

DEEGS IN BETWEEN

When Deegs got home from school, all his mother's stuff was gone and there was a note on the kitchen counter. She had left some food: most of a gallon of milk, several cartons of old cereal, a bag of chips, some salami. No plates. A couple of metal chairs from the dining table sat in the middle of the living room with the phone on one of them, the phone book on the other. The shower curtain was gone and all her junk. Her room was zero, a couple of hangers was all. There hadn't been many pictures hanging in the hall, but she had gotten every one. Outside his door Deegs held his breath and closed his eyes. He tried to picture his room exactly the way he left it that morning, the blanket on the bed, the crap on the floor. He nudged the door open with his toe, opened his eyes, and exhaled loudly. She hadn't touched his stuff. A couple of jackets and a football from the front closet thrown on the floor was all.

After closing the door behind him, he opened the window, and using the headboard of his bed as a stepladder, he reached up above and behind the closet door where he had stashed a pack of his mother's Marlboros. He sat back down on the bed and lit one up with a Bic he had in his jacket pocket. The smoke burnt the back of his throat. He tried to remember if his mother had said anything to him that morning, but he couldn't remember anything in particular. Just a regular day. He used an empty Coke can for the ashes.

The apartment was quiet. He had never heard it so quiet before. It gave him the creeps. Last week his mother had confiscated Jake's boombox so he didn't even have that. When Jake

joined the army last year, he had given Deegs everything he didn't want anymore. The case was cracked, but it worked fine. His mother wouldn't tell him what she had done with it.

He stubbed out the cigarette, dropping the butt into the can, where it sizzled, and decided he'd better get out of the apartment before the quiet killed him. He changed his clothes, putting on a tee shirt from off the floor. No doubt about it, he was deformed. How could a guy be both skinny and fat? His stomach stuck out, his chest flat. His brother could make his pecs quiver and dance. Deegs sucked in his stomach. His ribs stuck out, making him think of starving kids in India or wherever. He grabbed Jake's old army jacket, three sizes too big but cool, from off the floor and left.

He thought about calling Porter or maybe Mark Ridley but didn't, thinking he didn't want to know whether the phone worked or not, not wanting to think if it didn't.

The sun was just settling down over the ridge of trees behind Michelson's lumberyard, casting long shadows over the dirt path that snaked its way beside the chain-link fence running through the backyards of Crestview Apartments. When Deegs first moved to the area two years ago, Crestview Apartments sounded pretty la-de-da, but now he knew all they had a view of was the trees going up the hill to the crest. It was the crest of the hill that had the view.

Porter's mom answered the door. She said Porter was grounded and gave Deegs a look that said by all rights he should be grounded too and closed the door. He wandered around back, climbed up on the roof of the shed where they kept their broken-down lawn mower, and rapped on Porter's window. The window opened, Porter stuck his head out, and said, "I'm grounded."

"I know."

Porter squinted off into the distance. “When the leaves fall, I can see into Cindy Sprague’s windows.” He pointed with his chin and made a wet, slurpy noise with his mouth. Deegs followed the direction of the chin point and saw a white ranch surrounded by trees two, maybe three hundred yards down the slope. Porter had sex on the brain worse than anyone he knew. Everything had something, somehow, to do with sex. For Porter sex was safe territory.

“My mother left.”

Porter was still squinting into the trees. “Where to?”

Deegs shrugged. “She left a note. Took everything. Cleaned the place out. TV. Shower curtain. Everything.”

Porter said nothing. Deegs figured that he couldn’t think what this had to do with sex.

“Everything except my stuff. Didn’t touch that.”

Porter glanced at him before rolling his gaze back down the hill. “What did the note say?”

Deegs sat down on the roof and let his legs dangle over the edge. “I didn’t read it,” he admitted, realizing now that maybe he should have. “I know what it said. She moved in with Stu. She’s been talking about it for months.” He glanced up at the window where Porter was wetting his lips with his tongue. His tongue was really little and pink.

“Stu’s an asshole.” Porter said.

Once, several months ago, in the spring, Stu took him and his mom up to his hunting cabin in the woods north of Granby. It had sounded cool, but it was just a lean-to and smelled like rot. Stu was all proud of it, seeing something Deegs couldn’t. On the way back, Stu and his mom had the windows rolled down and they were smoking, holding the cigarettes outside the pick-up with Deegs in between, smelling their smoke. Every time Stu had to shift, he’d nestle his

elbow into Deegs's chest and rub. He couldn't tell whether it was like a joke or what. Stu was talking about how one day he was going to build a log cabin up there, using the logs from the trees on the land, opening the view so they could see clear to the White Mountains. Deegs doubted that and didn't say anything. Then Stu started talking about taking him out, teaching him about guns and shooting deer when hunting season came around in the fall. He didn't much care about shooting deer and such, but when his mother started hemming and hawing about killing and guns, he said, "Aw, come on, Mom," and started using all her arguments about getting to know the area and Stu against her. No one had talked about guns or hunting since.

"Just goes to prove," Porter continued, "a woman's got to have some every morning or else she goes cranky and vindictive."

"You talking about your mom?" Deegs didn't smile.

"Damned straight. More than most." Porter had once famously said he'd willingly do his own mother. The guys apparently thought that was cool.

"Well, I'm outta here," Deegs said, not moving.

"Where you going?"

"Don't know. Mark Ridley's?"

The window started coming down. "Well. Watch your cookies."

Deegs pushed himself off the shed roof and felt himself falling.

The sun was still casting a bright glow, but there were no shadows anymore. Walking along the path beside the road, Deegs was trying to remember the word his grandmother used to describe the time between light and dark, when all of a sudden a dwarf, no, a small child came chugging toward him, going as fast as its choppy, little footsteps could carry it.

“Hey,” he said, as it came close. The kid stopped, stuck a finger in its mouth, and looked up at him. It was a girl with a tangle of yellow curls atop her head. He knelt down, and said, “Where you off to?”

She swiveled around awkwardly and pointed back behind her to a maple tree, just starting to go red. Then she swiveled back and stared him in the eyes. Deegs hadn’t much experience with staring into the unblinking eyes of a two-year old, but he didn’t seem to fluster her any.

“So, should we look for your mommy?” he asked. She didn’t move, just stared at his face. “Okay,” he said and stood up and held out his hand toward her. She stared at the sleeve of Jake’s army jacket for a moment and then reached up and grabbed one of his fingers. They walked down the street toward the maple tree, the girl pointing off to the right, sounding out syllables that made no sense. Deegs didn’t know anyone on this street, didn’t know anyone who had a two-year old. Didn’t know anyone who would let a little kid wander the streets. He started repeating the girl’s nonsense syllables to her as if they were having the normalest of conversations.

“Prazzabo.”

“Azeebo?”

“Gah!”

“Ga-eeza-bub.”

Then the kid would point to something and Deegs made up a sound for it, and they walked along, the kid pointing and laughing and Deegs making silly sounds, when a woman with braids came running up the street saying, “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.” She swooped down and plucked the kid up, still yelling, “Oh my god, oh my god,” into the kid’s ear, and the kid started shrieking, and Deegs backed off. The woman started bouncing up and down and the

kid quieted some, and Deegs saw the woman wasn't any older than he was. In fact he went to school with her and sat two rows behind her in English class. Becca or Becky Something. She didn't smile much on account of her braces.

"You are so busted," she said gruffly to the kid who was pointing at Deegs. She gave her a little shake.

A car drove by slowly, its lights on. "She was just walking down the street like she owned the place," said Deegs, not sure if he should just walk on himself.

She snapped her neck to look at him, pressing the kid to her chest. "Oh god. Don't tell anyone that. I could get in real trouble." Then her face changed. "Hey, I know you. You're Nicholas. Nicholas Degan. Right?"

Deegs recoiled. No one called him Nicholas. Not even his mother. Some teachers maybe. "Yeah. English class. People call me Deegs."

She nodded. "I know."

"Your sister?" He tipped his head toward the kid.

"Oh god no. Worse. I'm her baby-sitter. I was just talking to the phone for like an instant and she was gone. Just like that. She's fast. I gotta get back. Thanks for not abducting her or anything." Then she flashed a tinsel smile, turned, and walked off.

Deegs shrugged. "Whatever," he said and stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. People were always thinking the worst. Like his mother. She'd sit in her bathrobe at the kitchen table, drinking, saying that nothing good was going to happen to him on account of him living in a fantasy world and that life was going to bite him on the ass one of these days.

He didn't say, "Like it hasn't already?" He said instead, for the tenth time, "Nothing bad is going to happen to Jake," because he knew that Jake's being in the army was what this was all about. She sipped her drink and then fixed him in her eyes which were all red and wet.

"You don't know that. You don't know anything. You still think Bill is gonna come back, but he won't. I can guarantee you that." She stabbed her cigarette at his face like it was a poker.

"I didn't say he would. I just said that nothing bad was gonna happen to Jake, that's all." He knew that. He knew that like he knew his own name. Jake wasn't even near the fighting.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "One of these days you're going to learn something about life you won't like."

He looked up at the darkening sky, now the color of gunmetal, and decided he'd walk over to Mark Ridley's, where Mark would be working on his '88 Camaro like he always was, his bald head poking out from the wheel well, and he'd wait in the shadows until Mark recognized him and invite him in. But when he got to Mark's house, he just kept walking. He didn't feel much like talking, and Mark's mother, a wire-haired woman who pushed around a respirator and sounded like a cross between the air brakes on a cement truck and Darth Vader, gave him the creeps.

His feet kept walking until he cut through someone's backyard and found himself looking down at Stu's backdoor and his kitchen lights all ablaze. Stu was the kind of person who yelled at you if you left a light on in the bathroom, so Deegs knew he was inside. He stood for a while beside a tree in the overgrowth of weeds and bushes, watching for someone to pass in front of the kitchen windows. If he wanted to go down and knock on the backdoor, he knew he'd have to climb the chain-link fence that separated the two yards, so he stood and waited. Finally, his mother came and rinsed something off in the kitchen sink. She was wearing an old ratty flannel

shirt of Stu's and her hair was pulled back in a pony tail. The sky was now completely dark, and Deegs climbed up the tree he was standing beside and settled in a convenient fork, his back leaning against the trunk, his legs wrapped around a branch, like it was a horse or maybe a camel. He thought about Jake and how he'd wanted to be a sniper and how that never happened. He sat perched, waiting, in what he would remember later as a moment of serene complacency, waiting, as if the next thing was going to happen any minute now.