

Breakfast, a Key

I wake to the smell of burnt oatmeal. Normally, such an acrid pungency would prompt someone of my tender age to burrow back beneath the covers, waiting until the bitter air is replaced with something more agreeable like frying sausage or scrambled eggs or perhaps even a dozen Krispy Kremes just procured by one of my loving and adoring big sisters. But youth has no patience and hunger little pride.

I sit on the side of the mattress, knees like dull knives to either side of my face, and rub my big toe. I stubbed it yesterday while running from those junior mobsters trying to steal the money Mom gave me for a few groceries. Off I was to fetch the usual basics—a box of powdered milk, three loaves of Wonder bread, a canister of Quaker Oats oatmeal, and a carton of Benson & Hedges cigarettes—when they jumped out from behind the bushes. Lucky for me I have this uncanny knack for spotting budding criminals hiding behind the old arborvitae. Plus, I'm fairly fleet of foot when the situation, such as familial sustenance, requires it. I can dodge and weave with the best of them.

I push on my knees, stand up, and survey Shangri-La. I live on the third floor, the *attic*, of this old house, along with four of my five brothers. Yeah, you heard me. I have five brothers. And three sisters, though Sally, being less than a year old, hardly

counts. The girls are down on the second floor in an actual room to themselves. More about them later. Nick, just a year older than me, is wound like a pretzel around one of Brigitte's legs, a *Mad* magazine over his face, his BB gun lying over his left ankle. The rickety floor fan's right in front of his single bed. He gets a bed while me and Squirt only have mattresses plopped on the floor like soggy bread. In fact, everybody has beds except us two. Tommy's over on the right side of the window near the only potential bit of fresh air to reach us, himself clutching Brigitte's chest, a smile as big as the ocean on his sleeping mug. Squirt, on this even thinner mattress than mine, is sort of squashed into the far corner by Anthony's bed. He, meaning Squirt, is half-awake and I can see some movement underneath his sheet. He's been getting to know his six-year-old bod lately, so the rest of us try and leave him alone as much as possible. Anthony, the platoon leader of this here rag-tag outfit and genuine military man (he's taking ROTC at Akron U, though he's also considering entering the priesthood after college), looks blissfully oblivious to the mayhem and mess that is the third floor. A crooked black and white of General George S. Patton, framed, looks down with grim confidence from the slanted wall above his studio bed. Frankie, in his first year of art school at Akron, sleeps out in his Volkswagen bus now that summer's here. Some guys have all the luck.

I tidy up a bit before the old bulldog rouses—no need to have unnecessary punishment before the sun's barely above the rooftops, is there. Magazines and comic books go on the small shelf against the wall; plates, bowls, glasses, and various utensils are gathered onto a single plate crusted with day-old spaghetti sauce and placed at the foot of the stairs; shoes, shirts, underwear, and socks are lumped in a pile outside the overflowing plastic laundry basket; Brigitte, her parts scattered to the four corners of the room, is collected and slid behind the small door leading to the crawl space where Mom wouldn't think to look. I move Nick's weight bench in front of the door and put the bar laden with a full fifty pounds on the rack, just for insurance. I find an odd pack of matches on the floor and shove it beneath Tommy's mattress—

the usual hiding place for such potentially explosive contraband. Then, like the good soldier Anthony taught me to be, I make my bed so there's not a ripple, not a crease, not a single defect in its cottony white contours. You know what Anthony does? He checks our beds and if there's so much as the slightest imperfection in it, he'll mess it up and have us make it all over again. He's Dad's long arm of the law up here where Dad can't go.

Following the malodor, I pick up the dirty dishes and half lean, half slide against the banister on my way to the landing, turn, and flutter on down to the second floor. All's quiet. Mom and Dad's door immediately to my left is open, the room glistening in sunlight, unoccupied. Mom's dark rosary hangs prominently around the porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary on their dresser. The girls' room is predictably closed to the world, as is the door to the right, their lounge. Yeah, I said *lounge*. Britt and Sissy brought Sally into their room so they could turn the other one into a lounge, a pad, a place of gossipy leisure where Dad was somehow convinced into installing a separate phone line. Sure, Britt pays for it out of money she earns from working part-time at the office, but it hardly seems fair that the two of them get one phone and the rest of the household has to share another. The closed doors don't mean a thing, since they keep them closed day and night, occupado or empty. The glossy photo of the Fab Four taped to the lounge door makes mockery of me. So cheery and clean and successful. I wince, sneer, and turn my head with contempt. I'd stop at the bathroom, but with my hands full of the precariously perched pile of used dishes, I defer and continue the descent. Down to the second landing, turn, and I'm spilled into the hall connecting the living room, dining room, and kitchen, my ultimate destination.

"Here," I say, handing Britt the dirty dishes.

"What?" she says, pretending she doesn't know what's going on. I remove my hands of the mess just as she realizes the whole thing's about to crash. Her bleach-blonde, short-clipped mod haircut jumps like a spooked poodle.

"Where's Mom?" I do inquire. A pertinent question, since Mom would never burn the oatmeal.

“You guys shouldn’t leave these up there so long,” she says. “You’ll draw rats.”

Wow, she’s styling it today with the miniskirt and go-go boots and long fake eyelashes. And Dad puts up with it.

“That’s why I brought them down,” I tell her. “So, you’re going to chastise instead of praise, eh?” I slide past Dad, sitting at the head of the kitchen table with his back toward me, and give Gram a kiss on the head. “Morning, Gram.” Gram sits on the church pew along the wall, staring right into Dad’s jolly profile, whether the table is packed or not.

“The day nearly over, and you now just getting up?” She gives a big whole-body sigh that nobody responds to. A big sigher, she is.

“Aw,” I say. “Come on now. I’m the first private in the platoon vertical and of sound mind, and that includes Anthony, the drill sergeant himself.”

“It’s time they get up,” Dad grumble-mumbles.

“When I was a girl in Sorrento,” Gram goes on, “my mama have me up to feed the goats and go to the market.” Her finger comes off her lap and takes aim at the ceiling.

“Who are you pointing to?” I say, my eyes glancing skyward.

“You know who,” she says. “You know who and you should be careful. You good boy, Puck, but sometimes. You jokey all the time. I like a joke, sure, but you can’t joke all the time.”

Dad, raising the left corner of the newspaper to block out Gram’s sourpuss mug, gives me a surreptitious lift of the old eyes. He normally ignores me, so I appreciate the facial gesture of empathy.

“We don’t have any goats, Gram,” I say all cheery-like. “Perhaps you haven’t noticed, but we live in an urban area. A *city*, Gram. No goats for miles and miles.”

“Don’t get smart,” says Britt, bopping me on the head with a fly swatter.

“I’m not being smart,” I tell her. “I’m just reassuring her that if we had goats, I’d be up at the crack of dawn milking away and tossing them scraps. Well, if we had any.” I bend down and give Gram a kiss on the cheek. She squirms and giggles like a little

kid.

I sit on the bench on the other side of the table, to Dad's right. It's always strange sitting at the table with elbow room. And it *is* unusual, us getting up so late. More than unusual—it's downright insubordinate. But then we were up into the wee hours rearranging Brigitte's body parts into various creative and fascinating ways, with Anthony himself as impromptu instructor. He might be our bulldog sarge, but he's bursting with hormones like the rest of us.

"Something smells yummy," I say facetiously.

"Stop," says Britt. "You try making it sometime."

"So, where's Mom?" I ask again. I sure do hate repeating myself.

"She can't find her key," says Britt, nodding out the kitchen window.

"Who, Mom?"

"Buzzy." Buzzy's the reclusive girl next door.

"What key?" I say, dumbfounded.

"The house key. Mom's over there helping her look for it."

"That explains the burnt oatmeal. Ever think of reading the two-sentence instructions on the cylindrical canister?"

Britt gives me another bop of the fly swatter. And to think, Squirt mouths that thing on a daily basis.

"We had four goats," Gram utters, adrift in her own la-la land. "I love them all. They like my own brothers and sisters. I wonder where they are now."

Dad turns his head just a hair in Gram's direction and tries not to sneer. "Why don't you go help your mother look for the key," he says, turning back to sanity and my mug. It's not really a question, you understand.

"Right now?"

"Son."

"Yes, sir."

"A brown one . . . and a black one . . . and a white one . . ."

"Here," says Britt, putting a day-old doughnut in my hand. I sneak on out of there before Dad notices I've absconded with one of his stale delectables.

I cut through the hedges along the driveway and pop out into Buzzy's front yard, dispensing of the doughnut in three bites. I find Mom and Buzzy standing by the rusted old drum, a pile of black ash beside it. The drum is smoldering. It's where they burn most of their trash.

Mom's all somber and sad-looking, and Buzzy's in even worse shape, with genuine tears bleeding down both cheeks. I never got this close to her before, never got a good look at her. She doesn't come off her porch for more than a minute or two, and that's to toss more garbage into the smoldering drum. Her mom, whose name none of us knows, she'll sit in her yard in a chair watching the traffic of Tallmadge Avenue go by. She sits there like a Sherman tank waiting to be refueled, legs out wide, hands on thighs. Just sits there and stares. I look at Buzzy. She's sort of pretty, actually, even with that short haircut. I try and picture her with long hair and lipstick and maybe wearing one of Britt's or Sissy's tops instead of that white T-shirt with the rolled-up sleeves.

"Dad said you needed help," I say to Mom.

"Puck, you know Sandy," she says.

"Hey." I force a smile.

Buzzy doesn't flinch; those tears keep coming.

"She lost her house key," says Mom. "She's looked in the ashes, but she can't find it. I've looked too, but it doesn't seem to be here."

I keep the old mandible clamped shut. The elephant in the yard—why she's looking in the ash pile for a house key—ain't going to come out of *these* lips.

I get on my knees and start sifting through the ashes.

"Use this," and Mom hands me a spatula, presumably from Buzzy's house, since I don't recognize it.

"What kind is it?" This time I address Buzzy. She lifts her pointed chin. Her big brown eyes look like shot moons.

"It's just a key," she says.

"But is it shiny? Big? Small? A skeleton key?"

"It's not a *skeleton key*," says Buzzy with sarcasm so thick I realize I offended her.

"I'm just saying, it helps if I know what I'm looking for."

"She's upset," says Mom.

"It's a regular key," says Buzzy. "Kind of shiny, I guess. I never paid much attention to it. It's gone. I know it's gone."

I keep on looking, but there's not much recognizable in the ash pile. The end of a charred piece of wood. A couple paper clips. A corner of a cereal box. But there's no key.

"How about in the drum?" I ask her.

"I don't know," says Buzzy.

"You want me to look?"

"It's burning."

"I can dump it out if you want me to," I tell her.

Buzzy looks more pained than ever. She turns her head to the house in a way like maybe it hurts her to do it. I'm standing straight up now not bothering to wipe my sooty hands yet, waiting.

She tells me to go ahead and so I feel the rim of the drum to see if it's hot and, since it's barely warm, dump it on its side and jiggle the smoldering trash and black and gray ashes out. Buzzy gets down with me and takes the spatula from my hand and picks through it.

"Puck . . ." says Mom, nodding. She means to have me do it for Buzzy, but I know that Buzzy wants to do it herself. I do what I can, flicking at things with a stick.

"It's not here," says Buzzy. "What am I going to do? I've lost it. The key's not here. What will I tell her?"

The spatula drops from her blackened palm into the soot.

"I'm . . . sure your mom will understand," says Mom. "I can talk to her. Would you like that? Sandy, I'm sure it will be all right."

Buzzy looks like a house on fire.

"You don't understand! Leave my mother alone! Stay away from here!" She shoves Mom on the shoulders, then does the same thing to me.

She starts running toward her house and then, like there's some invisible barbed-wire fence ten feet away from the porch, she stops. She jumps in place flapping those thin, white arms, and

then starts running around the yard. Just running and running like it's some kind of cinder track.

I scoop up most of the ashes with the drum sideways, then turn it upright. I try and make things just like they were, not better and not worse, but exactly the same. I let Mom go through the hedges first. Buzzy starts throwing rocks at us and saying all kinds of cuss words. I want to protect Mom and protect Buzzy at the same time, but it's pretty tough to do either.

When we get back in the house everybody's packed around the table like you might see in a submarine. You know, bodies just crammed side by side with no room, hunched over, looking somewhat miserable. They're all shoveling in the burnt oatmeal. Nick's got a *Mad* magazine to his face, while Anthony's reading some military pamphlet. Sissy's standing off to the side ironing her hair on the ironing board. She likes it straight as a rail, just like old Joan Baez. Mom pops her head over Tommy's shoulder to take a look in his bowl, then makes a face.

"I tried, Mom," says Britt, "I really did."

Mom starts making toast and tosses the pieces on a plate as soon as they come out. Our toaster is industrial-sized and can do six slices at a time. She brings out some cut celery sticks, an unusual item on the breakfast menu to be sure, but nobody complains and we snatch them up.

Dad sets down the Sports page and I grab it before Nick can. Lucky for me the *Mad* magazine has him distracted. I smile at him big and wide. He ignores me.

"Well?" says Dad from behind the Lifestyle section, his least-favorite part of the paper.

"What's that, Dad?" I say.

He looks at Mom. "What was that all about?" He means over at Buzzy's.

"Oh," says Mom, "nothing really."

Dad's not one to dig for more info than is absolutely necessary. But he couldn't help seeing me wash the soot from my hands, and I'm sure he heard Buzzy yelling.

"You sure about that?" he says.

Mom comes over and rubs his shoulders and kisses the top of

his head.

“Would you like me to fry up some eggs?” Mom’s a whiz at keeping Dad on an even keel. She’s a real study in diversionary dialogue.

“I’m fine,” says Dad, patting her hand.

“I don’t mind. You can’t go till lunch on that.”

“It’s all right. You have enough to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Hey, Mom,” says Squirt. “I’d like some eggs!”

“She didn’t ask you,” I tell him.

“But I want some!”

“Eat your oatmeal.”

“But it’s burnt.”

“What’s your point, kid?” I ask him, hands clasped above the table, giving him the droopy eyes.

He makes a frown, crosses his arms, and pouts. Wow. And he thinks that’s going to work *here*? The kid’s got gumption, he’s got spunk. But a heck of a lot to learn.

“Something’s burning,” says Tommy.

I raise my eyes all full of sarcasm. “Oatmeal? Remember?”

“No, I mean really burning.”

I look over and see the tip of Sissy’s hair caught on the pointed part of the iron as she slides it across the ironing board. It’s sizzling like melting plastic.

I jump up and flick it away. She slugs me.

“Don’t,” she says.

“I was trying to save your head from going up in flames,” I tell her. I wag the end of her singed hair in her surly mug.

“Oh,” she says. “I’m sorry, Puck.” She touches my arm in sisterly affection.

Sally, over in the high chair, dissatisfied with leftover mashed lima beans, tosses them on the floor. Britt moves to calm the kid down, slips on the lima beans, and goes flying. Hits the old linoleum with a thud, but before she does the wooden burnt-oatmeal spoon in her hand whips around, sending the sticky stuff all over the kitchen.

Mom just keeps on rubbing Dad's shoulders. He lifts the paper higher so he can't see anything else.

"Look," he says, "there's a plant sale at Bob's Greenhouse."

"Oh, really?"

"That's what it says. What do you think about that?"

"I wonder if they have marigolds. You know how I love marigolds."

"Sure, why not?"

"Maybe I'll take a drive over there today," says Mom.

"Yes," he says, patting her hand, "why don't you."

Mom helps Britt clean up the lima bean mess and then they calm Sally down. Dad wheels back from the table, turns around, and heads toward the stairs leading to the side door. Anthony and Tommy get up to go help him down.

"Have a nice day at work," Mom says to him.

"You too," he says.

After breakfast, me and Nick and Frankie scrub the kitchen floor. It's only been two weeks since we did it last, but the oatmeal moved it up on the to-do list. Since we're at it, Mom has us do the kitchen walls, and then the dining room walls. After lunch we hit the front yard. Seems Dad spotted a few weeds mixed in with the lush fescue greenery. Frankie and Nick have real weed diggers, but I have to use a table knife. We don't wander around the yard haphazardly looking for the old dandelion, no sir. Dad showed us long ago how to do it methodically, systematically, so every square inch of the yard is scoured. We get on our hands and knees, side by side, and move forward like a phalanx, each of us uprooting the ones that fall within our path. I do feel sort of bad yanking them out. Especially the odd time I get one with the whole root like a carrot. I hate being the hands of death, even if it is to some dumb old weeds. Weeds are just plants that nobody wants. I understand their predicament. No, I do. But listen to this. I've got this patch on the shady side of the house where the others don't go much where I replant some of them. There's good dirt over there. I coil the long carrot roots in holes I dig with the hand trowel, cover them up, and water them. Sometimes they don't make it, but sometimes they do. When they form the white

balls of seeds, I'll take them to the front and blow on them so they disperse throughout the yard. It's a form of treachery, I suppose, and I'd really be in for it if Dad caught me. But somebody's got to stand up for the weeds.