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BEFORE OUR WORLDWIDE INTERCONNECTED NETWORKS

IT HADN'T OCCURRED to me to go looking for my father's pornography collection until my friends and me were smoking on the sidewalk across from the senior gymnasium and Billy suggested it. Besides Billy, Darby and Will were there and we were listening to Billy's pool-table story, standing in a kind of circle and huddled to keep the wind and snow from blowing in our faces. Richmond Middle School didn't allow smoking on school property, so at lunch time the teachers crossed the road to light up in the city bus shelter, but since students weren't supposed to be smoking at all, we had to cross the road in the other direction where there was no bus shelter.

"Check your dad's closet on your next weekend," Billy said. "That's a regular hiding spot. Or dresser drawers. Under sweaters."

I nodded at his suggestions and put the cigarette in my mouth to inhale, something I had just learned to do well, but this cigarette was menthol and tasted like wintermint. My socks were wet and cold inside my boots, so I was rocking back and forth and kicking my feet together.

"Yeah, okay." Weekends when I stayed over, my father took the chesterfield in his living room/dining room and I slept in his bedroom, and I didn't think it'd be hard for me to look through his things.

"So the pool table?" Darby said. He was annoyed because Billy couldn't tell a story straight, but jumped from topic to topic on account of his disordered hyperactivity.

"I'm getting to it," Billy said.

He'd found a videotape of his father's two weeks earlier and watched it bit by bit while his parents went to their couples counselling, but then he'd got caught and wasn't allowed to watch television or leave the house except for school or advanced-level three sea otters on Sunday afternoons. The movie had been bloody unreal. Worth being punished for, and Billy had been recapping it for us scene by scene at lunch times.

It was about three escaped convicts who went their separate ways after they'd cut through the prison fence and crawled their way to freedom. The first returned home to his wife who had been waiting for him for years and they had sex. The second hitchhiked across the desert into Mexico where he met a woman living alone in an adobe and they had sex. And the third stumbled into the home of a rich blind woman who lived alone in a secluded mansion.

"And the guy kicks in one of the basement windows and tries to climb in undetected, but she's blind so her hearing's super acute and she can hear the glass breaking even though it's all the way down in the basement. And she comes downstairs and she's wearing one of those short-short frilly nightgowns? That come up almost above the bum?"

"Baby-dolls," Darby said.

"What?"

"They're called baby-doll nighties."

"How do you know what they're called?"

Darby shrugged and said his sister had a pair, and that made me feel uncomfortable.

"Yeah, baby-dolls. So the convict sees her walking around in the baby-dolls and he can see she's blind, so he just stands there watching her as she walks around the rec room, reaching out her arms and calling, *Is anyone there? Is anyone there?* But she thinks she's all alone, so then she's lying on the pool table and she's doing it to herself and the convict's there watching the whole time."

"She's was doing it to herself?" asked Will.

Will was Lutheran or Methodist or something and didn't know about things that most of the kids in our class knew about. It was strange that he was out smoking with us—really kind of strange that he was friends with us at all.

"So, then the guy unzips his prison jumpsuit thing and they have sex."

We nodded.

My cigarette was done and I put my hands in my pockets, thinking about Darby's sister Beth, who I'd met twice when she picked up Darby from school on the city bus. Beth was in grade ten at Richmond East Secondary, smoked out in the open, and had short hair and three earrings on the top of her left ear and a silver loop in her nose, which I'd never seen before except on Indian-from-the-East women who usually wore one of those diamond studs. All this made Beth the kind of young woman my mother said was best to avoid thinking about too much, but right then I couldn't help it.

What colour were her baby-dolls? That's what I was thinking. I hoped blue. But maybe Beth was more of a black nightdress kind of girl.

"Wait." Darby was grinding out his cigarette with the toe of his boot. "Wait. Why would a blind person have a pool table? It's not like she can play pool, right?"

"Blind people have really good hearing," Billy said.

"That makes no sense. No matter how good you can hear, you can't hear good enough to play pool if you can't see the balls."

Darby was right. She wouldn't have been able to see which balls were the stripes and which were the solids, never mind the cue ball.

"Darby's got a point," I said.

Billy shrugged and said he guessed the filmmakers overlooked that, and we were all silent. Will was the only one not finished his cigarette and we had to wait for him before we went back and gargled with mouthwash in the boys' bathroom.

"I don't like Jesus-Christing menthol," Will said. He hadn't really learned to swear yet.

Visitation weekends with my father weren't regular because he had a new job with overtime since he'd come back from Out West, so I had to wait three weekends to look for his pornography collection. After we said good night and he went to watch television in the living room/dining room, I did look in the closet and dresser drawers like Billy suggested, but I couldn't find anything except clothes, which smelled of cigarettes and made me wonder if Dad was maybe folding and putting them away without washing and drying them like you're supposed to. My mother said he'd never had good personal hygiene and that was even before he moved Out West to work in energy research for two years and live by himself in a trailer. And then I looked under the bed, where I found piles of magazines stacked neatly together. Which meant that the pornography collection had been right there underneath me during all my past weekend visitations; all that time I'd slept on top of naked women photographs.

I don't think I need to remind you of the penalties for perjury in New York State, sir.

The sound from the television was loud, but except for some small bits of dialogue, the voices were hard to make out and I couldn't tell what

my father was watching. I thought I had time, so I reached in and slid out the closest pile of magazines, which was easy to do because the bed was the hotel kind where the boxspring sat pretty high on top of a metal frame. My father bought it secondhand from Value Village, where he'd bought all his apartment furniture except for the Mitsubishi, which was large-screen and rear projection and he'd bought it at the Brick.

So when you looked out the window and witnessed the accused fleeing from the vehicle, were the street lights on or off?

I think the show was the kind of gritty drama about crime and punishment that my mother would never watch with him because the world was sometimes ugly, but there was no need to dwell, and indulging in ugliness never helped anyone. I was worried there'd be a commercial break and he'd come to check if I was asleep and brush my hair aside to kiss my forehead and whisperspeak *you know how proud I am of you, don't you?* which was something both he and my mother used to do before when he lived in our house. Neither one of them had done that in a while though, so I took a chance and turned on his gooseneck lamp and looked through some of the magazines.

The naked photographs were bloody unreal like I guessed they'd be, but also I liked how each set of pictures told a story. Each photograph was part of a larger story about a woman—or sometimes two and three—and by turning the pages slowly, you could unfold an entire mini-movie where they got more and more naked. In one of the stories, a blond girl in a bikini top and denim cut-offs drove a Yamaha ATV next to a river bank when she had to pull over because it ran out of fuel, and as she leaned forward to untwist the gas cap, the middle part of her shorts strained and the whole of between her legs showed, and then, since she had no way to refuel, she decided to walk among the reeds and bulrushes picking wild flowers and taking off her clothes.

That was the warden on the phone. McGreevy hung himself in his prison cell before the parole came through.

The show was over. The end credits music came on and I wasn't sure how I could stack the magazines back in neat piles under the bed, turn out the light and get under the covers in time. If I was quick I could have maybe pushed the whole mess onto the floor and then yanked out the lamp plug, but it turned out I didn't need to worry, because my father was flipping channels, a multitude of voices sputtering, so I went back to the stories in pictures.

Ships Ahoy. Swing in the Mood. Graffiti Art. The titles were important, I realized. Each set of photographs had a title that was like a clue telling

you how to read the story, but sometimes they were jokes or wordplay things that confused me. The last story I looked at was like that. The pictures were from a women's bathroom and it was like a posh hotel washroom where the cubicle walls were chocolate brown and the fixtures were golden brass. The naked woman on the toilet looked classy with a tiara and she was ignoring everything except the magazine she was reading. The title was *Get off Your Throne*, which made me feel uncomfortable because it was something my father used to say when him and my mother argued because she'd always been such a goddamn princess. I kept turning the pages anyway until I reached the last picture, which showed the complete front cover of the magazine the woman was reading. On the cover of that magazine was a picture of the same woman reading the same magazine and, inside, on the cover of that magazine was the same woman reading the same magazine—on and on until the pictures inside the pictures were too small to see.

The next time I met Darby's sister Beth was at their apartment. Darby and I got to be closer friends than we were with Billy and Will, which was probably because of both our parents being divorced, and it made sense that I'd eventually be invited over to his place. The night I went over, his mother was working a dinner shift and wouldn't be home until late. Darby said we'd be left to our own devices as far as dinner was concerned, but I didn't mind because it was the first time my mother had let me go to a friend's house during the school week and, like I said, Beth was going to be there.

It was extra cold outside and their apartment was on the top floor of a squat, low-rise building, and I was surprised when it was warm.

"My sister cranks up the heat whenever she wants to take a bath."

We were standing in the hall kicking off our winter boots and I tried to act like I didn't care that he just told me his grade-ten sister was naked in a bathtub just down the hall and behind a single closed door.

"I don't mind heat. I'm fine."

I don't think Darby noticed me acting oddly because all he did was ask if I wanted to play Missile Defense or watch TV. The way he pronounced the game was *Miss-isle Defense*, which kind of bugged me but I didn't think it'd be good manners to say that since I was a guest in his house, so I just said I didn't feel like watching television.

"Do you like music while you play?"

He switched a clock radio on to *103 FM The Bear Rocks* without

waiting for a response, but I would have said yes because I usually don't get distracted by anything when I play video games. This time was different, mind you, because Beth was naked in the bathtub down the hall. I thought she was probably reading a historical novel while she soaked and was so absorbed in the story that she let the bathwater go cold, so that she would have to stretch out her leg and turn on the hot water tap with her tippy toe and then lean back and submerge herself again. My concentration wasn't for anything, and I lost many games of *Miss-isle Defense*, so, after a while, Darby just laughed at how bad I was doing and said we should start dinner.

I thought that was a good idea. If we started dinner, Beth would smell the food. She'd stand up in the tub and towel the bubbles off before she stepped lightly onto the bathmat and applied cocoa butter lotion to her legs, shoulders and stomach area. Then, before joining us, she'd pull on her baby-dolls, which might be either blue or black. I didn't much care which.

"What kind of pasta do you like?" Darby asked.

"What?"

"We've got penne and fusilli."

It seemed important to Darby that I choose, so I said penne, and we set about chopping green and red peppers while waiting for the water to boil. By the time Beth came out of the bathroom, we were done chopping and were sitting on the chesterfield watching a comedy show about a group of school teachers who hang out in the staff room and help each other with their problems because although they were just coworkers, they were also close like members of a family. When I looked up, I saw Beth wasn't wearing baby-dolls, but jeans and a black t-shirt that said *there is no cure* across the front, but I wasn't too disappointed. She was barefoot, and that I liked.

"The water's boiling," she said.

"Oh, shit, Saint Louis," said Darby.

He ran to the kitchen and I was alone with Beth, trying to think of what to say.

"You're not wearing your nose earring."

She touched the side of her nose for confirmation.

"No, I take it out sometimes."

I nodded. I was going to ask her if it didn't get painful in the winter when the weather turned the metal all cold and it touched the skin on the inside of her nose, but, luckily, Darby came back and I didn't have time to say

anything so stupid. Grinning, Beth looked at her brother and then back at me.

“You guys want to smoke before dinner?”

She held out her hand like she was displaying a brand new car for the showcase showdown and in her hand she had a Ziploc baggie with two handrolled cigarettes. It was the kind of Ziploc that was blue on one side and yellow on the other and when they zipped together to form a vacuum seal, the top became green, and this distracted me because I remembered once when I was younger, my mother saying they were clever and my father rolling his eyes.

“Yes, we do.” Darby was nodding and grinning for both him and me.

“Yes, we do want to smoke.”

The two of us sat on the chesterfield, which sagged in the middle like someone had been sleeping on it, and Beth sat cross-legged on the other side of the coffee table. Because I’d never tried it before, I didn’t know what to expect, but Beth said I was inhaling like an old pro and that made me proud even though I didn’t yet feel any different. When the first cigarette was almost gone, she dug around in her purse and came out with a metal clip. Attached to the end were three leather strings that she said were real doe-skin with dyed-red feathers and a mini-dream catcher like the Indians-from-the-West use, and I stared at it, but I don’t know for how long, which was when I realized that I did feel different.

“You feel it now.” Darby was laughing, but I don’t know when he started.

“I Jesus-Christing do.”

Darby laughed harder, and Beth and I laughed along with him, even though I didn’t think she knew we were laughing about Will’s inept swearing, so I told her and she laughed some more. We were passing around the second cigarette, but then we had to stop talking because a loud beeping was drowning out our voices.

“The fusilli’s burning.”

Darby stood up and ran into the kitchen so quick that I didn’t have time to remind him we were having penne, but I probably wouldn’t have said anything anyway because I was a guest in his house. It was funny how fast he could run; I must have said this aloud because Beth agreed, and we were still laughing about it when he darted back out of the kitchen waving a tea towel over his head.

“It’s the smoke alarm in the hallway,” he said.

Beth stopped laughing, put her hand on my forearm and looked at me deep in the eyes.

“It’s the smoke alarm in the hallway.”

She kept staring at me and held her grave expression for one, two, three beats, until she released a bark of a laugh that I loved her for. Once the alarm stopped beeping, Darby came back and placed the plate of chopped green and red peppers on the coffee table, but then excused himself and said he had to use the throne. Time wasn’t working the way it’s supposed to and at some point I realized Darby had been gone way too long. Beth and I’d finished the second cigarette and, though I didn’t remember her getting up, she’d moved to the chesterfield beside me. The dip in the chesterfield made her body lean into mine, and her bare feet were propped up against the side of the table, so that I could have reached out and touched them.

Conversation escaped me once again and, staring at her feet, I noticed that the plate was empty of red peppers, but neither of us had touched the green ones, and this could have been something to talk about if I hadn’t waited so long. Beth must have figured out I had nothing to say and she pulled a comic book out from under the coffee table and flipped through the pages. *Mutation Generation Seven*. A double-sized annual for the price of a regular issue. Darby still wasn’t back, and I guessed he must have gone to his bedroom and fallen asleep or something.

“A comic book is like a mini-movie in pictures,” I said.

She nodded her beautiful head in agreement and kept flipping through the pages. Her lips were moving as she read, but I guessed this was because of the drugs and she wouldn’t have done that normally. I stared at the cover, a picture of a mutated adolescent boy with a tail, sitting up in bed with a flashlight and reading a comic book. On its cover was the same mutated adolescent boy reading the same comic book—on and on and inward and inward until the pictures inside the pictures were too small to see. It was confusing, and I didn’t want to look at it, so I looked at Beth’s moving lips and I was absolutely sure she whisperspoke *you know how proud I am of you, don’t you?*

“What? What do you mean?”

She looked at me strangely and I understood that I must have yelled. I also understood that she hadn’t really said anything.

“The cover,” I said.

She flipped the book around and looked at the picture inside the picture inside the picture on the cover.

“Shit, Saint Louis.”

That must have been a saying in their family or something.

“I’ve always liked this kind of drawing,” she said. “Image recursion. It’s even got a name. Droste effect.”

I nodded like I understood, but I didn’t. I felt uncomfortable, and I was scared of what was going to happen next.