

## We're Sorry

Like in church that time, I can't stop laughing and that's what's getting us in trouble, I know, because that starts Colin laughing too and jumping up in his seat like he's about to go off and once he does I won't be able to stop him so I'm trying to keep him calm but it's not working because he's what's making me laugh.

Frances is at the counter getting us Jumbo Jacks with onion rings and vanilla shakes. My brother and I are waiting in a red booth by the window wearing our new Baltimore Oriels shirts Frances got us and Colin's already has spit on it. I have to keep pulling sugar packets and twisted napkins out of his hands and grabbing old gum from under the table he puts in his mouth and telling him not to suck his thumb either, but he can't help it. He's excited about the vanilla shakes.

And he's laughing really really loud...

There's no one here but us and the counter people and Frances at the counter too but Frances has her hands on her hips and the look that says, What'd I tell you boys, so Colin drops his still laughing face into his hand, nervous rocks, and says, Be good now vanilla shake, which should be You two be good now if you want vanilla shakes, which is what Frances told us a minute ago.

I reach across the table and pull Colin's sloppy hand away from his mouth, tell him sit up straight but when he comes up he's all Cross-eyed Bill, bucktooth drooling, a slow squeal coming out his chapped mouth because he's too excited to care anymore and I'm Laughing Jack again which is what he wants, which isn't good, because that's me telling him it's okay to go off

even though right now it really isn't because Frances might march us back to the car like that time in church.

Frances puts the ketchup bottle down on the table and we both sit up. I am looking not at my brother's faces, not Cross-eyed Bill or Drooly Ben. I am not watching his chap mouth grin. I am smiling the other way. I am watching out the window. I am a notsmiling boy when Frances says, Oh you two, and sits down across from me still looking out the serious window. Look what a beautiful day we're having together, Frances says and I turn to nod, Yes a beautiful day, because it is most definitely a beautiful day outside and in here too if we get vanilla shakes with our Jumbo Jacks. She pushes Colin's hair out of his eyes and Colin leans back like a dog saying rub his belly. She runs her fingers through his hair like our dad does and tells me we can go past the horses later if I want to and I say, Hell yeah! in my Mission Jim voice and Colin goes, Hell yeah! too and Frances gives me the *Watch your mouth now* look and I look at her like sorry and say, I would love to and Colin whispers Love to love to into his hand and laughs a little.

Then she's gone. Back to the counter to wait for our food and it's just us again and the empty booths. I hope the shakes come out fast.

Colin's still all sleepy-eyed zombie from Frances rubbing his head when he pushes his hand across the table for me to tickle his palm, also like our dad does. I run my finger in circles and his eyes go heavy, but when I stop to check on Frances he pushes his hand back at me like a dog pawing your leg to keep petting him. Wait! I say, getting mad because I don't feel like it anymore. I just want our food to come out quick so we can eat and get on to the vanilla shakes and the horses.

I give Colin a look that says quit it or else, so Colin sits up with his hands folded polite in front of him and stays quiet for maybe a minute. Then he starts to giggle so I say, I'll kick you I mean it and then I tell him Shush but he starts praying for our food: God is good, God is great, let him thank us for this food amen. Then he slaps the table hard and says Hallelujah! like in Frances' church, loud enough that everyone can hear him but there's still no one in here but us. I kick him under the table and he puts his head in his hand again when Frances says, Hey now! from across the room. She's got the look that says, don't make me tell you again, the same look our mother gets, so we both sit still not looking at anything and Colin's quiet for a whole five minutes.

Harrison, Colin says after a while, but I just shush him again, tell him to act right or we won't get anything. Harrison, he says again, and I ignore him, trying not to look at him. He's making a new face at me now, I know it. He says my name one more time but I'm looking out the window at an eighteen wheeler pulling into the parking lot and driving toward the back when the biggest fart in the world blasts off of the curved plastic seat under Colin and I'm not even trying not to laugh any more when Frances shoots her eyes at us and shakes her head like there go the milk shakes but I really can't help it now and Frances is smiling a little while she's shaking her head probably because she heard it too.

Then Colin says, Harrison I made a smell.

In the bathroom it's always the same. I tell Colin, Close the stall, I'm right here, and don't forget to flush... He says, Can I have a milkshake? Yes, now shut up and do your business... Then silence for a while and I ask, Are you done yet? French fries? No, onion rings.

Are you done yet? Then there's a flush and the door swings open. Come on, zip up, I tell him. Onion rings? Yes! I told you, onion rings... stop sniffing that... zip up and wash your hands, get your thumb out of your mouth! Come on, I'm hungry, wash your hands... I'm sorry, he says. It's okay, I say, Let's go... I turn the water on and wait for him to soap his hands. I'm sorry, Harrison, he says, I'm sorry. I stare at him to see if he'll say it again and he does, just like always. Forgive me? I'll be good now, vanilla shake. I'm sorry, Harrison, sorry. It's okay, I tell him. He smiles at me all nervous though and says, It's okay, right? And I tell him for the millionth time in our lives yes.

Then I tell him that's too many paper towels... here give it to me... come on, let's go, you're taking too long... and tuck your shirt in... Hey, get that paper off your shoe...

But all he's thinking now is about the vanilla shakes and so am I so I don't try to stop him when he starts dancing. I don't say anything when he starts swinging his arms and spinning because he's happy we're getting Jumbo Jacks and onion rings and vanilla shakes, but when Colin windmills through the inswung door he uppercuts the trucker in the chin.

The trucker doesn't know what to do at first and neither do we, so everyone freezes for a second, red light stop, then Colin buries his face in his hand, and I say, He's sorry, sir, we're sorry, we were just excited and jumping around, we didn't mean it, and Colin says, Sorry, sorry, sorry Harrison, sorry, and the trucker goes, Well calm the fuck down, Jesus fucking Christ! and rubs his chin in the doorway, and Colin goes, Jesus fucking Christ! real loud and licks his hand and the trucker goes, What'd you say? But I just say again, We're sorry, sir, we're leaving, and Colin repeats after me, We're leaving, and he lets out a nervous laugh, and the trucker can't believe it. He says, You got a smart mouth, boy, you'd better watch yourself, so I say one more

time we're sorry and I push Colin out the door and the trucker bumps me into the wall as we go by. Sorry, Colin says, sorry sir, and we run for it.

When we get to the table our burgers are there and the onion rings and, hell yeah, the shakes are too. We start eating and the trucker walks past like he just got down from a horse after a long ride and goes up to the counter to order his food.

Frances keeps telling Colin to slow down his eating because he'll wolf it down so fast he'll throw up. He does that if you let him.

In two more days Colin will be nine and a week after that I'm ten. Six days a year we're the same age and I always know what I'm getting for my birthday because Colin usually gets it first in a different color even though he's younger. But this year Colin's getting a bike with training wheels so he can ride around with me but I don't think the training wheels will work so good on our dirt road. I guess we'll see.

Our mom says we're Irish twins but we don't look the same. Colin's got blonde hair mine's brown and he's got buck teeth and sores on his arm from biting it all the time, plus he sucks his thumb. When he talks to his hand he doesn't make any sense. Mostly he just repeats junk his teachers at school said, or the bus driver, or our mom—things like Put your coat on when he's already got his coat on, stuff like that. He laughs a lot too, but not because something's funny, mostly for no reason at all, or sometimes he just screams for no reason too. Our dad says he screams like blue Jesus and I guess that's right.

The worst is when he starts licking things, like the kitchen table or the backs of chairs and stuff, or when he picks things off the floor and sticks them in his mouth. I'm supposed to tell him

not to do that, especially outside or in the barn because of poison and stuff but he does it anyway and I get so mad I hit him sometimes and then he bites his arm and I get in trouble which isn't fair so I hit him again when no one's looking.

What I really want for my birthday this year is my own room, though, because Colin keeps me up at night with his bad dreams and sometimes he sneaks in under the covers next to me and wets the bed. But he's afraid of the dark and if I'm not there when he goes to sleep he gets scared and won't lie down, so I don't think I'll get my own room yet but I'm going to ask for it anyway.

The trucker takes his tray of food and sits a table away from us against the wall. Frances looks up for a second and smiles like she always does when she sees somebody for the first time, but he just stares at us like we're from outer space then opens his food and starts shaking salt on it. Frances just goes, Huhn, and looks back at us then wipes Colin's mouth.

Colin asks for more ketchup. He likes ketchup more than any other food in the world except maybe milkshakes or donuts, and Frances squirts some out on his onion rings then scoots the tray closer to him so he won't drop any on the floor because he'll eat them anyway. Colin lifts the bun off his Jumbo Jack and she squirts some on his burger too, even though there's already lots on there, and then she tells him, Wipe your mouth, now, remember what I told you, and Colin wipes his mouth with a napkin and smiles up at us both like this is the best day of his life, except every day is like that with him.

You eat nice and slow now Frances says to Colin as he's stuffing his last onion ring into his mouth. I'm gonna run to the bathroom right quick, I'll be back, and she walks off. I squirt ketchup on my onion rings and put one in my mouth. Colin holds out his hand like I should give

him one, but I just shake my head no and he gives me his Frowny Ben. He starts sucking on his shake and making eyes at me again but I'm ignoring him now. I'm eating. But Colin's goofing again, trying to get me to look.

He's leaning over all Cross-eyed Bill and sucking loud at the bottom of his shake making that empty cup sound, and when I'm still ignoring him he stands up on the seat and starts dancing with his thumb out like Fonzie, the thumb he sucked till it's raw and sore and tiny and red, and with his empty shake in the other hand he's dancing back and forth going, Ayeee! Ayeee! louder and louder now till he's got me and I look.

Which makes Colin go bananas.

He starts in even more now adding a crazy hop to his dance and getting louder with the Ayeee! and that's when the trucker stomps over and smacks him bang across the back of the head and Colin goes flying over the table across the last of my onion rings and ketchup is everywhere, even on my new shirt. There's no one else in the whole place except us and the trucker and the counter people, but the counter people are just staring like they can't believe this either but they're not doing anything to stop it so I don't know whose side they're on.

God damn it, the trucker says, You boys need to learn some fucking manners! and he leans over us like he might hit us both this time and Colin's screaming like you never heard before and the man's face is boiling over and I'm trying to pull Colin up by his pants and tell him shush but I'm scared too. Where's Frances?

I'm yelling Frances! Frances! as the trucker raises his hand again and steps over top of me to shut me up but Frances comes shooting out of the bathroom and she's on him like a dog whose yard you're in, not playing or wanting a pat, just mean and snarling. She grabs the

trucker's arm from behind and spins him around superfast so the man just freezes for a second totally caught off guard and he doesn't know what to do but Frances keeps coming.

Shame on you! she yells into his face, she says, holding his thick arm by his tattooed wrist. Frances is as tall as the trucker is, and he's taller than our dad, so the man is trying to figure out what to do next or who he can hit. He's all steam faced and quiet for a second and then he's yelling at Frances and Frances is yelling back and Colin's still screaming and I'm pulling him up off the floor by his Oriels shirt.

These kids're wrecking my goddamn dinner! he yells into Frances' face and points his stumpy finger at us. They been running around like animals since I walked in. Why don't you control them? You gonna let them wreck everyone's night? And then he looks around to see if anyone else agrees with him, but the counter people are all out front now and one lady comes over and gives Colin a plastic dish of ice cream with hot fudge that shuts him up finally and I say thank you.

They're wild animals, the trucker starts up again. They ran into me in the bathroom. That one hit me right in the mouth and they didn't even say they were sorry.

We did too, and it was an accident, I say, wanting to hit him for real and kind of wanting some ice cream too.

Then Frances lets go of his arm and takes a step back. She breathes a big slow breath and just stares at the man. He starts to say something else but Frances shoots him a look that says, Go ahead I dare you, so he stands quiet.

Frances says to him in a soft voice, Can't you see he's special, Mister?

You mean he's a fucking retard, the trucker says, getting a swipe in.



But Frances just tilts her head and locks him with her brown eyes glowing and says, What did you just say? And everyone in the whole place is silent like prayer, like uh oh.

They should lock him up, you ask me, the trucker says. He's a drooling lunatic. He should be put down like a sick dog.

He leans toward Frances as he says this like, I'm not scared of you, lady.

But Frances has her church voice on now when she says, Look at him and say that again, Mister. Take a good look at that poor little boy over there that you made cry, and you a grown man who should know better. What kind of man are you? The trucker looks at Colin for a second and shoots back at Frances but Frances goes, No sir, you take a good long look, Mister. Look at him and recognize what he is and what you are for hitting him. That boy's got as much right to this life as you do, and he's got a mother who worries something sick over him because this world is gonna be hard for him. Go on, look at him. He's got it tough in this life already, she says, Can't you see that or are you too perfect yourself to even see someone like him? He's got it hard, Mister, and when people like you make it harder because they won't even look at him, that's just sinful... sinful, so help me God.

Frances looks like she's searching for a Hallelujah and the counter people are crowded around her now like that's right, Mister, shame on you, you're going straight to hell.

The trucker looks down at Colin then, who's sitting low in the booth and not even eating his ice cream he's so scared. He's got his hand up in front of his face, fingers twitching, saying sorry, sorry, I'm sorry.

Then Frances takes another deep breath and says in her *everything's okay* voice, Sir, I'm awfully sorry the boy bothered you. I'm sorry he ran into you. If he ruined your dinner, I'm sorry, and he's sorry, we're all sorry, but he can't always help it is what I'm trying to tell you. I'd

be happy to pay for your meal and we'll leave you in peace to finish your evening. I can't apologize enough.

She opens her purse and reaches inside for a five-dollar bill, and I can't believe she's going to give him money, but the trucker puts his hand over hers to say that's okay. He rubs the back of his neck with his big paw and gives Frances the sorriest look I've ever seen. He's like a whipped dog with a murdered chicken tied around its neck.

He says, I'm sorry I lost my temper, I didn't mean to, they got on my nerves is all and I've had a long day. I'm sorry about smacking the kid, that was wrong. I hope I didn't hurt him.

Frances just smiles at him like she did when he first walked in, like We're all God's children so we'll be forgiven.

It'd be nice if you told the boy that, she says. It would help me explain all this to him later, and the trucker says to Colin, I'm sorry, kid, I'm sorry, and Colin goes, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry into his hand but he won't look at the man or anyone else, so the trucker says to me, I'm sorry, I am, and walks out, bowlegged and beaten.

Driving through the hills, the sun is dropping over the trees behind us and the back of Frances's car is glowing yellow and warm. We're speeding away from the blazing sun. We're speeding away from Jack-in-the-Box. We're speeding toward the racetrack where Frances' husband works, where we'll get to pet all the horses, every one, and we'll get to help him brush them down for the night, my favorite thing.