

Adrenaline and Blood

"Friday night out with the guys, Wade," his father said, toweling off and pulling on clean jeans. "You and me are going to Daryl's to par-tee."

High fives, fist bumps, and a stop at the liquor store. Wade's heart raced. Since his mother's gruesome death two years earlier, a week before Wade's seventh birthday, his father usually left him at Gramma's on Friday nights. But Gramma boarded the Megabus for Chicago on Thursday to spend a week with her sister, leaving Wade's father no choice. It would be a boy's night out with Daryl, his father's oldest friend. The two men had grown up together in the same small town just west of Cedar Rapids. Now they drove trucks and loaded vending machines with chips for Frito-Lay.

Wade's father headed out of town on the two-lane blacktop singing along with Jimmy Dale Gilmore on the radio. "Everybody's baby but mine"

Three miles later he swung the rusty, faded red Chevelle off the highway onto a gravel lane, parking next to Daryl's pickup in a swirl of dust. Father and son loped across the hard packed dirt yard toward the back steps of a beige, skirtless, double-wide. Cicadas buzzed in the cottonwood canopy of Daryl's lot, a quarter acre carved out of a field of tasseled corn that had once held a farm house. The remains of the caved-in barn cast a long shadow over the mobile home.

Wade shaded his eyes against the slanting evening sun and hurried to keep up. His father hoisted a brown bag above his head like a trophy and pumped his arm as they climbed the two metal steps and entered Daryl's tidy kitchen. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke, microwaved pizza rolls, and Glade air freshener. The aluminum screen door banged shut behind them.

"I've got the JD," Wade's father called. He opened a cupboard and pulled out two canning jars to use as tumblers. Wade wandered into the living room looking for Daryl, hoping for a wrestling match before they settled down to play cards. Daryl and a towheaded little girl sat hunched forward on the orange and brown plaid sofa, each holding controls to a video game, their eyes locked on *SpongeBob's Truth or Square* on the flat screen TV.

"There's ice in the fridge," Daryl called without looking up. "Make one for me. You bring the Dude?"

"Right here," Wade said. He stood behind the couch watching their play.

"Awright, Dude," Daryl reached a hand over the back of the couch for a fist bump. "Take over for me, will ya? I can't stand losin' to this pip-squeak."

Daryl tweaked the girl's blond ponytail, and then pulled his lanky frame up from the couch.

"Dude," he said. "This's my niece, Mandy."

Neither of the kids spoke. Daryl shrugged, threw a few fake punches at Wade, then shadow boxed his way to the kitchen. "Let the party begin," he said.

Wade threw himself into the warm spot Daryl left on the couch, his arms folded across his chest, aware now why his father had been so happy to bring him along.

"Don't jiggle," the girl said. "You'll mess me up."

He bounced two or three times, making her pony tail sway about her slender neck. Her eyes never left the screen. Her small shoulders poked out of the armholes of her sleeveless top and rounded toward the TV.

"Yes!" she said when her final score came up. She turned to Wade with a wide smile. Two thin white lines peeked through her gums where new front teeth were just beginning to emerge. She raised her hand for a high five. Wade kept his arms folded and looked away from her.

"Uncle Daryl says you're good at video games," she said. "You wanna play?"

He snatched up the control Daryl had dropped on the couch.

"I know your name," she said. She had moved so close to him he could smell her watermelon bubble gum.

"So?" He jabbed her with his elbow and she scooted over, just a bit.

"It's Wade."

"I know my own name," he said, glancing at her through narrowed eyes.

"Uncle Daryl's my mom's brother. He said my mom and your mom were friends in high school, just like your dad and him."

She picked up a purple plush pony, marched it across her lap.

"My mom's dead," he said.

She trotted the pony in Wade's direction. "I know. Uncle Daryl told me."
"Did he tell you I don't like know-it-alls?" he said, turning to glare at her.
She hugged the pony to her chest. "Was she sick?" she asked, her voice quieter now.

He looked away from her, his voice, too, softening. "She fell down the basement stairs. Broke her neck and other things."

"Did you see her?"

"I was at my Gramma's."

He sighed, looked down at the controls cradled in his hands, and thought that if he'd been there he'd have somehow stopped his parents from drinking that night and his mother would still be alive. The coroner ruled his mother's death an accident, but Wade knew how they fought sometimes, especially when his father drank.

"How old were you?" Mandy said. "When she died."

"Seven." He tightened his grip on the controls. "I'm trying to concentrate here. Do you mind?"

"That's how old I am. I bet you miss her. I'd miss my mom if she died. Her and my dad're showing cattle at the State Fair in Des Moines, so I'm staying with Uncle Daryl. I miss her now. Don't you miss your mom?"

"That's a stupid question."

Wade tossed the control on the couch and headed toward the kitchen, embarrassed by the fact that sometimes he had to go into Gramma's bedroom to look at his mother's high school graduation picture on the night stand in order to

remember her face. Even then, it was difficult. He had never known her so young. He struggled to reconcile the soft, carefree eyes in that photograph with the weary eyes of the woman who came home from working all night at the post office as he got up for school, the terrified eyes of the woman who hid with him in the basement when his father came stumbling home in a drunken rage.

Wade's father and Daryl sat at the kitchen table playing pitch. Drinking. Grousing now and then about some asshole at work, and reliving their hunting adventures. Laughing. The dusty wooden blades of a slow-moving ceiling fan swirled cigarette smoke above their heads. Daryl tore open a bag of tortilla chips and dipped one in a bowl of salsa that sat next to the ashtray. He maneuvered it carefully into his mouth then wiped his hands on his jeans and picked up his cards.

"Wade?" Daryl said. "You bein' nice to Mandy."

"Can I play?" Wade said.

His father, in the early, amiable stages of his night's drinking, grinned.

"Set yourself down there, son." He pushed a chair out with the toe of his boot.

"Me and Daryl'll teach you a thing or two about pitch."

His father was shorter than Daryl, but had the same, sinewy forearms and biceps that bulged visibly each time he lifted his glass to drink or took a drag on his Camel.

Wade sat. He watched the men carefully, placed his elbows on the table when they did, and threw his cards down with the same disdain or bravado. He

sipped a Mountain Dew when they lifted their drinks, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, but refrained from cursing. He knew better than to cross that line.

Mandy wandered into the kitchen now and then urging Wade to return to SpongeBob. She stood beside Wade's chair, staring at him with puppy eyes.

"I brought my Disney movies. I want somebody to watch with me," she said with a little stamp of her foot.

"Go on, Wade," his father said. "Why don't you go play with that cute little girl? You like Disney movies."

Wade shot her a look. "I wanna play cards."

Finally, Mandy trudged back to the living room. The theme from *Beauty and the Beast* drifted into the kitchen. As the card game and drinking got more serious, the men's voices grew louder and their talk less frequent. Wade glanced often at his father. He had seen him turn mean when he was drinking, then not remember what he'd said and done the next day, even when Wade had a bruise on his forehead where the back of his father's hand had connected.

It was getting dark, now, and Daryl got up to turn on the overhead light, illuminating the dust bunnies that floated along baseboards. Wade shuffled the cards with great care and dealt them deliberately, two at a time, counting softly under his breath. A killdeer shrieked outside the open kitchen window as it dove for moths flitting around the yard light.

"Hurry it up, Wade," his father said. "If you can't handle the cards right you might as well go in the other room with that girl."

Daryl stepped over his chair and sat down again. "Ease up on the Dude, John. He's doin' good for a kid."

"Well, it ain't good enough." His father grabbed the cards from Wade's trembling hands and shuffled repeatedly.

Wade bit his lip. He wanted this to be a good time, like that day last November when his father, after much begging on Wade's part, had taken him hunting for the first time.

Wade had stepped carefully then, stretching to place his feet exactly where his father had crunched through the snow-crusting corn stubble ahead of him. Wade, with his mitten, brushed aside dried weeds that scratched against his face. Their breath puffed in little white clouds and made frost crystals on his father's mustache. His father stopped suddenly. In the taut quiet, he swung his .22 long rifle to his shoulder and fired, leaving a haze of cordite to sting their nostrils. Wade felt a new kind of excitement, and then he heard the screams. At first, he did not connect them to the wounded rabbit. When his father grabbed the flailing animal in his gloved hands and with one swift movement wrenched the head from the body, Wade's stomach lurched. His father dropped the carcass and flung the head into the weeds.

"Feeding the crows," he said. He knelt, clutched the nape fur of the headless carcass, and peeled it from the pink flesh as easily as Wade could slide off his mittens. Wade's mouth hung open in the frigid air. It didn't look like a bunny anymore. He felt relieved not to have to see those terrified eyes, not to have to hear the screams.

It is easy to die, he thought.

His father pulled a knife from the sheath in his boot, and slit the skinned rabbit from throat to anus. With gloved hands, he scooped out the innards. Wade winced at the stench of entrails, and swallowed in an effort not to vomit. His father smiled up at him.

"How do you like hunting, now, Dude?" his father asked.

"Fine," Wade shuddered. "But I got a funny taste in my mouth. Like metal."

"Adrenaline," his father said. He zipped the slick pink carcass into a plastic bag and shoved it into the pouch of his hunting jacket, then cleaned his knife and gloves with snow. "Adrenaline and blood taste the same," he said. "It's the rush of hunting. Gets you all excited."

As they tramped back through the weeds toward the car, his father put his free arm across Wade's shoulder. In the other he cradled his rifle. They walked a long way like that, his father's arm, warm and relaxed, his own arm brushing his father's pant leg.

Now, Wade was determined to make this a good time, too. He watched his cards carefully, laughing when the men laughed. The ashtray was full, the salsa dish empty, and the Jack Daniels had disappeared long ago. The men were working their way through a twelve pack of Bud, stacking the empties, along with Wade's Mountain Dew cans in a pyramid on the kitchen counter. Wade, believing his father would be impressed with his card playing skill, laid a trump card on a trick his father clearly intended to take to win the game.

"Pretty good, huh Dad?" he grinned.

"Good at pissing me off," his father said, swiping the cards onto the floor.

"Go on, get outta here. Daryl and I want to play for real."

Tears welled in Wade's eyes. He looked pleadingly at Daryl who merely shrugged his shoulders and winked.

"Better go, Wade. It's getting late anyway."

"But I'm doing good."

His father raised the back of his hand. Wade flinched. He saw the pulsing vein at his father's temple, the ever-so-slight twitch of his jaw, the stark white all around the hazel of his eyes. Wade slid off his chair and headed to the living room which was lit by the glow of the television. He slumped onto the couch next to the girl who sat mesmerized by "Beauty and the Beast."

Wade proclaimed it "totally stupid," and watched intently until the end, when he went to the bathroom to blow his nose on toilet paper. When he returned, Mandy was wearing her pink, Little Mermaid nightgown. She fluffed her pillow, stuck her thumb in her mouth, and curled into a ball on the sofa next to Wade, the purple pony tucked under her arm. Wade took the remote and found Comedy Central. Mandy was asleep within minutes. Wade leaned his head against the frayed arm of the sofa using his own arm as a pillow, and dozed. He awoke sometime later, disoriented, to the stench of his father's sour breath hot on his face.

"C'mon Wade. We gotta go home," his father said in a hoarse whisper.

The TV sat silent. Dark. A chorus of crickets chirred outside the open windows. His father gripped Wade's arm and tried to pull him up, but he staggered, and the two fell back onto the sofa, his father heavy and hot on top of him.

"You gotta get up, Wade. Too big for your ol' man to carry." He put a finger to his lips. "Shhhhh.....Less go."

"Where's Daryl?" Wade said, turning his face to the side to avoid the reek of his father's breath.

"Lightweight's passed out on his bed."

Wade's father pushed himself up, lurched, and nearly fell onto Mandy, who still slept curled into her pillow on the other end of the couch.

"Don't wake l'il Mandy here," his father said, his voice rising as if he were talking to a pet. "Look at her pink l'il toes peeking out from under that nightgown."

He bent down, touched one of her toes with his fingertip, then he stuck out his tongue and ran it slowly along the bottom of her foot. She murmured, wrinkled her toes, and snuggled deeper into her pillow. Her pony fell to the floor.

Wade's stomach lurched. His entire body quickened. He rubbed his own tongue across the ridges in the top of his dry mouth and watched as his father reached out his hand to trace the soft curve of Mandy's ear with his fingertip. Wade's heart raced. Heavy snoring sounds poured from the open door of Daryl's bedroom.

"C'mon, Dad." Wade tugged at his father's hand. "Let's go."

His father jerked free of Wade's grip. "Donchyou ever tell me what to do!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "You un'erstand? Not ever!"

Wade winced, then he bolted from the living room, through the kitchen, and outside into the sultry night air. Every cell of his body wanted to slam the door, but he knew better. Even silence offered no guarantee against being hit when his father was like this.

The bitter disappointment of this men's night out welled up in Wade's throat. He tramped circles in the dirt of the scraggly yard, pounding his fists on his thighs, mumbling "shit shit, shit" over and over under his breath. Before he had completed his second circle he heard the creak of the trailer door. Wade ran to the car, scrambled into the back seat, and pulled the door closed behind him. His father appeared, huge in the yellow circle of the yard light. He tottered down the metal steps cradling the sleeping Mandy against his chest. One of her thin, pale arms dangled as he lumbered across the yard toward the car.

She stirred when he fumbled with the door handle, and came groggily awake when he placed her on the back seat opposite Wade and closed the door.

"Wade?" She pulled her thumb from her mouth. "Where're we going?"

"Ask him." He nodded toward his father who had climbed in front and was fumbling to get the key in the ignition.

Wade folded his arms over his chest, slumped down in his seat, and stared straight ahead. He wanted to tell the girl to get the hell back in the damned house, but his throat locked so tightly he could not make himself speak.

Mandy leaned forward. "Where're we going?" she said to Wade's father. "Where's Uncle Daryl?"

"Goin' for a ride, honey. We're just going for a ride. Your Uncle Daryl don't care."

The engine caught. Gravel flew like buckshot as they sped away from the yard light of the double-wide and into the moonlit darkness of the countryside.

"I don't wanna go with you," Mandy said, throwing herself against the car seat and sticking her thumb back in her mouth.

"Lay down and go to sleep," Wade's father said, his eyes darting at her in the rearview mirror. "You can sleep in the car."

His father veered along the blacktop. Warm evening air, heavy with dew, whipped through the open windows, damp on Wade's bare arms. The sweet scent of freshly mown alfalfa filled the car as they passed one farm after another.

"Why'd you bring...?" Wade started, but his father turned and glared at him over his shoulder, then raised the back of his hand. Wade clenched his fists in his lap, pressing hard on the sore ends of his fingers where he'd bitten his nails to the quick. He punched a fist into his thigh over and over again trying to stop the pain in his chest, trying to think of something to say or do to make his father return the girl to Daryl's.

Mandy whimpered in the back seat. "I wanna go home," she said around her thumb. "I want my mom."

Wade's father looked over his shoulder at Mandy, swerving violently as he did so. "You're okay," he said, his voice betraying his rising irritation. "Quiet down, now."

Her whimpering turned to wailing. Wade leaned toward her, his mouth close to her ear.

"Quit it," he hissed. "You'll piss him off."

"I want my mommy!" she shouted. "I want her now!" She hugged her knees and sobbed even louder - chest heaving, gasping sobs.

I want mine, too, Wade thought, turning his back to her. He clamped his eyes shut and pressed his palms to his ears thinking maybe, if he concentrated hard enough, this would all be a dream. He'd wake up in the morning and things would be okay. He'd be home in his bed, his dad sleeping it off in the next room.

His father gripped the wheel with both hands and mumbled to himself, his shoulders hunched, his face an eerie green, lit from below by the glow of the dash. He swerved off the smooth hardtop and onto gravel. He slowed and dust billowed into the car, filling Wade's nostrils.

"Where we goin', Dad?" Wade said, trying to keep his voice light.

The car came to a halt. Clouds of dust swirled and settled in the foggy glow of the head lamps. Wade's father snapped off the lights and killed the engine. Mandy's wailing was the only sound Wade could hear besides the slow tick-tick-ticking of the hot engine. When the dust began to settle, the air in the car filled with the lush vegetal scent of tasseled corn.

His father opened his door and nearly fell out of the car. Wade sat frozen in the sudden flash of light that disappeared when his father gained his legs and slammed the door behind him. The back door flew open and Mandy's sobs changed to screams. Wade turned to look as his father reached in and grabbed the girl beneath her arms. Her eyes widened in fear, and she reached her hand toward Wade in the half moment before his father jerked her wriggling form from the seat and shoved the door closed with his boot. The bottom of her small pink foot slammed against the window. Wade licked his chapped lips. His heart was pounding its way out of his chest. His mouth tasted of metal. He could not move.

His father, clenching Mandy in his arms, lurched past the front of the car down into the weedy ditch, up the other side, and into the field where corn stood taller than a man. Mandy's pale limbs flailed in the milky blue moonlight. They disappeared into the rows and rows and rows of corn, her screams muffled, now, gagging. Wade shrugged his shoulders up and clamped his hands over his ears. He tried to hum, but his voice would not work. His father's shouts, the girl's shrieks, the crashing of corn stalks muffled their way through the cushions of his palms.

Wade rolled up his window, pressed his hands harder over his ears, bit his trembling lip until he tasted blood. Then silence. Tentatively, he lowered his hands. Crickets. The pounding of his own heart. Boots tromping through weeds. He reached up with his index finger and clicked down the lock to his door, then crouched lower in his seat.

His father jerked open the driver's door. In the flash of light that lasted only a second his father's eyes met his. Blood smeared on his twisted face, on his hands, soaked into his shirt front and down the legs of his trousers. Wade recognized the hunting knife that fell from his father's hand onto the floor of the car. His father slammed the door shut, filling the car with the acrid stench of blood and alcohol sweat. He lifted his hips and zipped his pants, then rubbed his hands over and over on his thighs. He pounded the steering wheel and shouted, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" His head dropped to his chest. His shoulders shook.

Wade had only seen his father cry once before, at his mother's funeral. He reached a trembling hand toward the weeping man's shoulder, but let it fall, instead, onto the car seat. He looked out the window at the wall of corn, the tassels glistening in the moonlight. He pulled his knees up, hugging them tightly to his chest, and he began to rock.

It would be better not to feel at all, he thought, than to feel this.

His father sat up suddenly, drew in a deep breath, and wiped his eyes with the back of his bloodied hand. He turned in his seat to face Wade.

"Don't you say nothing to nobody," he said, his speech no longer slurred. "You were with me. If you say anything we'll both go to jail. We'll never see each other again. You understand?"

Wade did not understand. He hugged his knees tighter and nodded.

His father reached over the seat, grabbed Wade's arm and shook him.

"You understand?"

"Yeah," Wade mumbled.

His father pulled Wade to him. Hugged him over the back of the seat. Wade felt his father's heat, his racing pulse, smelled the stink of his alcohol sweat and the blood on his shirt.

"We got to stick together, Wade," his father said, his voice softer now. "Nobody else gives a shit about us. We're a team, you and me. All we got is each other."

He released his son and turned the key in the ignition. Wade fell back in his seat, trembling. Neither of them spoke on the endless ride home.

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Wade stepped out of the back seat of the unmarked police car carefully placing each foot on the concrete, as if he were unsure his legs would support him. Despite the crisp fall air, his face was sweaty in the black ski mask they had given him to wear, "For his own protection." If he moved his head even slightly, the eye holes disappeared and he could not see the cracks in the sidewalk. He did not want to step on a crack. His breath billowed in clouds from the hole where his pale, chapped lips protruded. He kept his eyes down. Adult shoes lined the edge of the sidewalk. People wearing the shoes called his name.

"What happened out there, Wade? Did you see it? What are you going to say about your father today?"

Cameras clicked and whirred. Still, he would not look up. The man who walked beside him into whose hand he reached his own, had warned him before

they got out of the car that the reporters would badger him, try to goad him into responding.

“Ignore ‘em, Wade,” the man had said. “They’re vultures.”

The man, a social worker, clutched Wade's mitten so tightly his fingers hurt. They hurried toward the court house steps. Wade knew his father waited inside. He knew he would have to sit in a court room across from him and, again, tell adults what he remembered about that night. He had not seen or spoken to his father since the day after it happened, when cops came to their house and took his father away in handcuffs. They transported to the youth shelter where he now shared a windowless room with a kid who sometimes beat his own forehead until it bled against the pale green concrete block wall. The staff at the shelter told Wade he was not in trouble, but he did not trust any of them.

His father had turned to look at him that sweltering, August morning with sad, confused eyes. He flashed Wade a tentative smile and gave him a thumb’s-up with his manacled hand when the uniformed officer ducked him into the back seat of the black and white.

“You and me, Wade,” he called with forced joviality. “Just you and me.”

Now, the lawyers and social worker told him, he had to testify, to tell the truth about that night, about his father and the girl, and what he had seen and heard. He wondered what that truth would be.

Wade looked down at the cold, gray concrete and counted the courthouse steps in his head as they climbed. He took a deep breath, and recognized the familiar metallic taste of his own fear.

