

My Name's Roy



Before I shake my older brother Milton awake, I eat all the food—a hard dinner roll and a teaspoon of peanut butter scraped from the bottom of the Adams jar. I set the empty jar quietly in the trash so I won't wake Milton. He grunts in his sleep and I stop my loud chewing. If he knows that I'm eating the last of the food, he'll seriously beat my butt.

Once the roll drops into my stomach, I start to get really hungry. My teeth hurt. I want to fill my mouth with one of the cabinet doorknobs just to have something to chew on until the pain in my stomach goes away.

Milton is four years older than me. He goes to middle school, so I don't see much of him around the house except when he's sick. Sometimes in the morning, Milton wakes up for breakfast and he tells me about the motorbike he's rebuilding in the old shed that used to be a horse stable behind our house. Our place used to be a farmhouse. For a while, our dad grew plants behind the thick door of the root cellar and sold the leaves to people who dropped in. Dad and his friends sat around the kitchen table and talked about music while Dad licked sandwich bags closed. My dad, he really likes music. So does Mom. My parents have a stack of albums they play all the time—the Rolling Stones, Paul Butterfield, Jefferson Airplane, bands like that. When my parents are around, the house fills with music and flat, blue clouds of smoke and people talking about stuff that makes everyone laugh. Once in a while, Mom and Dad don't come home for a few days from the parties at their friends' houses. They sleep over a lot.

This morning, as I walk into the living room rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I realize the Chevy is gone. I see the clotted and oil-stained gravel where the car normally sits in the driveway. The only car in the driveway is my old Tonka dump truck, its yellow bed filling with rainwater.

In the big bedroom, the sheets of my parents' bed lie on the floor. My Mom's old blouses printed with paisleys, blouses with brown and orange and red stripes, are piled up on the bed. She left her old clothes and took all her new clothes, ones she stitched for herself with her new sewing machine. Even the Singer is gone now. She sewed the clothes for herself with the thin, crinkly,

cut-out patterns she kept in the white plastic bag from the Benjamin Franklin Variety Store in Issaquah. She took me there once. While she looked through the rolls of cloth, I stuffed a plastic water pistol into my pocket. Before we left, the manager made Mom pay for the pistol and she needed to use our return bus fare. We waited together in the Pick Axe restaurant for Dad to come and pay the tab and take us home. While we sat there, Mom and I did crossword puzzles and I drank one Coke after another. The waiter kept giving us slices of hot sourdough bread with little squares of butter.

Still chewing on the roll, I search through the back of the cupboards for some food. At the bottom of a macaroni-and-cheese box, I find some noodles and pretend they're popcorn. Mom and Dad have taken all the good stuff from Milton's and my room—my stuffed animals, my box of plastic army soldiers, my battery-powered tank.

I wait for Milton to wake up or Mom to return. I don't have the TV to watch, so I sit on the sofa and page through Mom's old magazines, ones with photographs of gardens and lawn furniture and orderly living rooms with books in the shelves. Mom has all the magazines like this because sometimes they have hints about sewing clothes or, as she once said, "ways to make this pigsty not so piggie." She has Better Homes & Gardens, Redbook, Family Circle. She has a lot of magazines, and reading them is the only thing I can do while I wait to tell my brother what has happened.

I look for pictures of people that look like Mom and Dad, but I can't find them. In Mom's magazines, families eat outside on picnic tables with red and white checkered tablecloths and paper plates instead of the grooved and glazed ceramic plates that Mom made at the Seattle YMCA. Men don't wear long black ponytails unless they are in biker costumes. But Dad isn't a biker. He drives a car. But instead of a new, little car he drives a rusted Impala Supersport that's older than Milton.

Mom once got in trouble for trying to buy People magazine. She slid the magazine from the rack while Dad, she, and I waited behind a man buying a load of beer and watermelon. "Christ," Dad said. He grabbed Mom by her wrists. He told her in a growling voice, "We don't need that filth in our house. Real people don't really read these things, they just sell plastic stuff to plastic people." Then he shook Mom's wrist and tossed the magazine back into the rack. But next time it was just me and her and she slipped the magazine into her bag.

Inside Mom's magazines, I hope I will find some clue as to what she has

done, where she has gone. They have been gone before, but they always leave enough food for us. Mom, and especially Dad, have never been good at telling us what the plans are. Our family just does things. One day we will be living in a house, and the next day we will be on the road toward a new city.

"Christ," Milton says when he wakes up and I tell him that Mom and Dad are gone, gone with everything important, like the TV, the stereo, and the cans of chili Dad brought home for us to eat this week. I smell something on my brother's breath like cigarette smoke. He quickly walks around the house rubbing his armpits and smelling his fingers while he looks at the places where our parents' stuff isn't. "Christ," he says again.

"You know what to do," I tell him. He has to know what to do, because I've read all the Redbooks I can stand.

When my brother opens the refrigerator door, he leaves it open. That's okay because there isn't anything in it.

"Where did they go?" I ask him. I can feel the cold air of the refrigerator filling the kitchen. If Dad saw Milton, someone would be getting some serious blue bruises.

Milton opens the cupboards looking for the chili that's supposed to be there. He looks at all the stuff that isn't there and he says, "Hell, I don't know."

"You don't know? You're my older brother, you have to know, don't you?"

"Don'tcha?" he says, mimicking me. "Look, we may sleep in the same room. I may sleep in the bunk below you, but that doesn't mean that I'm really your brother. I'm not related to a freak like you."

I sit down on the edge of the table. "We have the same mother and the same father. I'm not your half brother. I'm your full brother, the real thing."

"If I'm your brother, where are Mom and Dad?" He ducks out of the kitchen and I close the refrigerator door.

He puts on his work shirt and he walks through the rain to the old stable and starts working on his motorcycle that they haven't taken and I wish they had. Sometimes, when my brother pretends he likes me, he calls me Stickbutt, because one time when we went skinny-dipping in the Snoqualmie River my legs were so skinny he couldn't look at me. "Get your pants back on and hide your skinny ass," he said.

I sit at the window with a handful of magazines and watch the rain fall and roll down the driveway in a muddy stream. While I sit there watching, a

police car pulls into the drive, and a policeman in a black raincoat and a big Smokey the Bear hat walks up to the house. He stops to look at my old Tonka truck. I don't want him to think I've ever played with it. When he sees me looking at him, I wave and I open the door. I can take care of myself. I don't want a policeman to take me to a foster home, to a couple of strangers who'd be jealous of my real mom and dad.

"Hello," he says in a deep voice that sounds just like I thought it would sound.

"Hi," I say, and I lean against the door, acting like Milton.

"Your parents around?"

"They just left to get some milk," I say, "and some Cheerios. My brother's here, but he says he's not really my brother and he won't listen to me when I tell him he is."

"Yeah," the policeman says. He tips his hat back and looks up to where my brother works and makes a racket in the shed. "Well, he shouldn't say a thing like that to his own brother."

"No, he shouldn't," I say, "but that's the way he is."

"Mind if I take a look around?" he asks me.

"Help yourself," I say.

He walks through the house. He stands in the root cellar where my dad, just yesterday, had been growing his big green plants. "So this is where your dad had his own little garden," the policeman says. He knocks an almost empty ten-gallon drum over, dumping out a handful of potting soil. I wait while the policeman goes and tells Milton that he shouldn't talk to his brother the way he does. Milton doesn't even stop working. He just lies under his motorbike because he's so rude.

The policeman gets back into his police car and he says, "When they come home, why don't you give me a call so we don't have to worry about you." The thick blue carpet and warm odor of coffee make me want to get into the car and just sit in the seat and watch the rain rush down the windowpanes. He rips a yellow-lined piece of paper from his plastic notebook. I hold the paper in my hand. His handwriting is square and huge.

"Thanks," I say.

As the police car pulls away, I fall back onto the wet front steps, breathing in the cold odor of moldy wood and listening to the clash of metal from Milton's work. No one will take me away. I can just wait until my parents come home. When they come home with groceries, I'll eat sandwiches and

pizzas until I expand like Jiffy Pop. The house will fill with music and smoke and my parents' friends who laugh so hard they have to cover their mouths with both their hands.

Milton fires his motorbike. The engine buzzes and spits like the starting lawn mower. Milton flexes his muscles while he twists the throttle. He looks at me and bats the hair out of his eyes. He grins and laughs but I can't hear his voice over the roar. Dropping the back wheel to the ground, he jumps on the seat and races down the driveway, past me and away. I fold my hands under my butt and sit with my legs crossed while I listen to the buzz of the bike fade down the road. I wait for him to come back.

He doesn't come back until much later and, by that time, I've drawn the water for a bath and sat in the water until it's grown cold. I find an old pair of scissors and cut out all the pictures of women in the magazines and stack them according to hair color. The blondes have the largest stack but Mom has brown hair and I find a few women with brown hair and I stack them and pair them with likely men. I can't find any man who looks like my father, with his long black ponytail and bristly beard, among the men in blue suits and yellow polo shirts.

A girl with sort-of-brown hair comes back with Milton. She sits on the back of Milton's motorbike, has her small white hands folded across his chest. She carries a backpack, Alpine Explorer, the same model Milton and Dad use when they go hiking for a long time. They like the metal frame and dozen pockets because they can carry apples or cassette tapes or Milky Ways. Milton rides the bike up the drive and then they jump from the back. She smiles at me and he smiles at me. "Hey, Stickbutt," he says, "this is Annie. She's my girl."

"Hey," Annie says. She holds the straps of the backpack with her hands. She flicks up her chin when she says the word like she's just met me on the street or something. She nods like she wants me to think she's cool.

Milton says, "Hey, Babe, give me that backpack." When he takes her off the bike he kisses her on the lips. As he kisses her she closes her eyes and leans back. He kisses her and then he does something gross. He puts his tongue in her mouth.

"Why are you doing that, Milton?" I ask.

He says, "Stop looking, perv, and take this inside." He tosses me the backpack. It's light. When I take it inside, I find wrinkled shirts, jeans, and an army surplus raincoat stuffed into the main pocket. She has a book, Hollywood

Wives, by Jackie Collins. I sit on the sofa with the book. Someone has written in loopy handwriting on the inside cover, "To lovely Ann for her fourteenth birthday."

"You like my book?"

"It fell out of your backpack," I say as I push her clothes back inside the flap.

"So what's your name besides Stickbutt?" Annie asks. She doesn't sit on the sofa next to me, but flops down spraying her soft hair over my face. I smell her perfume—if that is what it is—some sort of odor like scented soap or smelly shampoo. I try to look down her shirt but Milton has already come into the room and he sits down on the arm of the sofa above Annie and he looks down her shirt.

"My name's Roy," I say.

"Roy?" Milton asks.

"My name."

"No, it isn't," Milton says. "Your name's Dillon."

"That's not his name," Annie says. "This kid's name is Roy."

"Dillon's my first name. My middle name's Roy, so call me Roy. Roy's a good guy's name."

"You're not a good guy."

"What do you know about being a good guy?" I ask Milton. All Milton knows about is how to break down his motorcycle and how to fix the thing.

"So what're you two doing back here?" I ask. "I was just getting settled and I thought I would sit down and have dinner."

"We scored some hot dogs and stuff from Annie's," Milton says. "How about that?" He jumps off the arm of the couch and he opens the side pocket of the backpack and pulls out hot dogs and buns and mustard and a Heinz ketchup bottle with about half the ketchup pushed to the bottle top. My empty stomach just about buckles from all the excitement.

After we eat the hot dogs, Milton tells me that I have to stay in my room for a while and he and Annie disappear into my parents' bedroom.

I see Milton and Annie leave just as it gets dark. They coast down the driveway with the engine off. They wear army surplus raincoats. The green hoods fade down the street in the darkness and rain.

When I wake up in the morning it's so cold I pull Milton's blankets down from

his bunk. I fall asleep again huddled under the heavy pile of blankets. Later Mom comes. She comes down from the woods behind the house and pinches me awake. She says that she was going to get me yesterday but there was a trooper cruiser in the driveway. "Come on, Dillon, we're going to meet Dad."

"My name's Roy," I say.

"Come on, Roy," she says.

"What about Milton?"

"Milton's got a bike; he'll turn up on his own."

"When can I have a bike?"

"As soon as you're old enough," she says.

I tell on Milton and say that he has a girlfriend named Annie.

"Milton's old enough to take care of himself," she says as we climb out of the back window and walk up the hill. I look back down to the house where we had lived. I see smoke rising through the rain from some of the other houses down the hill. In the driveway I see the yellow Tonka and I wish like a stupid kid that I can play with it for a moment. "What about your magazines?" I ask Mom. But she's not there. She's already walking into the trees and I hurry to catch her.