember what she says?

I was averaging 27.4 points-per-game! I had a girlfriend who loved me!

But you said, “Itch,” Mother. That’s how you cure poison ivy, Voss. You itch it. You itch until there’s nothing left, and then you itch even more. You itch until you’ve been in bed for three months without a doctor, itching, and suddenly you’re cured. You don’t feel a thing anymore because the nerve-endings in your legs are all itched away. And you showed me how to itch, Mother. You even itched it for me...

So, Merl, who’s it gonna be? Mother or... Because I dare you to find a sweeter wheelchair basketball player in the whole world. I’m so fast you’ll go blind trying to watch me! Wait for my highlight video. Once I mail that sucker out to every college with a gym... But I already got fans, Merl. You hear that, Mother? The day Jean disappeared. Across the street. It doesn’t matter who it is—Darryl Lee, Tom Workman, Ben Wallace—I’m killing everybody! I’m so tall my head’s hitting the rim. And whose Cutlass Supreme stops in the middle of traffic? Here’s your movie, Merl. Get out your pen. Whose head is sticking out her car window, watching me nail a three-pointer? Jean Granger! Game over! I wheel to the fence and—are you listening, Mother?—Jean just can’t handle how pretty my shot is. She’s freaking out. And what does she say? Huh, Mother? Jean says, “I love your shot, Voss. I’ve always loved your—”

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Do you hear this woman, Merl? Telling lies just to close a deal? Jean Granger isn’t dead, Mother. She’s alive and practicing her hook shot, and if that’s not the truth my name’s not Jumpin’ Voss—

Because I feel like making a deal at all costs. Merl, get out the contract before I come to my senses. Add this clause beneath where I sign. “I, Jumpin’ Voss Ostran, by one year to this day, will be married to Jean Granger.” That’s a guarantee. Because she never saw a three-pointer so sweet. And as for me, my days of really loving somebody have only just begun . . .

All this crying would usually botch a deal, but I can see in your eyes, Merl, that we’re on the same page about this movie, and we’re gonna get the bad boy made if it kills us. And maybe this is premature, but what the heck? I’m seeing a sequel. One that explores the married life of Voss and Jean Ostran. Their respective basketball careers. Kids. Steals On Wheels going global . . .

She’s just getting it out. Takes a minute or two, that’s all.

But I tell you, Merl, deep down there isn’t a more complete package that this woman right here. I’m serious. Many talents. I’m even thinking—just go with me here, Merl—that there might be a part in our movie that’s got Mother’s name written all over it. Not the lead or anything, but maybe, I don’t know, “Laura Ostran”? We’ll deal with the specifics later. You bet we will.
And it occurs to me that we’ve done a whole lot of talking this morning, but you never got to see your man in action! How about we get my basketball down from the closet and I’ll show you what I’m talking about! All I need you to do, Merl, is grab my ball from the shelf in the closet there. I don’t know why Mother always puts it up in the old place. So if you could just open the door and reach up there and . . .

No?

I’m due at work in a half hour anyway. It’s just as well. That’s Steals On Wheels. We’re in the Yellow Pages. S-T-E-A-L-S, as opposed to . . . Just run those contracts by this afternoon at your convenience. Or early tomorrow. Anytime this week. We’ll get ’em all signed and . . . Okay, this is just between you and me, Merl, but the new 4200's came in yesterday, and I got a baby in Prussian blue that’ll break your heart.
[File footage (Courtesy: Livery's Gas Station): DICKY SMYTHE waves gallon milk jug at TOM WORKMAN and KATHY KING. DICKY screams: “I know for a fact you killed her! There's proof in the woods! By the Gravel Pit!” KATHY flees through door. DICKY looks straight into camera: “He's a killer! He's a murderer!” TOM lunges at DICKY. DICKY smashes milk jug on floor. CLERK runs on-screen, throws TOM and DICKY into parking lot. Locks door Screen shrinks to four-squared screen. Forth square grows to consume entire screen.]
THIS ONE’S GOING TO OVERTIME!

Dicky Smythe  
Tuesday, 11:58 p.m. Woods, fifty paces from shore of Gravel Pit.

Sorry. I’m right here, Mr. Hoffkins. I’m . . . Oh no . . . You’re looking the wrong way. I’m by this tree. Go the other way. Not that tree. It’s the big tree with all the--sorry--leaves and . . . I’ll just turn on my flashlight. I’m sorry. My eyes are really good in the dark . . . I’m always out in the . . . I forget most people can’t . . . I’m sorry. Jean’s not too far away. Just follow me. Stay close because there’s poison ivy. There’s so much poison ivy the cops won’t even . . . Jean’s right in the middle of it. But did you see the rig tracks? Like I told you about? Next to the Gravel Pit? The rig tracks from Tom Workman? When he dumped Jean out here after he . . . rig tracks, Mr. Hoffkins? Watch out for these prickers. That’s a nice suit. Don’t get caught on the prickers. I’ll hold them for you. Sorry about these prickers, Mr. Hoffkins. This is embarrassing. Sorry. But Diane Chianti is my all-time favorite on The Annoying Buzz. My all-time . . . Even though she’s not a basketball player. She’s just a doctor. But I love the way she can look into her patients’ eyes and know that they’re--sorry--lying to her. So--I’m sorry--it was just so--sorry--sad this afternoon because . . . Why did you . . . She got hit by a bus of women’s basketball players and died. This afternoon. She’s seriously dead. I’m sorry to bring it up now, but . . . I hate Sylvester Anthony! Sorry. But just to tell you, Mr. Hoffkins, when we get a little closer there is a smell. Not a bad smell, but a smell. That’s Jean. Sorry about it. It was 87 degrees today. Sorry. I don’t want to bring this up. It’s Sylvester Anthony. His wife got
hit by a—sorry. Sylvester doesn’t make sense lately. Sorry, but why is he wearing WNBA
jerseys to work? Why is he listening to sports radio in the office instead of practicing
law? Diane Chianti didn’t do anything wrong. She just—sorry—knew how to know when
someone was lying to her. I hate it when Sylvester says, “This one’s going to overtime!”
Diane hates—sorry—hated it too. What about when he missed their anniversary because of
the playoffs? Diane didn’t do anything wrong! It’s not fair! Here’s a little swamp we have
to cross. This log is the only way to cross it. Sorry, you have to balance in the middle of
the log. The water is—sorry—deep, but . . . watch me do it first.

That’s not my fault. I told you. It’s your fault, because I told you to balance in the
middle . . . the middle of the log . . . the water’s deeper now. Sorry. Your suit. I’m . . . But
Jean’s hair is still blond. That’s good. Sorry there’s only a little hair left . . . just a . . . on
the back of her head. It’s blond though. But it’s short. Sorry. One or two inches. But it’s
very blond. Maybe it’s white. Sorry if it’s white. But at least there’s some left. It’s not my
fault. What’s disrespectful is running over Diane Chianti with a bus and leaving her dead
body on the street . . . Of women’s basketball players! Sylvester Anthony didn’t even take
her to a hospital. What if she’s still alive? He didn’t even check her pulse. Why? . . . I’m
sorry, but . . . why, Mr. Hoffkins? Sorry . . . I hate Sylvester! . . . I’m not mad. I wasn’t
mad just now. I’m sorry. I’m . . . Sylvester Anthony killed Diane Chianti, Mr. Hoffkins.
Because Sylvester didn’t even cry. He just dribbled his basketball in the driveway. With
Diane still lying in the street. I could murder . . . I don’t hate you. Sorry. Here’s the smell.
Oh . . . I’m so sorry. It was 87 degrees. Jean. Don’t look at me. It’s not my fault. Breath
with your mouth. You can’t smell her if you breathe through your . . . Sorry about this.
But Sylvester... Now we have to climb a tree. The poison ivy’s too thick to walk through. Jean’s stuck in the middle... You have to... Just watch me first. Sorry about this tree. The police won’t even send dogs out here. Sorry about the... at least you’re good at climbing trees. But I know something else, Mr. Hoffkins. Sorry, but Sylvester thinks now that he killed Diane Chianti that he’ll get to have sex with a basketball player, because it’s very obvious that’s all he wants, but he’s very wrong about that. Maybe he’ll get--sorry--to kiss the cheek of a basketball player. Maybe he’ll get to talk on the phone with one. Maybe they’ll hold hands. But he won’t--sorry--ever get to have sex with one. Or even a poem. Grab this tree branch and--I’m sorry but you have to... swing to the next tree and... it’s not too far away. Come on. But I can’t--I’m so sorry--wait to see Sylvester screaming on the floor of his law office after his heart is--and it won’t be my fault--smashed flat as a dime! Because why did you--sorry... because I didn’t kill her. Now jump to the ground. It’s so dark because the poison ivy lives in the tree-tops too. Take my flashlight. Take it. Sorry. Jean’s behind that stump. Take my flashlight, Mr. Hoffkins. Behind that stump. Don’t look at my face. Jean’s right there. Please.

Doesn’t she look happy? Mr. Hoffkins? Look at her smile! Can you believe how big her smile is? From one ear to the--what’s wrong? She’s happy! What’s wrong, Mr... Are you cry--... NO!... NO!... DON’T RUN THAT WAY!... YOU’RE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE... Run. Keep running... It’s not my fault you’re a... murderer. I’m so sorry.
Part 4
Earlier tonight I quickly and easily completed Steps #1 through #8 in Johnny’s 10-Step Plan to Rape Michelline Back Into His Arms, but here on Step #9—“Go Forth, Man-Child, And Plunder The Woman With Your Hands!”—I freeze in mid-step. It’s just me and Michelline alone in the woods behind Rheener’s, and even though I can’t move or speak, she just keeps walking, getting smaller and smaller, and only because of her new hair—blond as a headlight now—can I see Michelline at all. But Johnny knew this would happen—me turning into a “Mr. Pussy” at the moment of rape—because my hands suddenly go tingly, then fall to the ground. I look at them there, biodegrading into the leaves and dirt until they’re nothing. Then, on each bald wrist, sprout five little nubs that quickly become Johnny’s Hands—thick and calloused and ready to rape. I test one Hand by asking it to itch my arm, and as it scratches the skin off my elbow, Michelline spins in place and fires this back at me: “Do you want to hear about the first boy I ever kissed?”

Still a bit frozen in the mouth, I look to Johnny’s Hands to see what they think. One shakes its fist, no. But the other seems to want to hear Michelline’s story, so it climbs up to my ear and whispers why. But because it’s a Hand I can’t really understand anything. So I just say, “Okay.”

“Really? You really want to know?”

“Okay.” And I guess I owe one to Johnny’s Hands, because now Michelline’s cheeks are bouncing back to me.

“When I asked my two boyfriends—you know, Johnny and Ernie—if they wanted to hear about my first kiss, those guys said they’d kill any boy that thinks he can kiss me and get away with it. Johnny said he’d pull the boy’s tongue out of his mouth and then...
slap him to death with it. What would you do, Jesse? Would you kill that little fifth-
grader who kissed me on the monkey bars?"

“No.”

“That’s good, because it wasn’t the boy’s fault. I dared him to kiss me. And you
know what? He got so scared that he couldn’t do it. His whole mouth dried up. Then his
tongue turned black. So then I had to kiss him. Can you believe that?"

“No.”

“I mean, why would someone be afraid of kissing?”

I glance at Johnny’s Hands, because I’m sure they know Johnny’s first rule about
rape: *Before a man rapes a thing, a man must express the proper respect for it by kissing
that thing passionately, the man’s lips to its.* The Hands give me a funny look, so I just
stuff them into my pockets and say, “I don’t know why,” because right now Michelline is
standing within easy kissing-distance, and once I kiss her, Johnny’s Hands will be free to
rip into her. A breeze takes hold of her blond hair and nips me in the nose with it.
Johnny’s Hands are sweating through my pockets, waiting for me to get down to
business. My eyes find Michelline’s. Man, she’s grinning at me . . . but I wait too long,
and Michelline finally steps back and smirks at me. “What about your first kiss, Jesse.”

This gets Johnny’s Hands laughing, so I jam them even deeper in my pockets, but
that just causes an itch at the tip of my nose. I try to wiggle the itch off, but somehow that
dries out my lips. Then they’re stuck together, so I can’t answer Michelline’s question
about my first kiss. I just look at her and shrug.
“So you’re one of those guys who doesn’t like to kiss and tell. That’s okay. We’ll just talk about me then.”

I nod. Michelline takes two more steps back. I’ve got a full view of her now, and that unfixes my lips. My nose somehow manages to itch itself too.

“What do you think of my sweater?”

“I like it.”

“But why do you like it?”

“Because it looks warm.”

“Tell me what else you like about me.”

“Your eyes?”

“My cheeks?”

“I love them.”

“I hate my cheeks!” Michelline grabs her cheeks, smashing her lips vertical on her face.

“Michelline--”
"You pronounce that wrong too! Why are you so horrible?"

I glance at Johnny's Hands, but both are shaking their fists sadly at the ground.

Michelline is more than ten feet away now. "How does your name go then?"

"Why am I out in the woods with a guy like you?"

"Because I saved you back at Rheener's."

"It wasn't a question."

"Okay." The Hands just sigh, and one flicks the other's pinky. "What about the cigarettes I brought for you?"

"Cigarettes remind me of someone else. But don't ask me who, because I'm not telling. And what are you, freezing to death?"

"No."

"Why are you shivering like that?"

"I'm not."

"What about your hands?"

I don't even look down because I can feel them thumb-wrestling at my bellybutton. I throw Johnny's Hands behind my back, and there it digresses to bloody knuckles. "I'm just a little nervous. That's all."

"But what do you have to be nervous about, Jesse? You don't even like girls. This date is over!" With that, Michelline starts running back to Rheener's--un-kissed, un-raped and un-everything else. I don't know why, but I feel a sudden brick of energy dissolve in my stomach--enough to stomp the earth so hard that Michelline trips to the leaves, where I'll grab her and kiss her--but the second I lift my foot I just have to go to the bathroom. I

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bring Johnny’s Hands back out so I can see them, but now they’re just pouting, giving me the back-of-the-hand treatment.

“Please,” I say. “What would Johnny do?”

One glances at me. It nudges the other one. Then they both rock back on their wrists, laughing at me. Michelline is so far down the trail by now she might as well be in Johnny’s Ford. I start thinking about the rigs and Ms. Itty-Hampton, and what a perfect night used to consist of, when a Hand slaps me across the face. That one points to my feet while the other one points back toward Rheener’s. They pound me on the heart a couple times, then give two big A-OK’s. “Really?” I say, but that just causes them to slap me again, as one points to a watch that’s suddenly on the other’s wrist—and then I’m sprinting down the trail after Michelline. But maybe my brain is frozen, because I can’t stop thinking about Mom for some reason, and I say, “Guys? When we find Michelline we’ll wait a couple minutes before we, you know, rape her, right? Because didn’t Johnny say to kiss her before raping her? You know, because of respect?” But the Hands keep to their tight, determined fists, and don’t even give me a thumbs-up. Then I’m an arm’s reach away from Michelline, and I almost yell, “Watch out!”—but a Finger presses against my lips, then clamps them together, muting me, so all I can do is watch the other Hand rise to the back of Michelline’s head. She halts when a Finger drags through her hair. The Finger twists a clump of it around its knuckle and--

“Oh, Jesse! You do love my hair!” Michelline spins, awarding me a huge-cheeked smile, and the Hand brings a lock of her hair to my nose. I take a deep sniff, and the other
Hand slaps my cheek, demonstrating the mental torture her shampoo causes me. "I do love your hair."

"I didn’t even think you noticed. But you did!"

"You bet I noticed," I say, and I owe Johnny’s Hands big time. That’s twice they saved me, and now they’re just staring me down—at the same time gently caressing Michelline’s blond hair—as veins are rise in their knuckles, and maybe it’s my imagination, but their fingernails seem to be growing to points.

"Jesse, can I tell you something?"

"Maybe you shouldn’t," I say, because the Hands are now sliding up and down her cheeks, pulling them closer to my face. I try not to feel what they’re feeling, but their nerve-endings are sending her softness straight to my brain, along with images of my mouth sucking on those cheeks.

"So maybe I shouldn’t tell you what I want to tell you?"

"Yes."

"But you said maybe I shouldn’t tell you, and maybe shouldn’t also means maybe should, right?"

"Maybe."

"So maybe I should tell you what I’ve been dying to tell you all night."

"But only maybe."

"So maybe I will."

"Okay."
But Michelline’s not telling me a thing. She’s just relaxing every muscle in her body as Johnny’s Hands enwrap her skull. Her breath beats slowly against my face, and each whiff of it through my nose carries a tiny diagram of dimensions and to the parts of Michelline’s body hidden beneath her sweater. When I close my eyes, a smiling Michelline, in a bright white room, leads me through these diagrams then offers herself as a specimen to study. When I put a hand on her stomach she giggles and screams, “That tickles!”—but by the time I’m elbow deep under her rib-cage, feeling her lungs and spinal cord, she’s just humming quietly to herself. But the humming stops a second later when something up near her collar-bone snaps off between my fingers. I’m holding it—what feels like an empty peanut shell—and I look up at Michelline’s face, now white and flat-cheeked, and I realize I just killed her. And it’s that image, her mouth hanging open, that opens my eyes just in time to see Michelline’s alive, wet mouth just an inch from my own, and makes my feet jump backwards until I slam against a tree trunk, and makes me stuff Johnny’s Hands into my armpits where they begin to squirm and claw and scream that I’ve ruined everything. Of course, Michelline is just standing there, staring back at me like I didn’t just save her from being raped and killed by Johnny’s Hands. One of the Hands escapes from my armpit and goes for Michelline, clawing spasmodically through the air. It’s a good thing I’m more than ten feet away now, because my elbow might snap off and go flying at her. I don’t know what would happen then.

“God Jesse! Do you want me or not? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m nervous?” I say, as the other Hand gets loose. Now they’re both reaching for her, tearing at each other. I dig my feet into the ground and try to smile.
"You already said you were nervous. Now I just think you’re a freak."

"Maybe you’re right. I’m sorry."

"I thought you were my new boyfriend. I thought you were different. But now I know you’re different in a bad way, not a good way."

"I’m trying to be good."

"At least I have Johnny. He at least knows how to kiss me when I need kissing."

"But I want to kiss you too, Michelline. That’s my problem. I just need to figure out how."

"Okay, number one--stop saying my name if you can’t say it right. And number two--while you try and figure things out, I’m going back to Rheener’s. But just so you know, Jesse, if something happens to me on my walk--I don’t know--if somebody jumps out of the woods and takes me by the hair and--I don’t know--does something... In that case, whatever happens, happens. Okay?"

"I’ll try."

But Michelline’s already gone, and this it’s time for good. Now all I’ve got are these stupid Hands that I’ll have to sit on until tomorrow morning, when I can give them back to Johnny at genius--

But it’s not over yet. Johnny must have known that this would happen too. Because a long knife is twisting inside my bellybutton. And while the Hand holding it--the Stabber--is careful not to put a hole in me just yet, the other Hand is viscously ordering me off the ground. There’s no confusion as to where this Hand--the Pointer--now wants me to go. "Please," I say, but it’s no use. The Hands have already driven their
roots down through my body and into my feet—Johnny’s Feet—which are walking me quickly to Rheener’s Party Store. I begin to wonder when Johnny’s Brain will finally take over everything, but the Stabber just slashes me across the belly, and I have no thoughts anymore. Then I’m just a body sprinting to rape her.

* * *

Johnny skipped genius school today, but I only know that because I followed his Plan. #1: “Attend School and Become An Educated Man.” That was easy enough, because I was the only genius there. The next part of the Plan, though, called for me to--#2: “Wait Until Johnny-Time, Pack The Loot, and Slip Through The Cracks.” So when the sun fell behind the water-tower, I filled five LIVERY’S plastic bags with cigarettes and jumped out my bedroom window. Then, #3: “Get Thee To Rheener’s Party Store, Jizz!” But I needed to avoid all enemy forces, so I stuck to the tiny streets of the trailer park, then ran through the Meech Road Cemetery, crossed the railroad tracks, scrambled to the top of Culver’s Sledding Hill—where I first sighted the Rheener’s flood-lights off in the distance. But between myself and the parking lot was the Gravel Pit. Mom warned me never to go near it, because when she was in high school a genius she knew--her first boyfriend--had sunk to the bottom and was never found. But one of the general rules to Johnny’s Plan was to resist being a “Mr. Pussy,” so I walked on the shore of the Pit. and even threw a rock at it, though there wasn’t a splash or a sound.
Step #4: “Stand Tall Before the White Chevy (You Know Who’s Inside)” Johnny had briefed me on the White-Haired Kid’s name: Ernie Granger, which meant he was the brother of an older girl that died a year ago. Her name was Jean Granger. Mom told me she was a genius too, and that’s why somebody killed her—“So always watch out for people,” was Mom’s lesson. But when Ernie rolled down the Chevy’s window it seemed like he was done dealing with his sister’s death, and he calmly told me I had five seconds to explain why a boy was setting foot in Rheener’s parking lot. Of course, Michelline sat in the passenger seat, just where Johnny said she would be, and I used four of my five seconds staring at the two of them, coming to the conclusion that if anybody ever looked at Ernie’s sister’s picture and Michelline’s picture side-by-side, they’d pick Ernie’s sister every time. Ernie knew that too. And Michelline must have known that Ernie knew it, and that’s why Michelline’s hair was dyed blond, just like Jean’s, and why Ernie looked like he’d already forgotten Michelline was sitting there. So I went ahead with Step #5: “Give The Gift Of Cigarettes,” and somehow Johnny knew that Ernie would get out of the Chevy, grab all five LIVERY’S bags from me, step to the center of the parking lot, and invite his army of girls laying around the place to approach. Johnny knew that Ernie would say, “Here you go Deb. Here you go Sarina. Here you go Maggie,” passing out cigarettes, and that he would know each girl’s name, even though each girl had the same blond hair down to the middle of her back and wore a basketball uniform with number 44 on the chest, and that when Ernie got close to each girl, she would spin a basketball on her finger to grab his attention, but that the ball wouldn’t spin, just roll off the edge of the parking lot and onto the wet grass. Then, Johnny knew, Ernie would light a cigarette for
himself, and this would cause every girl to light her cigarette too, and Ernie would stand in the middle of his parking lot, alone, frowning up the Rheener's flood-lights.

But by that time I was already occupied with Step #6: "Slide Into That Horrible Chevy Which Holds A Doll." But when I was seated behind the wheel, Michelline had barely enough time to touch her lovely cheek in shock before #7 happened: "When The Old Man Flies Through The Door, The Sweet-Thing Vanishes!" The Rheener's cashier suddenly burst into the parking lot, waving his arms through the smoke, demanding to see proof that every girl was 18 years old. And it was then that Johnny's Plan hit its first snag, as here I froze solid instead of kidnapping Michelline. But Johnny had a safe guard for that too, because Michelline--amid the panic outside--assumed control and kicked off the passenger-side door, pulled me through it by my t-shirt collar, dragged me through the dirt and rocks, and finally dumped me on the dark side of the party store. And after the police stormed the parking lot, and I presented Michelline with her own special package of cigarettes, it was then she who initiated Step #8: "The Woods, Man-Child, The Woods!" Johnny's Plan was now more like a law of nature than something that needed to be memorized. But even with Michelline's new blond head shining like a beacon through the cold woods, and the sudden weight of Johnny's own hands flexing at my sides, I knew these last two steps would be the most impossible.

* * *

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With Johnny’s Feet hurdling entire trees at once, I easily overtake Michelline at the edge of the woods. The new plan, as communicated to me by the gestures of the Stabber and the Pointer, has just two steps. #1: Kiss Michelline. #2: Die because of it. My only hope is that Johnny’s Body—which is my body, all except for my head—will let Michelline live after she is raped.

When she hears my footfalls, Michelline stops, spins, and whispers “Don’t hurt me” in a voice so breathy it retches Johnny’s Heart up into my mouth. The Stabber is hiding behind my back, cocked and jittery to slice my lips off. The Pointer just keeps getting longer and longer, pointing and pointing, until it pokes Michelline’s hip without shame. Michelline giggles and closes her eyes. My mouth says, “Please forgive me if I do,” and that’s the last thing I see, because my eyes go blurry as Johnny’s Neck leans what’s left of me toward Michelline, and at least I’ll have my first kiss before I die.

Or I won’t. Because now I’m lying in the dirt. The Pointer’s lying beside me too, sliced-off at the wrist and squirting Johnny’s Blood everywhere. Michelline just stands there—alive and un-raped—looking down at me with a red-cheeked smile before she says, “That’s what you get for leading me on, Jerky Livery!” And what happened was this: Michelline tripped me to the ground just as the Stabber wheeled its knife between our noses—the Stabber needing blood so badly that it kept wheeling until it sliced something else, the Pointer. But now the Stabber is frozen and staring at its brother, so frozen it can’t even apologize. And Man! My real hand sprouts back in an instant. I itch my nose to make sure it’s on my side, and then ease the knife from between the Stabber’s fingers, and . . . and my body’s mine again too! All except for the Stabber, but I’ll get to that
Hand in a second. I jump to my feet and say, “Michelline, can we just stand here and look at each other for a minute?”

“God, Jesse! It’s Michelline!”

“That’s what I meant to say.”

“And why do we always have to look at each other? You’re the most boring boy I ever met.”

“Sorry. Just one more minute. Please.”

“Fine. But only one minute, Jesse. God, this date is taking forever.” Michelline’s face tries to look annoyed, but it can’t do it for longer than a second, and then she looks so amazing I’m collecting her faces to draw them later. At one point she sucks her cheeks so far into her mouth that I’m afraid she swallowed them. But then she pumps them so full of air that I can’t find her lips anymore. Of course, I’m staring straight back at her too, trying to look normal while my good hand saws off the Stabber. But Johnny’s Only Hand won’t quit trying to prove what a useful hand it could be if I just let it live. All in a matter of five seconds it types a novel, plays three songs on the guitar, and tries to dive down the front of my pants—which is right where I catch it and kill it with the dull knife. It drops to the ground—still alive, somehow—and scurries back to Rheener’s. But I don’t care. I’ve been waiting all night to tell Michelline how I really feel about her, and now I finally have the chance. So I say--

“Don’t say anything, Jesse!”

“But I need to tell you--”

“Don’t!”
“Okay.”

“Nobody’s ever looked at me for so long without stopping.”

“I love looking at you, but—”

“You know what I just figured out? That maybe looking is better than kissing!”

“But I just figured out how to kiss you.”

“Who cares about kissing? Can’t we look at each other just a little bit longer?”

“I guess so.”

But I take Michelline and kiss her anyway. The left side of my head goes heavy because of it. The same thing happens to Michelline’s head, and now our lips are airtight. So if I close my eyes and let my right eye-ball roll down into my mouth, it can safely travel into Michelline’s. First my eye bounces over our teeth, then it finds a soft valley in the back of her cheek where I can watch the intricate workings of Michelline’s tongue. I get quick views of my own tongue too, so now I can tell it how to hide from hers and where to surprise attack. Then, after I figure out Michelline’s tongue-pattern, the canyon-wall of her cheek becomes the most breathtaking sight in the world. The peak is impossible to see through the fog and darkness, and the droplets of saliva falling from that height are bombs by the time they land. But I can’t tear my eye away, and suddenly it’s so dizzy it accidentally rolls onto Michelline’s tongue. From there it gets whacked by my own tongue to the back of Michelline’s throat, where it hover for a second in a geyser of steam, before getting sucked to her stomach.

“Oh my God!” she says.
With an empty eye-socket, I watch Michelline take two deep breaths. I say, "But I’ve got to tell you--."

"No Jesse. Let’s please just shut-up and let that be a perfect kiss."

"But it’s important. It’s about Johnny."

"I’m not going to tell Johnny about this."

"That’s not what I mean."

"God, I could tell him if I wanted to!"

"I mean Johnny’s waiting for you back at Rheener’s. It’s part of a plan. I’ve been doing the plan all night, but the last step is Johnny’s step. I’m supposed to bring you back to Rheener’s where Johnny’s going to... He doesn’t know I love you! He thinking I’m raping you right now. He thinks he gets to--"

"Jesse."

"He thinks it’s his turn!"

"Oh, Jesse. Can we please just be quiet? We’ve still got a couple more seconds out here alone. Can’t we let this be perfect just a little longer?"

"But Johnny--"

"He’s my boyfriend, Jesse."

This time Michelline grabs my head and kisses me. It’s a more serious kiss, though, because now her tongue has a bone down the middle of it, keeping it hard. Her fingers squeeze my cheeks and I try to imagine them as claws for fighting off Johnny. I barely notice when my eye rolls back into my head. And then we’re staring at each other again, from a friendship-distance, and Michelline says, "Let’s go."

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But the plan is far from over. Step #10: “Johnny’s Revenge.”

We emerge from the dark side of Rheener’s and, sure enough, it’s just a ghost of a party store now: just Johnny’s black Ford, and the man himself sitting on the hood. Michelline walks ahead of me, as Johnny said she would, and he swoops her up with one arm and tosses her into the backseat. I watch the window for any sign of white cheeks, but all of Johnny’s windows are tinted black, and besides, now it’s my turn with him.

As the Plan dictates, I cannot run away: *Jizzy has raped Johnny’s one and only doll in the universe, and now the Man-Child will pay in blood for this sin...* or I could battle. I could trip Johnny to the cement--steal his Ford!--and speed away with Michelline’s cheeks rippling in the wind--

But Johnny’s wink freezes me. His grinning lips read: *Fucking PERFECT, Jizzy.* His hands slap my throat... and I hear bugs dying on the electric flood-lights as Johnny chokes the genius out of me.
YOU NEVER ASK ME ABOUT ME

Kathy King
Wednesday, 7:56 p.m. Hectorville Community Hospital, Room 119.

Did Ah wake you? Dear? Ah was just loosening that horrible tie of yours because your breathing was making me feel light-headed with heartache. Now it’s better. When Ah heard what happened to you--how the police found you face-down in that dirty Rheener’s parking lot, and how you had the worst case of poison ivy the hospital had ever seen--well, Ah just had to run down here and make sure you were being treated properly. And please pardon mah dreadful manners. Mah name is Miss Kathy King. It’s a pleasure to make your--Oh! Don’t try to speak, dear. Your neck is so swollen from itching that the doctor could barely fit that dreadful tube down your throat.

And do please excuse mah southern accent. You see, Ah’m an actress practicing for the part of Miss--

But there Ah go again, boring everybody with the details of mah life. As if it wasn’t boring enough playing the part of “girlfriend” to Mr. Tom Workman. Good lord! If Ah have to accompany that man just once more to that horrid Livery’s Gas Station, or sully mah dresses in his “rig” . . . Well, there’s no telling what Ah might do! At least right now Mr. Workman is off in New York City, so Ah can, for the moment, use mah intelligence in speaking once again. Ah do appreciate that, Dear Mr. Hoffkins. A man Ah can talk to, that is.
But maybe you’re still thinking about that angel, Jean Granger. Certainly, who isn’t? Apparently, your final words before going under were in regards to her “smiling dead face.” Well Ah just can’t imagine . . .

Mr. Hoffkins, you don’t mind if Ah smoke a cigarette, do you? Oh, Ah’m not really going to smoke it, dear, but mah acting coach told me to keep it between mah lips as much as . . . And there Ah go again. Me. Me. Me. It’s a problem Ah have. Jean Granger never had that problem, though. She gave of herself quite freely. Ah was her best . . . mostly best friend, and that’s the reason she told me of the relations between herself and Mr. Ben Wallace that were going on behind closed doors a whole year before she was kidnapped by him. Of course Jean swore me to secrecy about that information. But really, Mr. Hoffkins, do such silly little rules still apply when your best friend is D-E-A-D?

And yes, Ah know the popular gossip these days is that mah gentleman-friend, Tom Workman, is the true killer. Ah might be convinced mahself if Ah didn’t have first-hand knowledge of how stupid the boy is—certainly too stupid to pull off a stunt like murder and get away with it. And just to quell any other rumors you might have heard—no, Mr. Hoffkins, Ah most certainly have not given mahself to Mr. Workman. Nor do Ah plan to. In fact, when he returns from New York the first thing I’m gonna do is dump his sorry . . . or, have a talk with the boy and try not to break his heart. Because, Mr. Hoffkins, Ah need a man who knows how to use his brain. A man of . . . maturity. A man who appreciates the subtleties of great acting . . . a tear-drop on demand . . . a--

But look at the time! Poor Mr. Workman is just a moment away from his television appearance and Ah’m so very far away from a TV set. But look! Here’s one in
your room! It wouldn't be too much trouble, would it, Mr. Hoffkins, to keep a young lady company while her ex-beau makes a fool of himself on that black box up there?

Would you mind scooting over just a sliver then, dear? Ah don't have cooties.
LIZZY: Tonight's interview is serious. That means someone was either hurt very badly, or someone died. In this case, both. I won't bore you with the details of the Jean Granger abduction. Everybody knows about it, and frankly, everybody dealt with it about eleven months ago. But seriously? Not everyone did. In a minute you're going to meet Tom Workman. He was Jean's boyfriend—possibly still is Jean's boyfriend—or . . . maybe he killed her.

Put yourself in his shoes. Would you forget about a lover lost on a spaceship behind the dark side of the moon? And if so, when is the right time to give up hope? What if this lost person shows up on your doorstep and you're right in the middle of a make-out session with that new someone? Tom has to seriously think about these things.

And in honor of the seriousness of tonight's interview, and because I just graduated high school and Tom never got to graduate, and because Jean Granger would be graduated if she was alive, I decided to revisit my high school and relive some of my best . . . and some of my worst memories—the very worst happening two days ago, right in this very parking lot, when I had to do the hardest break-up of my life. So, sorry in advance if I start to cry or something.

[White limousine rolls to stop behind LIZZY.]

LIZZY: Who's this?
[TOM WORKMAN emerges from rear door. TOM wears blue-jeans, white dress-shirt tucked in. LIZZY beams. TOM unsuccessfully tries to beam. They hug. LIZZY holds TOM’s hand.]

LIZZY: Come on, Tom. Do you want to go inside?

[LIZZY leads TOM through double-doors. Zoom-in/fade-to-black on door handle closing. Cut to classroom. LIZZY and TOM face each other, sitting in desks. CANDLE on desk between them.]

LIZZY: Tom, did you love Jean Granger?

TOM: Yes.

LIZZY: I thought so. I’ve seen the pictures of her. She was gorgeous. [Looks at camera.] Everybody? Wasn’t she? Gorgeous. But did all of you know how tall she was? She was six-feet-five-inches. Now, I don’t claim to be studying human biology at Princeton next year—I’m studying philosophy—but Tom, you’re not quite that tall, are you?

TOM: No.

LIZZY: I didn’t think so. That must’ve been a big problem with you guys, huh? [Shrugs shoulders.]
TOM: It wasn’t a problem for me. I mean, Jean never, if I remember right, dated guys who were taller than her. You’d have to ask her about it.

LIZZY: As a woman, I can understand how frustrating it would be. In this very room, Mrs. Fleetwood’s ninth-grade history room, I got my first kiss. We were sitting right here, and it was on a dare with a senior guy named Jeffron—like two names, Jeff and Ron? He said he didn’t care about kissing, and I bet him that, No way! How could you NOT CARE about kissing? He kept saying I was full of nonsense. First of all, because I was a freshman. And second of all, because there are a lot better things to do with your time than kissing. So we kissed. And I’m sorry to say this story has a sad ending, because our relationship only lasted six months. Tom, what was your first kiss with Jean like?

TOM: We only dated a week, so there wasn’t much time for kissing. And really there was only one kiss. At the Gravel Pit. We were sitting in my rig, looking at the Pit. Then we kissed. It was . . . it was awesome. Is there more you want to know?

LIZZY: [Winks at camera.] Is there more we want to know, everybody? Of course! Details! Who kissed who?

TOM: Well . . . she kissed me. She definitely kissed me. Yeah, we must’ve kissed for about five or ten minutes, and then I drove her home. Yeah.
LIZZY: That’s great, Tom. Do you want to go see my locker?

TOM: Okay.

[LIZZY rises. TOM gets stuck in desk. LIZZY pulls TOM’s arm. Cut to hallway, TOM and LIZZY stand before row of lockers.]

LIZZY: Everyone cleaned out their lockers for summer, but I was allowed to keep my stuff in here so I could use the school library and get ready for college. Let’s see if I still remember my combination. [Turns toward locker.] Um, Tom, could you please not stare at the combination while I do it?

[TOM puts hands in pockets, looks at ceiling.]

LIZZY: Oh! Stinky! I left my gym clothes in here! [Close-up: inside locker: PHOTOS of TOM on locker door, including PHOTOS of TOM w/ SEMI-TRUCK. Also: PORTRAIT of Jean Granger, face crossed out w/ marker.] I guess I’ve kind-of got a crush on you, Tom. Is that okay?

[Pan to TOM, staring, mouth open.]
LIZZY: You don’t have to say anything right now. You can just be quiet. I mean, you probably just want to be friends. Which is okay. I’m probably lonely because I just broke up with my boyfriend. There were maturity issues there. All I can say is that one of us had a weekly news show on TV, and the other always wanted to come along every time I went to Europe. And one of us thought that just because I was a successful woman that he wouldn’t even go to college and that he could just move into my apartment and all he’d have to do is cook and clean and that would totally fulfill me as a person. Do you have a girlfriend right now, Tom?

TOM: I’m sort-of dating somebody.

[LIZZY slams locker, runs down hallway. TOM watches. TOM looks at camera.]

TOM: I don’t know what’s going on. Is she being serious? Can you guys tell me? . . . You can’t?

[TOM tests locker without luck. Walks down hallway. Zoom-in/fade-to-black on TOM’s head. 
Cliffhanger music. Cut to commercial.]

* * *
LIZZY: We’re back. I was pretty shaken up when Tom found me lying on the floor in the cafeteria. I was crying—so if I look gross, that’s why. But Tom apologized, and now everything’s great. This is the gym where our boys basketball team beat every team they played during my whole four years of high school. God, I can’t believe it’s over already. Can you believe it, Tom?

TOM: What?

LIZZY: I’m talking about high school. Can you believe it’s over?

TOM: I think I can believe it.

LIZZY: That’s too bad. Were you on the basketball team, Tom?

TOM: No. But I still played all the time down at the--
LIZZY: That’s okay. We’ve got a surprise for you anyway. Pardee Lang, please come out here. Pardee Lang, everybody! Number one pick in the NBA draft, and he just graduated from high school this year! Just like me!

[PARDEE walks into spotlight, dribbling basketball. PARDEE leans down and hugs LIZZY. PARDEE stands between LIZZY and TOM, smiles at camera. LIZZY mouths: “Oh my God!”]

LIZZY: Pardee, this is Tom Workman. Tom was Jean Granger’s boyfriend, but now he’s dating someone else.

PARDEE: [Shaking TOM’s hand.] I’m sorry to hear that.

TOM: That’s okay.

LIZZY: Before we get started, I have just a couple questions for Tom. Because what I think everybody—including Pardee here—would like to know is, did Jean dump you before Ben Wallace took her away? Or did you find Big Ben and Jean making-out in the garage, then you killed her? Or did you and Ben play a one-on-one basketball game to figure out who would get to be Jean’s boyfriend?

TOM: That’s fucking crazy--
LIZZY: Language!

TOM: Sorry. But when I got in the garage I thought they weren’t even there. It was just Jean’s Cutlass and nothing else. But then I stopped and listened, and I heard Ben Wallace’s laughing. Then looked in the Cutlass and they were in there, slapping each other or something.

LIZZY: I know if my boyfriend saw me in the front seat of a car, playfully slapping another boy, I hope he’d rip the doors off and tell us both how much he was hurt by it.

PARDEE: Yeah, I’d smash that car if that was my girl.

TOM: I was gonna smash it, or kick it—but suddenly Wallace is out, and standing there, smiling, and he’s holding a six pack of Kobra. I mean, Wallace is six-seven, so I figured I’d try to talk to him. And it worked, because, I mean, Wallace never stopped smiling, and then he gave me a Kobra. I don’t know. I guess then we were sitting on Jean’s hood, talking about rigs and--

LIZZY and PARDEE: Rigs?

TOM: Because Wallace drove rig for a while, just like me. He had a tattoo of his rig on his arm. It was red. But then Jean honked the horn at us. I think that scared us both, or
maybe just me, because Wallace says, “One of us better get back in there, huh?” And I say, “Yeah.” And Wallace says the first one who can chug a Kobra will get back in the Cutlass and see what’s got Jean’s panties in a bunch. That’s what he said, so--

LIZZY: Why didn’t you just say “No thanks” when he tried to peer-pressure you into drinking a beer? That’s what I--

TOM: Because I killed him!

LIZZY: You--

TOM: My Kobra was slammed before he was even half-done with his!

PARDEE: Hell yeah!

TOM: So suddenly I’m in the Cutlass with Jean. I even got the keys. And I’m telling her--

LIZZY: I bet you told her you loved her.

TOM: I think I said that. Probably. But I said, “We’re going to the Gravel Pit right now,” because that was our favorite spot. I even started the Cutlass.
PARDEE: But what did Jean say?

LIZZY: Good question, Pardee.

TOM: That's the thing. She wanted a Kobra too. She said she was thirsty. So she wanted me to get out and grab her a one. Then we could go to the Gravel Pit. I just said okay, and--

LIZZY: But you didn't leave her in there alone, did you?

TOM: I--

LIZZY: No you didn't, Tom!

TOM: I'm sorry! But the next thing I knew I was right there in front of Wallace again, and the Cutlass door was shut, and Wallace wouldn't quit smiling, and all the Kobra cans were smashed at his feet.

LIZZY: So you punched him!

TOM: No. Please listen. What was I supposed to do? Wallace asked if I wanted to play another game--a game to decide who would go and get the Kobras we needed. Please,
don’t look at me that way. Please. So I said okay, because I won the last time, but . . . but this time it was a pissing contest, and Wallace already had his out, and . . . and I was just getting mine out too when he said go . . . and by the time I had mine all the way out his puddle was already under my shoe. I tried to do it, but--

LIZZY: You couldn’t pee? Why not?

TOM: I tried!

LIZZY: So you jumped back in the car?

TOM: Can’t you understand? Jean had the windows rolled up. She wasn’t even looking at me. I tapped on the window, and I tried to use sign language--to tell her I’d be back in five minutes--that I just had to run to Livery’s for Kobra and I’ve be back in five minutes, and--

LIZZY: [To camera.] And we all know what happened to Jean while Tom was out buying beer.

[PARDEE slams basketball on floor, catches it. Gym floods with light.]

TOM: I was only gone four minutes! My rig was parked right outside and I . . .
LIZZY: After these words we’ll find out who wants a kiss from Lizzy Hitchcock more--Tom or Pardee! Stay tuned!

[F’in “up-beat” music over-dub. PARDEE leans over, fake-kisses LIZZY on head. LIZZY winces. PARDEE slaps her butt. TOM approaches camera. Cut to commercial.]

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[Cut to File Footage: “Pardee Lang High School Highlight Reel” (Courtesy: NBA). Announcer Voice-over: “Can Tom pull-off the upset, and STEAL a kiss? Or will Pardee drop some of his NBA-grade bombs and SCORE a victory? Take it away, Liz.” Cut to gym. LIZZY, with basketball, stands between PARDEE and TOM. TOM wears black jersey and shorts.]

LIZZY: It’s impossible to know what Jean Granger would have done for the sport of women’s basketball. She was a great competitor and could always be counted on in the clutch. Is the same true of her ex-boyfriend? [Gives each of them a look.] Here are the rules fella’s. It’s one-on-one basketball. Play to eleven. Loser’s outs. [Turns to TOM.] That means whenever Pardee scores, you get the ball next. Winner gets to kiss me on national TV! All set?

[LIZZY offers ball to TOM, runs off court. TOM turns and faces basket. PARDEE crouches into defensive position . . . LIZZY’s voice-over: “I knew Pardee would have a slight advantage--look
at that! He didn’t even let Tom dribble once! Oh, my God! He almost hit is head on the
backboard! . . Tom would need—at the very least—an angel guarding over him in order to beat
Pardee. I wasn’t sure if Jean would get the job done herself, so I asked our school janitor, Carl
Scagg’s, to rig up a trick basketball hoop. Let’s see if it worked!” PARDEE’s ball. Hoop raises to
height of eleven feet. PARDEE fakes, drives, drunks. He points a finger to the ceiling, shakes his
head. Bottom of screen: “Pardee 6 -- Tom 0.” LIZZY’s voice-over: “Now let’s see what happens
when Tom get’s the ball . . . Angel?” Hoop lowers to six feet. TOM throws ball high over
PARDEE. Lands out of bounds. LIZZY’s voice-over: “Oh well. Maybe some things are just not
meant to be.” Cut to basketball hoop at height of thirty feet. PARDEE shoots ball from three-point
line. Swishes. PARDEE looks at camera, shrugs. TOM sits on floor. Bottom of screen: “Pardee 12
-- Tom 0.” Cut to LIZZY, hands behind back, standing between PARDEE and TOM.]

LIZZY: I always love an underdog, and just so you know, Tom, even though you have
girlfriend, I was rooting for you. Pardee, that doesn’t mean I won’t enjoy a little peck
from the soon-to-be NBA’s richest man. Fire away, big guy. [LIZZY closes eyes, parts lips.]

PARDEE: [Shakes head.] I’d love to, Lizzy, but I’ve got a girlfriend back home. She’s
watching right now--Hi, baby--and she’d kill me if I kissed you. Would you settle for a
hug from the NBA’s biggest fan of your show?

LIZZY: A gentleman, everybody, or what? [Hugs PARDEE.] Thanks Pardee!
PARDEE pats TOM on shoulder, bows head as he walks off-screen. Gym lights dim. LIZZY and TOM stand in spotlight.

LIZZY: What do you want to do now?

TOM: I don’t know what any of this has to do with Jean or me. I played him in basketball. Did you think that was funny or something?

LIZZY: Are you upset because you didn’t get to kiss me?

[TOM doesn’t answer. LIZZY steps behind TOM, places both hands on his shoulders. Rubs.]

LIZZY: Let’s get out of here. I never liked gym class anyway.

TOM: Me neither.

LIZZY: I know a place we can go.

[LIZZY presses harder. TOM closes eyes, opens mouth. Spotlight disappears. Cut to roof of school. No lighting other than stars, moon, city lights in distance, etc. Whispering voices heard. Pan to SILHOUETTE of LIZZY and TOM, sitting with feet over ledge.]
TOM: And I always fill up and get Mountain Dew at this killer gas station, Livery’s.
Yeah, I wanted to take my rig out here, but they gave me that plane ticket instead.

LIZZY: I wish I could sit in your rig! I’ve got a car, but it’s pretty boring. It can’t haul things like I bet your rig can . . . I know! Maybe at the end of the summer you can go on a road trip! Drive your rig out to New York! You can pick me up and we’ll just drive around for two whole weeks. Wherever we want to go!

TOM: I’ll have to ask Jerry if I can get a New York haul around then. August? I bet that won’t be happening.

LIZZY: What if you ask him nicely?

TOM: That might work.

LIZZY: It really sucks you have a girlfriend.

[TOM doesn’t answer.]

LIZZY: Tom?

TOM: Yes?
LIZZY: What would happen if you beat Pardee?

TOM: He's the best player in the world.

LIZZY: I mean, would you kiss me? Or would you say the same thing Pardee did? About having a girlfriend?

TOM: If I beat Pardee at basketball? Jesus. Yeah, I'd kiss you.

LIZZY: You would? Even with a girlfriend?

TOM: If I beat Pardee that would change my whole life. Wouldn't that mean I was in the NBA?

LIZZY: Maybe. I guess I mean what if you got lucky. Somehow. Like, if the trick hoop worked and Pardee couldn't score on you. Or if he was sick, or had two broken legs. Would you kiss me then?

TOM: Would you want me to?

[TOM looks at LIZZY’s head. Smells it.]

LIZZY: Okay. Forget it.

TOM: Forget what?

LIZZY: You know what.

TOM: You mean kissing?

LIZZY: Jeez, Tom.

TOM: God, I . . . Damn it! Why can’t I not have a girlfriend right now?

LIZZY: You tell me.

TOM: [Takes LIZZY by the shoulders.] You know what a guy with guts would do right now? Not some wussy, but a guy who--

LIZZY: I don’t know anything about guys.

[TOM shakes LIZZY’s shoulders.]
LIZZY: We should go back inside.

TOM: Do you think I'm a wussy? Tell me right now if that's what you think!

LIZZY: [Faces camera. Spotlight hits them.] Hi everybody. Can you believe the view from up here? That glow way over there--that's New York City! Anyway, the school roof was the place everybody went to skip class. Not me, of course! [Winks.] And no, I can't tell you how to get up here. Principal Joyce sure would like to know, but it's a secret. Just like everything that happens up here. The seniors told us when we were freshman: What happens on the roof stays on the roof. Can you imagine, Tom, if this roof could tell stories?

[TOM looks at hands.]

LIZZY: I guess one story wouldn't hurt. But you didn't hear this from me, okay? This girl was my best friend. I'd tell you her name, but she's going to Columbia next year and this isn't the kind of story that would make anybody want to be friends with her. But anyway, if you take a condom from the machine in the bathroom and fill it with--

[TOM grabs LIZZY. They struggle. LIZZY wheels arms, grabs TOM's crotch, twists. TOM falls into LIZZY, licks her neck, grabs her head, kisses her. They kiss. TOM collapses beneath camera.]
LIZZY: What do you guys think? Do I have a new boyfriend or what? All I ask is that everybody out there—please don’t tell people what you just saw. Because what happens on the roof stays on the roof. Now I’m going to ask all the guys in the camera crew to give me and my new boyfriend just a couple minutes alone. Thanks guys! Eastchester High, I love you! Mom and Dad! [Blows kiss.] Everybody at home! We’ll be right back!

TOM: [Off-screen.] I love you, Liz! I’m not a--

[Cut sound. Zoom-in on LIZZY. Pause on smile. Pan to stars. Insert “shooting star” graphic. Cut to commercial.]

* * *

[Cut to Title-screen. Announcer Voice-over: “Will Lizzy give us more DIRT on the roof? Or will we have to use our imaginations like always? Throw us a bone, Lizzy!” Cut to school hallway. LIZZY and TOM holding hands before girls bathroom door.]

LIZZY: Welcome back! We’re almost done with our tour of Eastchester High—my home away from home for the last four years. I don’t know about you, Tom, but I’ve been crying almost every night. High school only happens once, you know? [LIZZY pauses, lost in thought, stares past camera.] So anyway, what would a trip through school be without a bathroom break? With all this excitement, I don’t think I can hold it any longer!
LIZZY: Where do you think you’re going?

TOM: The bathroom?

LIZZY: Don’t you know how to read? This says “girls.” That means me. There’s a boys bathroom somewhere else.

LIZZY: [Echoing from inside.] Normally I’d be talking to one of my girlfriends in here. Sherry. Karin. Maybe Michelle. You’re supposed to be peeing, but most of the time we just talk. I don’t know. What do you think about Tom? He seems like really nice guy, doesn’t he? At first he was nice anyway. I don’t know. What do you think? Did I make a mistake? God, I just don’t know. He’s an okay kisser. But all he ever talks about is rigs. Boring, right? Oh no! Do you think it’s just a rebound relationship? I hate rebound relationships! Why do there have to be rebound relationships? Why can’t people just be mature and express themselves honestly? I think he might still like that girl he was just dating. God, I hate her. And Jean Granger! He probably still likes her too. Rigs and Jean Granger are all he wants to talk about. I don’t know. Is he cute enough for me? He was
dating Jean Granger. I mean, not that she’s so great. I don’t know. How about I flip a coin, and if it’s heads I stay with him, and if it’s tails we have to break up? Does anybody have a quarter?

CHAD: [Off-screen.] I’ve got a dime.

LIZZY: [Echoing from inside.] Thanks, Chad.

[HAND appears under STALL DOOR. CHAD kneels, drops dime in HAND, ducks away.]

LIZZY: [Echoing from inside.] Oh my God! It went in the toilet! Jeez, does anybody have another one?

RICHARD: [Off-screen.] Can you still see the dime in there?

LIZZY: [Echoing from inside.] I don’t know, just a second.

[Laughing off-screen.]

LIZZY: [Echoing from inside.] Yes! I can see it. Barely. Is money supposed to float? It’s getting sucked away—but wait . . . it’s a heads, and that means . . . [Sighs.] I have to stay with him. Which really means I have to break up with him. You see, everybody, I had to
let fate decide it for me. Only by doing that could I really know what my feelings deep
down in my heart were. If those feelings were happy with fate, I would know Tom and I
were meant to be together. But if I was disappointed in fate . . . and I am disappointed . . .
then I have to say goodbye.

[LIZZY opens stall door, walks through bathroom. Camera follows. TOM appears. Camera
focuses on TOM’s face over LIZZY’s shoulder.]

LIZZY: Tom, there’s something I need to--

TOM: No. I’ve got something to say.

LIZZY: Is it important? Because mine’s really important.

TOM: It’s important.

LIZZY: Well, okay. I bet that mine’s more important than yours, but go ahead.

TOM: Then maybe you should go first.

LIZZY: I don’t know if I can go now. Now I’m all set to have you go first. God, why is
this so hard? Why can’t life be simple, like it was back in high school?
TOM: What are you trying to say?

LIZZY: I thought it over, and I like you so much as a--

TOM: If you say friend I'll kill you.

LIZZY: Oh, Tom. We just come from different worlds. It's not our fault. Fate brought us together for one brief night on national TV. But it was a special night. I'll always remember it, okay?

[Zoom-in on TOM's face.]

LIZZY: I understand if you hate me. God, you wouldn't be the first. I mean, I even understand if you want to kill me. Because we're friends, Tom. And there's nothing you can do about that. Make all the faces you want, but you know deep down it's true. I just want you to know I don't blame you for anything, okay? You've had to deal with a lot lately. Graduation was hard enough by itself. Pardee and I understand that. But you, Tom-you had it even worse. Maybe the worst of any person in the history of high school. Because even though you've tried to move on and date some new people, you're still in love with Jean Granger. And even if I'm your best friend, Tom, I can't help you get over her.
[LIZZY moves to hug TOM. LIZZY’s head snaps back. TOM grasp’s LIZZY’s neck. LIZZY attempts to kick TOM between legs. She falls. TOM follows, hands on neck. Zoom-in on HANDS. LIZZY bites at air. Blinks. One HAND releases neck. LIZZY watches HAND hover above chin. THUMB and FINGERS drive into LIZZY’s neck. LIZZY’s tongue protrudes from lips. Tongue disappears as THUMB and FINGERS draw esophagus from neck. LIZZY closes mouth. Cheeks puff. HANDS with ESOPHAGUS leave screen. LIZZY spits BLOOD. Zoom-out. CHEST rises, falls, stops. Zoom-in on BLOODY HEAD. Pan up to TOM.

[Whispering off screen.]

TOM: [Squinting at camera.] You want me to say something?

RICHARD: [Off-screen. Semi-audible.] Tell us how you killed Jean!

TOM: I didn’t kill Jean.

RICHARD: [Off-screen. Semi-audible.] Come on! We’ve got one minute left!

[TOM looks down. Pan down to BLOODY HEAD. TOM’s shoe lifts, nudges shoulder. BLOOD pours from mouth.]

CHAD: [Off-screen.] Oh, dear.
TOM: [Off-screen.] It was my turn. [Pan up to TOM.] Everybody had their turn. I was the only one left. You even went with Fat Wayne before me. But I wasn’t going to mess it up like everybody else. I wasn’t going to treat you like an animal. Don’t you remember our kiss? At the Gravel Pit? Wasn’t that perfect enough for you? I didn’t even try and touch you during it. I just let the kiss happen. Man, it felt like I ate a whole steak after that kiss. I dare you to tell me that kiss didn’t impress you. I treated you like a lady, and you know it. During the kiss I only touched you between the wrist and elbow. Okay, I touched your knee once. But I took my hand right off! And what about my eyes? Where did they look? Straight into yours! Your knee--come on, Jean. That was an accident. You can’t hold that against me. I was a perfect gentleman, and your knee was almost touching mine anyway. If it means anything, I can still feel your knee on my hand. But that kiss . . . And I listened to everything you had to say. You said you had to leave town, but you wouldn’t tell me why. What was wrong Jean? Didn’t I listen to you? Wasn’t it my turn? And it was an accident when I touched your knee! Give me another turn with you and I’ll never touch you again. How could you forget that kiss? How could you--


[TOM smiles, chest explodes. BODY spins, falls upon OTHER BODY. Bullets rattle BODIES. POLICEMEN 1 and 2 run to BODIES, kneel, touch. ROBERT steps to foreground, hands behind back.]
ROBERT: As the director of “F’in’ Around With Lizzy Hitchcock,” I would like to offer our deepest apologies to the underage viewer group that just witnessed the final segment of this episode. I guarantee that each and every moment of this program was unrehearsed and completely real. As a journalist, I am honored to have been part of what will undoubtedly be the most important moment in television history. I would first like to thank my dedicated camera man, Chad, for his calm hand and ever-present intuition in following the most difficult of stories. Chad, please.

CHAD: [Jumps on-screen. Waves.] Thanks everybody. [Jumps off-screen.]

ROBERT: Now, before we begin to put the pieces back together in this horrible tragedy, let me offer this word of commentary. [Clears throat.] When I was a teenager myself--

[POLICEMAN 1 pushes ROBERT aside.]

POLICEMAN 1: He’s still alive! Out of the way! He’s still--

[Gun shot.]

POLICEMAN 2: [Rising in background.] Not any more, Sarge.

POLICEMAN 1: What’d you do? Kill him again?
POLICEMAN 2: [Shrugs shoulders, replaces gun in holster.] Just following orders, sir.


POLICEMAN 1: This is official police business. [Points gun at camera.] You turn this thing off right now.

ROBERT: Don’t listen to him, Chad! You’re the best in the business! We’ll sue them for everything they’re worth! You--

POLICEMAN 1: You’re tampering with the crime scene. That’s a federal offense. [Cocks.] You’re in the line of fire.

ROBERT: This is my career, Chad! Don’t do this to me! God came down and gave us this moment! Don’t ruin it for--

[Static.]
THE WIDOW WORKMAN

Kathy King
Wednesday, 8:25 p.m. Hectorville Community Hospital, Room 119.

Ah'm feeling faint! What a horrible, horrific scene mah eyes have just witnessed! Mah eyes are . . . They blew holes through him until he was just a pile of mush! Oh my God I’m gonna barf . . . Ah mean, isn’t it a shame about young Mr. Workman? Dear, oh dear, the things that happen on the television . . . But that asshole cheated on me! I was only doing him a favor by being his stupid girlfriend, and then he--Gross! He put those same bloody hands on my . . . Mr. Hoffkins, dear, do you have handkerchief for a young lady to borrow? Ah feel mah eyes beginning to water and . . . You’re crying? You’re crying?

Who’s stupid boyfriend just got executed! MINE! I get to cry! Shut up for a minute so I can can . . . Pardon me, Mr. Hoffkins, but mah crying muscles must be fatigued from all the hard work they did yesterday at acting school. If you’ll please just allow me one moment of silence to dwell upon poor Mr. Workman . . . SHUT UP! . . . Or, dear, if you can’t stop making so much noise, would you be a darling and slap me a couple times across mah face? Some pain might just do the trick . . . Oh! Wait! Wait. I almost got it. Okay, let me try it now . . . HA! HA! HA! . . . Damn it, that was laughing! What’s wrong with me? . . . Sir! Try to be a man about this! You are in the presence of a sophisticated . . . God I hate your stinking guts. How can it be so easy for you to cry? You know what I think? I think you’re not even crying for Tom anymore. I bet you’re crying for Jean Granger! Do you know how many times I had to cry on demand because of that dead
bitch? God, Jean Granger! Do you know how many times I had to act like I gave a flying-
-
-Uh . . . uhhh . . . YES! They’ve finally arrived! Tears, Mr. Hoffkins! . . . uhhh . . .
But Ah’m feeling faint . . . Would you kindly make space on your bed . . . uhhh . . . for a
weak young lady . . . uhhh . . . with no man left in the world . . . uhhhhnnn . . . to console
her . . . Please, Mr. Hoffkins . . . before . . . Ah . . . colap--
Part 5
But I had a girlfriend before Michelline—one who pulled my hair on the bus and always made huge claims about who she was related to. This was back in fifth grade, and on the day we met her claim was about some guy nobody’d ever heard of. Andy Rooney. I wasn’t involved in this though. I was just looking out my window, like I did every morning, chopping down all the trees next to the road. I had a long knife on a swivel—not too heavy—that I held above the bus and spun around. I’d get mailboxes too. Telephone poles. Houses. Sometimes there’d be an adult at the end of the driveway, and I’d take his hat off. If it was somebody’s mom, I’d chop her bangs off. On the day we met, though, I was suddenly lifted from my seat and my knife disced off into a field. Her small hand was knurled up at my scalp, and for the rest of the ride I was victim to her swings and gestures as she screamed, _ANDY ROONEY’S MY GRANDPA’S GRANDPA!_ But the boys on the bus were sick of this stuff. They said, “Andy Rooney’s gotta be rich, and your t-shirt’s got yellow armpits and it’s the same t-shirt you wore yesterday.” _Is not! I have two of these t-shirts!_ Not that I could see the t-shirt. All I saw was everybody else on the bus looking at me for the first time ever. The bus was dim on the inside, and the boys were piled-up together, their faces cold and red. She was crying by then, but she still wouldn’t let go of my head, which was numb now. I didn’t know her name then. I don’t remember it now. But they called us boyfriend and girlfriend after that day, and she always sat behind me. I think I had an easier time of it, but it didn’t have to be that way. The trees were there for her to chop down too, and I would’ve shown her how to do it if she asked me. But she liked her fight, and I don’t think she cared if it involved me or not. Some days were worse for her than others though. She’d still be too sleepy to handle five of them at once, or her
t-shirt was so obviously the same t-shirt as yesterday that even a girl would say something. But she had her perfect days too. There were fat kid on the bus, and she let them know it. Boys ten seats away, picking their noses, eating it, and she saw them in the bus driver’s mirror. She could smell a fart and pin it on a person quicker than anybody I ever saw. And I was chopping down houses for her.

But maybe she was too good at the fight. The final days of us being boyfriend and girlfriend were the toughest, because the pile of boys knew that picking on me was easier than taking their chances with her, so they shifted their attention completely. The knife on my swivel was slow and lopsided then. I’d be sitting there for minutes, waiting for it to circle back around, a whole half-mile of things not getting chopped. But then for a couple days--wonderful days--she rescued me from them. But I never turned and looked at her. Not once. Not even when they put gum in her hair, and the next second she caught me drooling against my window. The boys must have seen it too, but decided to sit back and watch. She was still supposed to be my girlfriend then, but I’ll never forget her laugh: like somebody punched her in the stomach and she couldn’t breathe.

I tried to chop off her head after that, but bringing the knife inside the bus was something I just couldn’t do. It was the thought of killing all those other girls--the ones who did nothing but whisper--and the thought of their parents, and what they would think. Even my girlfriend’s parents. And her grandparents. But I took a swing at her once anyway. When the bus driver was yelling for her to sit down in her seat. My knife should’ve sliced right through her belly, but when it spun back to me it was all chewed up and broken, and I never chopped anything down again. And she wasn’t my girlfriend...
anymore because that happened on the last day of school. Then it was summer vacation, and for three months I had nothing to do but forget about her.

* * *

This morning I woke up with a stupid feeling in my head. Usually when I remember my dreams it makes me want to do something right away, but this dream just makes me want to keep sleeping. But I can’t sleep, because I’m still covered in pain from last night when Johnny choked a ring of bruises onto my neck. Then, for the first time in my life, I think I need to draw myself just to know what I look like. I pull out a fresh notebook, sharpen a new pencil, and when I go to make my neck the pencil flinches an inch from the paper. On the next the lead cuts through four sheets, then busts off. So I grab another pencil--but Man!--it’s all over, because I can’t even remember the right way to hold it, and now that blank sheet of paper is so horrible-looking the only thing left to look at is myself in the mirror, and that’s when I finally figure out the truth: Jesse Livery lost his genius. Not only that, but somewhere in the noisy background I overhear my entire life from this point forward: “Is that all today?” and “Thank you for shopping Livery’s,” and Man! I got to get that genius back! I reel through my memory for the last drawing I ever made, but my heart’s going crazy because everything seems to have vanished overnight. Except for her. The drawing of the girl named Michelline. And somehow I even have directions to her house.
So I’m sprinting through the door marked PRIVATE when the scene in Livery’s halts me. There’s Mom and Dad, sitting behind the counter, talking to a girl about the summer job of sitting behind the counter. They all turn to look at me, and the only difference between me and Mom and Dad is that Mom has long hair. Even the blond girl looks like a Livery. I stand there for just ten seconds, but somehow my brain is already registering what a sixty-hours work-week means—“Is that all today?” and “Thanks you for shopping Livery’s”—and I’m slamming through the front door, but not fast enough to miss Dad’s goodbye, “Come again!” and then Mom’s, “Have a nice day!”

But I’m jetting through the Livery’s parking lot even quicker. Every square inch is consumed with slow-moving rigs, most of them blowing their horns at the stupid kid who loved to chase them around every morning before school. Their noise enters my head from every opening, and when I’m cornered by two sad-looking riggers, waving to me, I grab hold of a distant memory from just last week: Filling my hands with all this rig-noise and shovelling it into my backpack for Ms. Itty-Hampton’s class. But a long horn-blast erases the thought completely. I’m left standing pitifully with hands lighter than exhaust fumes, but even worse—I suddenly feel what it’s like to sit in the same position all day, and how it must be to know the highway so well all you see are its flaws.

But Michelline’s house is on the other side of that highway, and I’m booking across the over-pass, drawing stares from every motor vehicle until—Man!—it’s my favorite road sign, and maybe I’m still a genius after all: DETROIT, because for a long second I’m telling myself, *What the heck is DETROIT?* For all I know if you drive long enough in that direction you’ll see a vertical black cloud rising in the distance, and that’s
DETROIT. It’s where a million cars go every day to battle, but only hardest come back alive. And if I stand on this over-pass long enough some lady-rigger’s sure to pull over, crank down her window, and ask me, “DETROIT?” and I’ll say, “Yes, ma’am!” because once you get to DETROIT everything is— . . . Man. It’s the same stupid feeling I woke up with. Because I’ve seen enough pictures of Detroit to know that it’s nothing but a city. Just like Hectorville, only wider. And if Detroit is so great, why are just as many cars moving in the opposite direction? So I’m glad when I run so far I can’t see that stupid road sign anymore—when I’m finally in the country-side, where it’s slow and quiet, and it feels okay to just walk and think.

But for somebody with serious things to think about, walking turns out to be the worst thing possible. Because now I realize it’s stupid to think backwards in time, because memories never changed anything. And besides, I have less and less of them every second. So now the only thing to do is think forward in time. But that’s a drag too because now I need to know who’s going to call me the phone when Mom dies. So I decide a dream is somewhere between backward and forward—even if dreams are ultimately the most stupid form of thinking there is—but still, I want to hang onto the one I woke up with this morning. So I stop walking and think, but somehow my brain is locked into future-mode, where it’s important to know which college I know for sure I’ll get into if all the other ones reject me, so finally I close my eyes, but that just shuts everything down completely, and I’m only left with a picture of the field I was just staring at. Fine then. That’s what I’ll work with. It’s not a bad field. Lots of green grass. A hill off to the side. But wait! Man— I’ve got an idea. I’m going to use my brain and set a tree
down in the middle of that field. And I don’t mean a little tree. This tree is huge. So huge I can throw a house up on top if I want to. So huge that the tree itself breaks the curve of the earth. I’m talking about a tree that Michelline and I can call our home, and--and there it is! I put that tree in the field just by thinking about it! It’s the biggest tree ever! It’s--

But when I open my eyes, of course, the tree’s sitting in the middle of the field. And even though I’m trying to tell myself I never once noticed that tree before, the truth is that when I was riding in Johnny’s Ford on the way to Michelline’s house, Johnny pointed out the window and said, “Fucking tree out there.” So all I did was steal the tree from Johnny. And it’s not a house-tree anyway. It’s a fucking-tree. And the next thing I’m thinking is that maybe I’ve never really cried before this moment. Sure, I created tears a few times—for Dad, usually—but the tears never took control of my whole body the way these are doing. It’s almost like being a genius again, the way it leaves you feeling not as stupid as you were before. But after that I feel pretty stupid again, maybe a little smaller too. And I decide not to think about anything else until I’m inside Michelline’s house, drawing her up and down.

So I don’t even break a step when I see her empty driveway. Her plain white house. The second story window, blinds drawn, where Michelline is sleeping. I just open the front door and walk inside. But I don’t expect to see what I see. Because I’m done trying to trick myself into believing I can do the stupid, made-up things I used to think I could do—but still, how can I explain a framed photograph of Michelline twenty years into the future? Her hair is shorter then, black like it used to be, and her cheeks are almost entirely gone. I have to stop my mouth from forming the word “Wow!” because she’s
sitting on the hood of a huge red rig, smiling at the camera. And of course, I have to stop my brain from telling the other parts of my body that it's my huge red rig, on our wedding day, because of course—as I knew the whole time, really--this is just a picture of Michelline's Mom, sitting on a rig for fun, and all I'm doing is stalling.

But at a certain step on the stairs to her bedroom, I lose the name of girl I'm climbing to see. I don't know--the girl whose mom likes rigs. The girl who's going to put the genius back in my head. She's just gone. But it's not a sad feeling. Not really. Because I still want to see her, whoever she is, and introduce myself and know every last detail about her--but it will just have to happen at a later date. So when I push through her bedroom door, and the bedroom has not a single girl in it--honestly?--I'm nothing but relieved. Because a plan of action just replaced all those useless memories and drawings that were just taking up space. It's a one-to-two-year plan, requiring that I record in my notebook all the information contained in this girl's bedroom, and--Man!--just look: There are three different magazines lying on the floor, all open to articles telling a girl how to read a boy's thoughts by watching what his hands do. That's helpful to know.

Then there are the posters on her walls--posters of boys doing different things, but mostly leaning, against walls, with their hands in their pockets. So I'll write down the names of these boys and next week I'll do some research in the library to figure out why this girl admires them so much. But I can't overlook her giant bedroom mirror and all the make-up bottles on the dresser beneath it. If I record which bottles are the emptiest, maybe next month I can buy new make-up bottles as gifts for her. But the gold mine of information will certainly come from the piles of this girl's clothes, which are spaced tellingly across
her floor. First I’ll draw a map of the whole bedroom. Then I’ll note the proximity of each pile in terms of the giant mirror. And after cataloging each article in a given pile, I should be able to generalize which types of clothes this particular girl likes best. And of course, the clothes in her closet will receive a score of zero out of five points. I can barely keep the smile off my face, sitting on the edge of this girl’s bed—halfway through the first of the 27 piles—when the sound of a car in the driveway rattles the bedroom window, and I see a pair of giant hands grabbing for my face—I freeze without a scream—and the next thing I know I’m clutching my own neck, fallen to the floor, gasping for breath as outside two car doors open, then shut.

“I don’t know, Mishie. I guess I have to admit it was a bit overrated. But, I mean, the newspaper had me thinking this would be Oscar-material the way they reviewed it.”

“John, for the record, the newspaper gave it an 8. There were three other movies with 9’s or 10’s. But I’m not saying anything.”

“But did those other movies have even a fraction of the budget this one had? How was I supposed to know the producers would spend every last penny on special effects and those huge stars. Well, I knew about the stars. But what happened to buying a good script?”

“I don’t want to say it, John. But I told you so. Last night I said this movie was going to be a dud. But look—how about we don’t make this be our first fight, and just stop talking about it, okay?
"So it was a dud. I’m man enough to admit that. It was my first at-bat and I struck out. Go ahead and say you never want to see me again. But at least it was a matinee and we didn’t pay full price."

"Yeah."

"And what else were you going to do this morning, huh?"

"I guess I’m just saying that after you told me how great the preview was, I pretty much already knew the entire movie."

"You did not know the entire movie."

"Ryan Edwards’ character—the one you thought was awesome and who, at the end, turned out to really be dead the whole movie . . . I knew he was dead before we even sat down."

"No way."

But by the time they’re up the stairs and sitting on the girl’s bed, I’ve already forgotten why my heart is pounding like a jack-hammer into the carpet beneath them. But hearing her voice, mysterious and so close, my hands go numb and I can’t even touch the box-spring under her legs anymore.

"But you can’t deny, Mishie, that the film was doing something pretty original with all those special effects. It would be impossible to know that Dave Templeton was still alive without a bullet’s-eye-view of his heart still beating after he was shot. I mean--"

"Wait a minute. I’m sorry, John. I know we just met each other a few days ago, but did you just call that movie a ‘film’? Because I hate to be this girl, but to me there’s a huge difference between a ‘film’ and a ‘movie’."
“So you’re saying that this positively wasn’t a film?”

“I’m sorry, but no it wasn’t. But let’s not have this be our first fight, okay? Please?”

“Let me tell you what I hope. I hope you have a strict system you’re using to judge these . . . what? . . . motion-pictures?--can we agree on that?--to decide if they’re films or not. Can you answer that question?”

“You didn’t ask a question.”

“Lord. My question is, do you have a criteria for--”

“Fine. Yes I do. Here’s my answer. If, before a movie starts, I know exactly how the movie will--”

“Motion-picture.”

“God. Sorry. Motion-picture. If I know exactly how the motion-picture will end before I even sit down to watch it, then that motion-picture is a movie, not a film. Not that movies are bad or anything, okay?”

“Film. Movie. Whatever. Can I just make my point?”

“There was a point?”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Johnny.”

“Just kidding. Really? My point was about special effects.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Because why would there be an Oscar category for special effects if they didn’t matter?”
“I think there should be an Oscar category for cutest guy in a movie theater.”

“I was being serious, but thank you. I think you’re cute too.”

And they go silent. Almost silent. The boy clears his throat. He says, “Hmm?” and something scratches the bedroom wall. The girl wets something. There’s five seconds where both of them completely reposition their feet. And then, for longer than I can hold my breath, they are completely noiseless—so much that I go blind in my right eye. Finally they start breathing through their noses again, and after five minutes of that, the girl whispers “Johnny?”—but that’s also when I feel it in my spine. A low rumbling in the carpet, and I can’t stop a strange grin from stretching across my face. But then my brain grabs hold of the only real memory left—a person—and now I’ve got her by the ears: My eighth-grade teacher, Ms. Itty-Hampton!

“Mishie, who’s that in the driveway?”

“That’s him! It’s--”

Ms. Itty-Hampton nods her head to the roar of the engine. Her cheeks swell as it gets louder. When the horn blows, long and low, her cheeks go green. And that’s another thing I suddenly know: Green is my favorite color! The engine screams and the boy’s toes hit the floor, dancing in place—too scared to let his heels touch down.

“God, John. What are you going to do, jump out the window? Just act like yourself and you’ll be great. He’s a modern guy. Not as mean as he looks, okay?”

“I only get one chance to make a first impression, you know? Modern or not. Lord, are my sideburns really this long? I need to tuck my shirt in.”
But the roar snaps--suddenly nothing--the cheeks pop and I don’t have a favorite color anymore. I’m just under this bed again, cold, with two pairs of feet caressing each other inches from my ear. A door opens somewhere. A high-pitched voice echoes through it. “LEENY?” And all I can do is taste sawdust on the back of my tongue.

“UP HERE, DADDY!”

“Mishie, I hope you know I can’t even dribble a basketball.”

“But do you like me, John?”

“I love you.”

“Then show my dad, and everything will be perfect. Okay?”

And no matter how much sense it makes that this sawdust shouldn’t be filling up in my mouth, I can’t seem to think it away to anywhere else. My nose is stopped-up with it. It’s pushing like a cork down my throat. Even my eyes are bulging

“Sir, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Leeny?”

“Daddy, this is John. John, this is Daddy.”

“John, you’re the owner of that Ford in my driveway, correct?”

“Daddy, please--”

“It’s just a question, Leeny. Let the boy answer.”

“Yes, sir. That is my Ford out in the driveway.”

“Good cars, Ford. But you see, John, when the member’s of this family aren’t driving rig, we’re driving Chevy. That’s the way it’s always been, straight down the line.
That's the way it's gonna keep going. It's a long line, John. So I've got just one question for you--"

"This is so embarrassing."

"Leeny, will you let the boy answer his own question for once?"

"You didn't even ask a question, Dad!"

"Sir, that Ford is as good as in the junk yard."

"But Johnny! That was your dad's Ford!"

"Son, is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then she must means a lot to you."

"Sir, if you are talking about your daughter, she means everything to me."

"Oh, Johnny."

"Leeny, I don't need to know anything else about this young man. Do you have anything to say?"

"Daddy, I know I only met John a couple days ago, but let me just say that nobody's ever made me feel so--"

And the last thing I feel is this: My hands, so empty they're floating up against the box-spring . . . A tingle in my nose . . . A burst of green . . . And after recoiling from the best sneeze of my life, I blink and take a deep breath. I rub my hands together. They weigh about a hundred pounds each. I look from side to side. And okay--because I'm lying right next to my dead body and it's smiling at me.

"Did you kids hear something?"
“Sounded like a bird outside. When birds have babies they get protective and do that. That’s what I heard in biology class anyway.”

“Probably a blue-jay, sir.”

“I don’t know. I thought that sounded like a sneeze. Maybe I’m crazy.”

And I can’t help but smile too, looking at my own face like this. But what I want to do is touch it. Of course I know that’s impossible--because if I’m looking at me, and the me I want to touch is dead, then how can I still be alive? And sure enough, my hand floats right through my face and out the back of my head. But it doesn’t feel like absolutely nothing inside me. It’s about like sticking my hand in the FROZEN SNACKS cooler at Livery’s: Great fun, and I always wonder how long I can go for--but the whole time I know it’s something Mom would tell me to stop doing the second she saw me. So I take my hand out, give my happy face a final nod, and then stand up through Michelline’s bed.

And, of course, even though there are three other people in the room, none of them look at me--even when I’m standing right in the middle of them. They all look like actors in a middle school play, trying to be people I know, but doing a very boring job of it. And even though I’m certain that talking to them won’t work, I still feel the need to yell into the face of Hair-Style Johnny: “Take your hands off my girl!” Of course, he doesn’t even blink. He just keeps rubbing Half-Michelline’s shoulder and frowning at the Small One, who’s explaining how amazing a rigger Half-Michelline’s mother was before the Great Wreck of four years ago, which took her life. The Small One is by far the smallest rigger I’ve ever seen--so small he looks like a fake. And he must be the only
rigger on earth who just smiles and blushes when a boy gives his daughter a kiss on the
mouth. So, of course, I put my fist through the middle of Hair-Style Johnny’s head, but he
keeps talking anyway—outlining, for the Small One, his ten-year plan, which includes
buying a modest home and making sound financial investments, all in order to support
Half-Michelline. And once I start looking at her, I freeze and can’t turn away. But it’s not
her loveliness that’s got me—it’s her cheeks, which are so impossibly thin I don’t even
know how I’d draw them. “Michelline,” I say, “What did Johnny do to you last night?”
But she just shivers under Hair-Style’s arm—her eyelids shiver too—and even though it’s
pointless, I can’t stop my hand from reaching out and trying to warm those dead-white
cheeks.

But she flinches. She blinks. And Man!—What just happened? She’s looking right
at me!

“God, Jesse! What are you doing here?” And her cheeks are huge now—bouncing
with blood and air—and Michelline grabs my shirt collar and shakes the answer out of me.

“I stopped by to say hello.”

“How long have you been standing here?”

“I don’t know. A while. I was under the bed, and then—”

“Jeez!” But then Michelline leans in close—I sniff her blond shampoo—and
whispers, “You gotta act cool, okay?” then turns around and says, “Dad, this is my weirdo
friend, Jesse. Please don’t kill him.”

But the Small One doesn’t hear her. In fact, the Small One is just staring—oh Man-
at Half-Michelline, who’s now just a dead puppet under Hair-Style Johnny’s arm—her
eyes gone cross-eyed, her mouth in a horrible frown—and Michelline sees herself too, and—oh Man!--this wasn’t the plan at all.

“Jesse,” Michelline whispers. “Who is that?”

“I’m so sorry. I was walking through your bed. Your cheeks were so thin. I—”

“Is that supposed to be me?”

“Kind of. Maybe.”

“JESSE!”

But then Half-Michelline slips out of Hair-Style’s grip. Her limp body smacks the floor. Her head is turned the wrong way. Nobody says a word. All four of us that are still standing, or whatever, go frozen just staring at Half-Michelline’s unbearable frown. The Small One thaws first. He crumbles to his knees and domes his small chest over hers.

“Leeny! Leeny!” His tiny hands try shaking life back into her—gently at first, but then harder as it gets clearer she’s just dead. Hair-Style Johnny is next to unfreeze, but all he does is faint to Michelline’s bed. Trying to stay frozen as long as possible, I accidentally thaw-out right after Hair-Style. I look out the window for a second, but I guess I should say something.

“Sorry?”

“My dad thinks I’m dead!”

“Did you try talking to him?”

Michelline slowly kneels beside the Small One. She whispers: “Daddy?” but that just starts him shaking with tears, so, in a panic, Michelline—oh Man!—swipes a hand through his back. I watch her mouth change as she feels his heart from the inside, and for
a second she looks like she might laugh—but instead she pukes through Hair-Style’s legs, and then it’s all screaming: “I’m dead! I’m dead!”

“Michelline? Let’s take a deep breath and try not to jump to conclusions.”

“Murderer! Killer!”

“Okay then.”

And that’s pretty much our back and forth for the next hour. Hair-Style Johnny wakes up at one point and takes a quick look around the room—stopping on Half-Michelline’s frown—screams “Lord!” and faints down again. Then, for about a minute, I have Michelline convinced that this is all a big dream, and when she wakes up she’ll never have to look at my ugly face again. She stops bawling to think about it, but it just takes one look at the Small One—and her saying, “But that’s not even my dad! He’s too small!”—and she’s back to wishing I was so dead I was really dead. Fair enough. But at this point I’m about to go seriously insane if I spend another second in this bedroom, so I say to her, “I’m getting some fresh air,” and that, by some miracle, clicks with her. Michelline follows me through the wall, and we’re sitting in a quiet tree next to her house. We each have our own branch.

“The air’s pretty much the same, isn’t it?” I say. “Outside. Inside. Are we even breathing?”

“I don’t care.”

“I couldn’t tell if we were breathing or not.”

But this is what I came here for. Who knows how long it will last? Forever? Well. I’ll discuss that with Michelline at a better time. First we need to think about flying over
to the Fucking Tree, where I'll start building our house, and probably have it roughed-in by dinnertime. Of course, I'll need to consult Michelline—when she's ready—about what her favorite color is, and if she likes sleeping in a little nook of a bedroom or some huge expanse without walls or a ceiling. My hands need to work so badly they're about to pop, and what I'd love more than anything would be to fly there right now and at least scope out a nice limb for the front porch. But it's not the time. Not when the girl who I'm building the thing for can't stop staring through her old bedroom window—at her old dad, who's still weeping over her old dead body. Man. At one point I even catch Michelline squeezing her neck, trying to choke herself to the next level of dead. But it doesn't work, obviously, and I can't say it cheers me up to see that she's staring through that window again.

"Doesn't it even feel kind-of good, Michelline? Did you try flying around or anything?"

"Haven't you learned my name?"

"Sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I don't feel like a person anyway."

"But you look like a beautiful woman."

"Who's going to look at me?"

"I will."

"Who else?"

"I don't know."

"Other dead people?"
“Maybe.”

“That’s just stupid.”

* * *

Looking back on it, I don’t think I even did anything. I just sort of flexed my hands in a certain way—I’m not even sure how—but a certain way that sort of wished Michelline wasn’t dead with me anymore. I don’t even think I wished it in actual words. Maybe it had something to do with a house crumbling out of a tree, which was the picture in my head when Michelline started sliding back toward her bedroom window. She didn’t scream, or say my name—just gave me a look. And Michelline’s last look is the first thing I’m drawing when I get done with my house-project. It was the loveliest look she ever gave me—cheeks as round as the earth—because in it she already knew what was about to happen. I didn’t even have to watch it myself. I just listened as her dad shouted for the whole country-side to hear, “She’s alive! Oh, fuck! She’s alive!”

But I’m still dead, of course. Right now it’s the next morning, and I can truthfully say that alive-dreaming is a lot more peaceful than what I went through last night. I woke up in the middle of some field, all kinds of things piled around me—things I can’t even remember dreaming: a pillow as big as a house, a map of outer-space, a couple empty King Kobras, school pictures of Johnny and Michelline’s kids. But then there were the hard things to look at—things like Mom’s white bathrobe and Dad’s old battle-bat—things I dug a hole for and buried before I could think about them. Oh yeah, and the rigs. They
woke me up, burning rubber around everything. So I got rid of all the junk, and since then we’ve just been riding around the fields, not doing too much.

Eventually we cruise by that Fucking Tree though. It wasn’t an accident. I’ve been more or less staring at it since the Green Machine and I went jumping over this farmer’s barn, and, out of the corner of my eye, all its branches swayed at once and the whole tree seemed to smile. It could’ve been my imagination, I guess. But now me and rigs are catching some shade beneath it, shooting ideas back and forth about where to roll to next--and that’s when I hear the buzzer. The same kind of gym buzzer that would echo through the whole school when a kid was dared to yank on it. And after the buzzer comes a distant cheering crowd. I squint up through the branches, and I can barely make out what seems to be a huge slab of cement stuck at the top of the Fucking Tree. I ask the Green Machine for a lift, and--Whoa, Green Machine!--he flashes his reds and yellows at the same time, which means he knows something I don’t know. Standing on the Green Machine’s trailer--with all the other rigs looking on, nervously rolling back and forth--I can reach the Fucking Tree’s lowest branch. But then it’s easy climbing, and in no time I’m saying hello to people just hanging out up there. A guy and a girl, both a little older than me, sit on one branch. The girl is shuffling some cards in her hands, and the boy is trying to watch those cards with everything he has. The girl gives me a wink, and the cards disappear. Then, a little further up, ten or twelve swimmers are shooting around in a lake of water balled-up at the end of a big branch. I don’t dare get any closer, though, because they’re having a splashing war. Next I say “excuse me” to a boy who doesn’t hear me at
all, and just keeps using a couple ink pens as drumsticks on the trunk of the tree. I sit and watch him for a while.

But when I climb over the edge of that cement slab, I know that this is where I should direct my attention. There’s a basketball court in the middle of the thing, but otherwise it’s acres of bleachers in every direction, with people in most every seat. Some of them have hotdogs and popcorn, chatting in a circle. And a few—the few that are even younger than I am—are making-out on the very top row. Then a buzzer sounds again, and most everybody turns to cheer. The ball is tossed in-bounds, and the players all jump, and it doesn’t look like they’ll land until the game is over. I find an empty seat next to a tall blond girl munching on popcorn. She can’t take her eyes off the game—and I almost feel like I’ve seen her before—but when she whistles and whispers, “Nice steal, man,” I realize, nope—I’ve never seen cheeks like this on anybody. So I start watching the game too, with just one eye though, while the other one organizes some questions to ask this girl at the next time-out. And there might be a rig or two back on the ground that’s afraid of heights, but I can already see a highway looping around every branch up here, going nowhere in particular. I wonder if there’s a law against something like that. And how much does popcorn cost? And not that I’m tired right now, but I’m curious where all these people go when the sun goes down.
Epilogue
[Cut to JEAN GRANGER seated in bright classroom. OTHER STUDENTS at desks, working. 
MAN 1 kisses JEAN’s neck, unbuttons JEAN’s shirt. JEAN stares at camera. Cut to close-up: JEAN’s eye. TEAR forms. Male voice-over: “Searching . Searching Searching for everything and nothing at once.” Cut to JEAN, at free-throw line, holding BASKETBALL. FANS cheering bleachers. JEAN raises BALL above head. Cut to close-up: JEAN’s eye. TEAR rolls down cheek. Cut to BALL swishing through net. Voice-over: “In a world of hungry men, she only needed a man who starved as she did.” Cut to dark alley. BEN WALLACE in fist fight with POLICEMEN 1 - 4. Fade-to red. Fade-to BEN breathing heavily, POLICEMEN lying at feet. Cut to close-up: BEN’s eye. TEAR forms. DIRTY FINGER wipes it away. Voice-over: “But their love was an outrage waiting to happen.” JEAN and BEN kiss in dark living room. Through window, FACES of MEN 1, 2, 3, etc. Cut to close-up: BEN and JEAN’s eyes. TEARS. Voice-over: “And when the breaking point came . it broke them for good.” Cut to JEAN, falling around room. 
Cries: “I’ll do anything you say Ben! Just get me out of here!” BEN runs on-screen, takes JEAN, wipes JEAN’s eyes. Says: “Then tonight we must marry.” Cut to close-up: JEAN’s mouth, TEARS streaming over lips. Smiles. Cut to Title-screen: “A Man Too Many: The Jean Granger Story.” Fade-to TAIL-LIGHTS disappearing into blackness. Voice-over: "This Sunday, 8-Eastern, 7-Central, only on the Triple-R, meet the Jean Granger you’ve only dared to dream about. 
Introducing Kathy King as Jean Granger and Merlin Hoffkins—in what critics are calling the finest two hours of his career—as Ben Wallace.” Cut to BEN ripping SUIT from body. Collapses, naked, on CAR HOOD. Voice-over: “You’ll never been the same again. But don’t say we didn’t warn you.”]
[Cut to Title-screen: “F’in’ Around With Barbara Hitchcock.” Announcer voice-over: “Ben made some pretty whack fashion decisions in the tank-top department, but let’s see how he handles fitting ‘America’s Favorite High School Freshman’ into her new jeans. How’s Mom’s credit card holding up, Barbara?” Cut to Eastchester Mall. BARBARA HITCHCOCK, BEN WALLACE, and PRISON GUARDS 1-11 enter “No Name Outfitters.” BARBARA stops before WALL OF JEANS. BEN brings cuffed hands to face, scratches NOSE. PRISON GUARDS 1 and 2 raise GUNS. BEN smiles. GUARDS lower GUNS.]

BARBARA: This is the only place in the whole world that has jeans that fit me, so if we can’t find any good ones here, then . . . then I don’t know what!

BEN: Don’t worry, Barbara. We’ll find some good jeans here.

BARBARA: Okay.

[BARBARA paces WALL. Gets on tip-toes, looks. Continues pacing. BARBARA stops, points at top row. Whispers inaudibly. BEN steps toward her. PRISON GUARDS 1-11 raise GUNS. BEN freezes, grins. PRISON GUARD 6 reaches, grabs JEANS, gives to BARBARA.]

BARBARA: Let’s go try these on, everybody!
[Cut to fitting room hallway. BEN stands beside DOOR. PRISON GUARDS 1 and 2 hold BEN’s elbows.]

BARBARA: [Inside fitting room.] No peeking over the door, guys!

BEN: Sorry.

BARBARA: [Inside fitting room.] So anyways . . . I hate zippers! . . . I mean, I love them—but one’s that don’t work? . . . Do you want to talk about Jean or anything?

BEN: You’re the boss.

BARBARA: [Inside fitting room.] What was it like to be married?

BEN: It was a marriage. I don’t know. It started out just fine. I got this priest-buddy to do the ceremony. Nothing much. But then Jean wanted to drive straight to Detroit, and well . . . she’d never been there, but she still thought she knew everything about how great that place would be. But see, I knew about this cabin in the woods—out by the Gravel Pit—so that’s where we went next. Yeah, that thing about Detroit—that was our first real fight. I don’t know. I guess the first week of being married was pretty good. Seemed like me and her might even beat that ninety-percent divorce rate. I wanted to beat it, anyway. But Jean
... man, Detroit ... See, there's two people in a marriage and that's probably what's wrong with them.

BARBARA: [Inside fitting room.] My parents almost got divorced once. I shouldn't tell you the details, but I almost ran away. But they got marriage counseling from our church. Now they love each other even more than the day they got married. That's what my dad said.

BEN: I'm not going to argue with you, Barbara. But sometimes a relationship just isn't equal. Love wasn't a problem for me. Jean, on the other hand ... I mean, I know she was a genius at writing poems, but she was absolutely crazy at knowing when I was lying to her. That only happened once, I can tell you that. And I think people have the wrong idea about her sexually. Then suddenly it's two weeks later, I'm in the cabin making breakfast for her, and when I bring it out on the porch--well, she's sitting in her chair, biggest smile you ever seen, and dead. I thought she'd probably split on me first, but nope. Just died. She looked happy, anyway--well, you saw the pictures of her on the news. She died with that same look on her face. Honest, it almost made you happy that she was--

BARBARA: [Inside Fitting room.] Yeah right, Ben! Everybody knows you killed her, you big liar!

BEN: I guess it's your show.
BARBARA: [Bursting through door.] Check me out!

[PRISON GUARDS 1 and 2 open mouths. BARBARA spins in circle, collapses to ground, lies on back. CHEST rises, falls. PRISON GUARD 1 fires through ceiling. BEN smiles.]

BARBARA: Why is shopping so much fun?

BEN: I don't know. Maybe because I get to shop with a pretty girl like you.

BARBARA: And finding these jeans.

BEN: And the jeans. Those are some killer jeans, alright.