

2.

Wes rode his bike up a path, looking past Stacey at the street they had to cross. A boy in his grade had been hit by cars there twice. He hobbled around school on crutches for months, reminding Wes of images of wounded soldiers he'd seen in movies. After Stacey crossed without a pause, a car screeched to a stop and its horn honked. She shot up her middle finger. The driver opened his window and looked at Wes instead.

"Cross for Christ's sake," he said. He went to their church.

Wes rode across. Stacey waited for him down the path by a stone wall. A creek passed through a metal pipe underneath. Wes had long wanted to play down there, imagining it as a tunnel between two worlds, but he wasn't supposed to play in the creeks and worried about water moccasins.

He breathed a little heavy by the time he reached Stacey. She tossed stones into the creek. He hoped they could rest a little, but as soon as he arrived, she rode ahead again. If they turned left, they'd head toward the junior high school. If they went right, they'd have to cross the street again and would eventually reach the highway. He'd never ridden that far, even with his parents. She chose right. He lagged a little behind so he could check traffic without stopping. Just as he made it to the other side, a car careened around the corner. It swerved close to the path, and Stacey yelped.

"Be careful," she said and rode on.

He tried to catch up, but the more they rode, the more he felt his weight. His heart pounded. A long line of sweat rolled from his underarms along the folds of his skin. His thighs burned from what felt like little cuts. He wanted to stop, and more than ever, he wanted to burst out of his skin as if it were a costume hiding a strong body and passing on its weakness.

Stacey would disappear around corners or down dips, but each time she waited until he saw her before speeding off again. He just knew she would laugh when he caught up, and he was glad she stayed ahead. He didn't need her or anyone else to tell him how slow and fat he was.

He stopped by the red brick Mormon Church. Through a thin row of pines on his left cars rushed by on the parkway. His father might pass and see him. He got off his bike and set the kickstand. He inhaled and exhaled, trying to slow himself down. He tried to feel his pulse in his wrist. It beat as if it would push through his skin. He thought he might vomit.

Stacey rode back down the path and stopped by him. She slid off her seat but stood straddling the bike and holding the handlebars. A long strand of hair hung down beside her face. She undid her pony tail and shook her head. Her hair flew around her face. She pulled it back and retied it.

"You ok?" she said.

He nodded.

"Your face is red."

"I'm tired," he said in a scratchy voice.

"I'll buy you a Coke," she said.

"Where?"

"Roderick's," she said. "That's where we're going."

"I'm not - "

"It'll be ok," she said. "There's a traffic light."

He sat on the ground and shook his head. I'll go, he told himself, but the part of himself that had climbed a high dive once and climbed back down instead of jumping said, "Go home." That part of himself said, "Remember your dad yesterday." Another part said, "Be brave, make him proud," and still another part said, "#@%& him." He didn't know what to do, only that he wanted his breath back, wanted to feel like himself and not ache. He wanted to not cry, but he did.

Stacey let her bike drop to the asphalt and sat down beside him. She put her arm around his shoulder. He gasped for air, and she patted his back. He didn't want to cry in front of her. He wanted to be a man for her, but he couldn't.

"You want to go home?" she said.

He shook his head. She took her arm away and leaned back on her hands.

"I'll wait," she said.

He wiped his face with his shirtsleeve.

A golf cart rolled down the path toward them. A gray-haired man drove. As he neared them, he honked a weak, metallic-sounding horn. Stacey laughed. Wes looked at her lying back now. Even through her baggy sweatshirt, he could tell something had changed. Her breasts had shifted with the new position, seeming flatter but wider. He made a note of it for drawing. He became aroused and worried he'd make a mess of himself.

The man in the golf cart must not have seen them because he stopped and walked slowly toward Stacey's bike, muttering curse words. He moaned as he leaned over in his plaid pants. Wes' grandfather had moaned a lot the last few years he was alive. The man's pants split, and Stacey tried to conceal her laughter by biting her arm.

"Shit," the man said and stood up. He turned around in shuffling steps and saw them. He ripped a fart but didn't seem to notice. Stacey buried her face in Wes' shoulder.

"Are you all right?" the man said.

Wes nodded.

"Have an accident?"

Wes shook his head.

"Could you move your bike?" the man said. "I'm late for dinner."

Wes didn't respond. He didn't want to stand up just yet.

"I ain't got all day, son."

Stacey punched Wes' arm. She still laughed. Wes stood up with care, at first bending over a little. When he stood all the way, he shoved his hands in his pockets and stuck them out.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" the man said.

"N-nothing," Wes said. He hurried to the bike and pushed it up. He rolled it over by his bike.

"There's a good lad," the man said.

Stacey burst into louder laughter.

"What's wrong with her?" he said.

Wes shrugged, more worried about how he could ride his bike comfortably.

"Goddamn kids," the man said. He shuffled back to his golf cart.

Stacey continued to laugh and even pointed at him. He started the golf cart and glared at them, his face red, his thick mustache spreading across his face like a caterpillar above his lips.

"Shut your hole, you little shit," he yelled back as he pulled away.

"Fuck you," she yelled back, "you old bastard."

He stopped and turned around, resting his arm on the seat. He looked as if he were going to yell again, but another golf cart drove toward them, and he pulled off. Wes saw that Jason's dad drove the second golf cart and dashed behind a tree.

"Hey, Mr. Lanford," Stacey said.

He flashed his big smile and waved and went on.

Wes crept back toward Stacey and looked down at her.

"Don't look at me like that," she said.

"Like what?" he said.

"Like I did something wrong."

"I'm not - "

"Let's go," she said.

She sprung up, kicked up the kickstand on her bike, and straddled the bike.

"I don't have all day," she said.

He hopped onto his bike, able to sit comfortably now. They rode on toward the intersection of the highway and the parkway. He was sure she was mad at him, but he followed anyway, knowing it might be worse if he didn't, that she might stop being his friend the way Jason and the others had.

At the intersection, they stopped to wait for the light to change. Wes had to get off his bike because he was too short to sit on it stopped. Stacey didn't look at him, and he knew what she thought - dork, wimp, pussy. He took the last one back. He shouldn't have thought it.

"Mr. Lanford won't fink," she said. "If that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried," he said.

"Yeah, you are," she said. Then she mumbled, "You're always worried."

"What do you know?" he said.

"I'm smart."

"Can you read minds?" he said.

"No," she said. "Duh."

"Do you ever wish you could?" he said.

The light changed to green.

"Hurry," she said.

He jumped on his bike and followed. They made it across all four lanes just before the light changed. He looked over his shoulder at how far they'd ridden, farther than he ever had with his parents. Cars lined the highway and the parkway. He smiled and tried to pass Stacey before they turned into the parking lot.

He cut up a row of cars, paying them little attention as he pedaled as hard as he could. He looked over his shoulder, but she wasn't there. When he turned around, she zoomed across the lane ahead of him, laughing, her hair blowing behind her. He thought he would remember that image forever. Then he thought that was the kind of idea that preceded disaster, and he slowed down. She rode up the wheelchair ramp onto the sidewalk, stopped, and leaned her bike against the brick wall outside Roderick's. She waved.

Wes made sure to stop at the end of the row and look both ways twice. Across the road, he parked behind Stacey's bike. She punched his shoulder and smiled.

"We made it," she said.

He nodded and rubbed his shoulder.

Inside, Stacey went to buy the Cokes, and he looked at the comic books. As he spun the rickety metal rack, he realized he already had all the ones he normally read. Still, something about the process absorbed his attention - the disorganization, the bright colors, the squeaking of the rack, the dull white paint flaking off it, the possibility of finding that single issue he didn't even know he was looking for tucked behind the *Donald Duck* comics. He checked each row quickly and spun the rack to the next row. Then when he'd been around once or twice, he took more care, kneeling on the dingy white tile floor to check the lower levels.

A Coke bottle hissed open, and he looked up. Stacey handed him a glass bottle and opened another. She sipped from it before looking at the comics too. Wes drank and knew it wouldn't satisfy his thirst. He had a couple dollars though, so maybe he could buy them each another and still get a comic book if he found one. Stacey plucked a *Betty and Veronica* from the rack and sat down. She tucked her legs under her and laid the comic book on the floor in front of her.

Wes kept searching. He knew something was there. He felt it. He had to search and search, and when he'd given up, he'd see it. That's how it worked. He spun the rack. He looked behind it for one that might have fallen. Stacey laughed. Nothing. He picked an *X-Men* he already had and sat down next to Stacey.

"Veronica's kind of a bitch," she said.

He shrugged.

She looked at him smiling, but it reminded him of looks his mother gave his father when he'd said something he shouldn't have. Her eyebrows raised.

"I - " he began. "She wasn't that way in the one I read."

Stacey nodded and turned back to her comic book. She flipped a page, picked up her Coke without looking at it, sipped, set it down, and flipped another page.

"She is pretty," she said. "In a comic booky kind of way."

He read his comic book.

"Who's that?" she said, pointing to a tall man with brown hair and red sunglasses.

"Cyclops," Wes said. "He's my favorite."

"Why?" she said.

He shrugged.

"Come on," she said. "Tell me."

"He's got all this power," he said, "so he's got to be really careful all the time."

"What kind of power?"

"He shoots optic beams from his eyes," he said.

He flipped until he found a panel of Cyclops firing a wide, red beam from his eyes.

"He has to wear special glasses or this visor or keep his eyes shut, or it will just shoot all the time."

"It's always firing?" she said.

He nodded.

"He used to have a girlfriend," he said, "but she died."

"Oh," she said. "Did he kill her?"

"No," he said. "She could move stuff around with her brain and read minds."

"I wouldn't want to do that," she said.

He nodded.

"You asked me earlier if I would," she said, "and I wouldn't. I had to think about it, but I wouldn't because most people are mean anyway, so who wants to know that stuff?"

"Sometimes," he said, "I wish people could read my mind."

She furrowed her brow.

"Why?"

"I could say stuff," he said, "better."

"You wouldn't like what I have to think," she said.

She stood up, dusted her pants off, and put the *Betty and Veronica* back in front of a *Spider-man* instead of the other various *Archie* comics.

"We better go," she said, "before it gets dark."

"I got to get something," he said.

"I'll be outside."

He put the comic book back and saw what he'd been looking for, the last issue of a mini-series starring Kitty Pryde and Wolverine, two of the X-Men. He took it and two Cokes to the cash register.

Outside, a string of curse words flew out of Stacey in loosely constructed phrases.

The bikes weren't there.

She kicked a trash can. Adults walking by stared at her, even as they quickened their pace. Wes had no idea what to do. Many times he'd seen his mother calm his father, but he'd never understood how - words, gestures, touching his arm. Maybe he could give her something. He held out a Coke, and she slapped it out of his hand. It shattered on the ground, and soda fizzed and spread around their shoes in a thick, brown pool.

She looked at him. He trembled and knew, just knew, tears would erupt soon. Instead, something unexpected happened, something out of his control, and he felt outside it and inside it at the same time, observing a spontaneous action.

"I bought that for you," he yelled.

She stumbled back and seemed surprised, maybe even scared. She shook her head and folded her arms across her chest, fighting back tears. He knew he must look

like that when his father yelled, and then he knew he must have looked like his father at that moment - bigger than life, features distorted, standing still but the posture suggesting aggressive forward motion. He was scared. He shook and felt a sudden hunger.

He forced himself to relax and reached out. She shook her head again. He stepped closer. Glass crunched under his feet. Then he held out the other Coke. She looked at it. He inched forward. As she reached for it, her hand shook, but she grabbed it and clutched it to her chest.

"Thank you," she said.

She sniffled.

"I'm in so much trouble," she said.

He scratched the back of his neck.

"What are we gonna do?" she said.

He shrugged.

"They just got me that bike," she said. "Hey-honey-we're-moving-even-if-you-don't-want-to-consolation present."

Wes thought maybe he'd finally get a new one now.

"I guess we should walk," she said.

"I guess."

"Hold on," she said and handed him the Coke.

She went back inside. About twenty seconds later, she ran out.

"Run!" she yelled.

They ran on the sidewalk toward the other end of the shopping center, weaving past people, laughing. He looked over his shoulder. No one chased them. She slowed down, and so did he. She held another Coke.

"Did you steal that?" he said.

She smirked.

"You shouldn't - "

"No," she said. "Just needed to have some fun."

"Funny," he said.

"I thought so," she said.

"Hilarious."

"Are you gonna yell again?"

He shook his head.

"You sure?" she said.

"Yes," Wes said.

"Because you look you're like you're gonna yell again."

"No," he said.

"Jesus," she said. "Maybe you don't need any more sugar."

She kicked at the sidewalk.

"Being mad sucks," she said.

He nodded.

"But sometimes it's good to yell, too," she said.

He shrugged.

"When I'm mad for a long time," she said, "it hurts my head, like there's all this stuff jammed in there. Yelling and cussing is like cleaning it out, and then you have some fun to wash out all the soap and leftover shit."

"Ok," he said. "Wh-what are we gonna do?"

"I don't care," she said. "My parents aren't home."

"Mine will be," he said. He imagined his mother coming home to an empty house, calling his name, coming in his room, running outside and searching for him. Then he remembered he'd left the garage open, and he thought again of the way his father had acted yesterday, the cold, harsh sound of his voice, the ugly look on his face.

"Shit," he said before he could censor himself.

"There you go," she said.

"Sorry."

"Fuck it," she said.

He thought about his father arriving to find his mother crying. He saw him racing out of the house and driving all over town. He saw him yelling at other drivers. Then he looked past Stacey and saw the wooden sign for Live Oak.

"What day is it?" he said.

"Friday."

"Good."

He headed across the parking lot toward Live Oak. They pushed through short pine trees in a median, and he saw Pritchard's truck. He pointed at it.

"Smart," she said and kissed his cheek.

He moved his hand to wipe off his cheek, but when he saw her, her eyes somehow rounder and kinder, he scratched the back of his ear. He should respond somehow, he thought, but no one had ever told him how. She sighed. She opened her Coke and drank.

"He - " Wes said, "he must be inside."

She nodded, and they walked toward the restaurant. As they passed Pritchard's truck, Hank barked. Stacey grabbed Wes' arm for a second.

"That's his friendly bark," he said.

"Yeah," she said, "I know."

Inside, they stood in front of the hostess' podium. No one seemed to notice them at first, and Wes didn't know how to get their attention. He'd seen the bartender there before, paid special attention to her dirty blond hair, her overly tan skin, her pointed nose, and her crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. She saw him now and winked. A blond girl stood at the podium, stacking menus.

"This gentleman needs a table," the bartender said with a cackle.

"Two, sweetie?" the girl said. Her nametag said "Jill."

"No - we - " he said.

"Looking for your folks?"

He shook his head.

She rolled her eyes.

"Mr. Prit - Mr. Pritchard," he said.

"Who?" she said.

"The singer."

"Music man," she said. "Roy. Hold on."

She walked into the dining area, her hair swaying behind her. The bartender leaned on the bar and flashed her yellow grin. Her face turned into a wide, dark, wrinkled mass. Wes looked at his feet and reminded himself that witches weren't real.

"Y'all on a date?" she said.

Wes looked at Stacey. She smirked. Oh, no, he thought.

"Yep," she said. "And later we're gonna have sex."

Wes' face burned.

"Well, ain't you a pip?" the bartender said. "You want some advice?"

"I read my mom's *Cosmos*," Stacey said. "I know how to please my man."

"Uh," Wes muttered.

"Listen, you little - " the bartender started, but she stopped when Pritchard appeared.

"Friends of yours?" she said.

"Thanks, Sal," he said. "Your dad here, Wes?"

He shook his head.

"What's up?" Pritchard said.

"They're on a date," Sal said, "and later, they're gonna have mad, animal sex."

Pritchard looked at Stacey. She shrugged.

"Outside," he said.

"Bye," Stacey said.

"Out," he said.

Outside, he folded his arms across his chest and looked down at them.

"I smell trouble," he said.

Wes and Stacey looked at each other. At first, he hoped she would say something, but then he hoped she wouldn't because it would probably be another smart-aleck comment. He had to speak.

"We need a ride home," Wes said.

"Why don't you wait for your old man?" Pritchard said.

Wes and Stacey shook their heads.

"How'd you get here?"

"Bikes," Wes said.

Pritchard glanced at the empty bike rack on the sidewalk.

"Somebody stole them," Wes said.

Pritchard nodded.

No one spoke.

Wes scratched his head.

Stacey elbowed him.

"Can we have a ride?" Wes said. "Please? Sir?"

Pritchard checked his watch and walked inside.

"Forget it," Stacey said. "He's not gonna do it."

"He will," Wes said.

"He sent you a telepathic message?"

"He will."

"We're screwed."

"Then go," he muttered.

She shook her head. "I'm gonna wait to see him say no."

"It's your fault," he said.

"You had to look at the comic books."

"You rode here," he said. "I wasn't supposed to."

"Me neither," she said.

"Then why did you?"

"I wanted to," she said.

"You don't have to do everything you want to," he said.

"Wes, I never get to do anything I want," she said.

He tried to see through the tinted restaurant window. He could only see Sal.

She still leaned on the bar.

"It sucks, ok?" Stacey said. "Stay at home because we're going out to have fun. Be a good girl. You can't hang out with Wes 'cause his mom's p-p-por-pretentious."

"What does that mean?"

"I - I don't know," she said, "but your mom said something to my mom that she didn't like."

"She wouldn't," Wes said.

"I know," she said, "but she did."

"Shut up," he said.

"Screw you!"

He started to walk away, but he didn't have anywhere to go.

Pritchard pushed through the door.

"Let's go," he said.

They trailed behind him across the parking lot. He was all action. When he reached his truck, he pulled the handle on the tailgate, and it swung down as he moved

on to the cab. He opened the door and jerked his thumb. Hank jumped out, ran around to the back, and leapt in. Pritchard fed Hank a piece of jerky from his pocket and then opened the passenger side door.

They got in without a word, Wes in the middle. Pritchard turned on the engine. Country music blared at them from the radio. He flipped it off and in the same motion grabbed the gear shift and put the truck in reverse. Wes felt around for a seatbelt.

"Ain't one," Pritchard said. "Hold on."

He turned left across the highway with the same kind of aggression Wes' father would have, but his posture was relaxed, the big, hard steering wheel spinning through his hand with ease, the truck riding as smooth as it could. Each action seemed an instinct - flip of the turn signal, switching lanes, turning down a street.

He drove them the back way along the same street they had crossed a few hours ago. They passed the small, brown patio homes on the right, where poorer people lived. The soccer fields and recreation center were on the left. They stopped, turned left down the hill, left again onto their street, and they were home. Wes' parents weren't.

"What's your bike look like?" Pritchard said, looking at Stacey.

"Yellow 10-speed," she said.

"Anything else?"

She tugged on a loose strand of hair.

"Need something," he said.

"Mmm. Oh!" she said. "Stickers of stars on the seat."

"All right," he said. "Get going."

They got out and walked toward the house. Pritchard whistled a sharp note.

Wes turned around, and Pritchard waved him over, leaning out of the window.

"I ain't lying for you," he said.

Wes nodded.

"I won't say anything," Pritchard said, "unless they ask."

Wes nodded again.

Pritchard looked past him for a second, then looked back. Somehow he looked more serious, his forehead a little more wrinkled.

"Be careful," he said.

"Ok," Wes said. "Thanks."

Wes wanted to hug him, though he couldn't and knew he shouldn't. Instead he waved and walked back toward Stacey, who stood in the garage, bouncing a basketball.

Pritchard backed out and drove away.

"Is he telling you what to do?" she said.

Wes shook his head.

"What you doing now?" she said.

He shrugged. He just wanted to go inside and lie down and wait for his mom.

"Want to shoot some baskets?" she said.

He shook his head.

"I'm going inside," he said. "I'm tired."

She tapped the ball back and forth between her fingertips, then faked a pass to him, grabbing it and pulling it back. He flinched. She grinned.

"Come on," she said.

"Nah," he said.

"Afraid I'll beat you?"

"I know you will," he said.

She held the ball now to her chest.

"I'm going in," he said again.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Something is," she said. "Are you mad at me?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?" she said. "Everyone else is."

"I'm not," he said.

She bounced the ball once.

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm just tired," he said, "ok?"

She threw the ball up and almost hit a window in the open garage door. She caught it.

"Ok," she said. "Can I shoot?"

"Sure," he said.

Inside, he turned on the TV. A rerun of *M*A*S*H* was the best choice. He drank the rest of the Coke from the store, then got another from the refrigerator and sat at the kitchen table. He tried to pay attention, but they talked too fast, and the intermittent thump of the ball against the basket on the garage distracted him.