

“Kentucky Boys”

by Maura Lammers

Ma must've been wearing every piece of jewelry she owned. She called me into the bathroom and the first thing I saw were all these bracelets on her arms, and a long necklace hanging down the front of a green dress she used to wear to church. She leaned over the sink, her nose just a few inches from the mirror, and dabbed lipstick on her mouth. As she stood up straight, she saw me.

*This look all right?* She asked.

*Yeah,* I said. All the makeup on her face and the bracelets on her arms made her look like one of the girls from my homeroom class who try too hard to get us guys to talk to them.

*Thanks,* she said, and looked back in the mirror. *Help me, will you, Shawn?*

Ma's hair was so long, it reached past her back. She'd been growing it out since she was fifteen – same age I am. It always took two sets of hands to fix her hair. Used to be, my dad helped Ma. He'd stand behind her and hold up clumps of her hair until she was ready to wind it all up. She held tight to the hair closest to her skull, wrapped it around and around her hand, then reached back to take the ends from him. He always groaned and acted like he didn't want to help, but once her hair was all pinned up, he would give her shoulder a squeeze and say she looked pretty.

It's been so long since he died, I just got used to helping my ma fix her hair, and so did she. She wound up her hair like she always did, so it looks like this thick chocolate donut sitting on top of her head, and I held it there til she put all the pins into the right places. Then I let go.

*He'll be here in just a minute,* she mumbled, almost under her breath.

As soon as that busted pick-up truck rolled by our mailbox and stopped in our driveway, I knew I'd seen it before. One side of the chipped white Chevy bent in by the middle of the door, like somebody had scooped out some of the metal. That truck was always parked in the gravel lot by the barbecue shack at the end of Heather Lane. Tommy and I liked to ride past the shack on the way home from school just to breathe in the smell of smoked pork and beef. My ma told me this guy's name was Carl, and that she'd met him at the shack when she and her friends stopped by for a late dinner after their Tuesday night bunko tournament. He was a cook and asked her out in front of everybody.

Carl stepped down from the truck real heavy, like he was trying to stomp out a fire. The sleeves of his checkered button-down shirt rolled up to his elbows, and a tie dangled down to his belt buckle. His forearms were thick and muscular, covered with dense hair.

*Be nice*, Ma said over her shoulder to me as she ran to the door. I stayed by the window and waited out of sight til Ma called me over.

*Shawn, this is* – Ma started to say, but Carl had already held out his hand and said, *Carl Everett*, like he was trying to git rid of something in his throat.

Carl's hand was wide and full of veins, and he crushed my hand in his grip. I stepped back, put my hands in my pockets, said *nice to meet you*, and looked at my ma.

*We'd better go*, she said, but she was looking at Carl, not me. *I'll be back later tonight*. From the window, I watched her step up into the truck, and Carl kept a hand on her arm to keep her from falling. Then he walked to the driver's side and climbed in himself, the headlights clicking on in the dying light.

I waited til they turned the corner. Then I went out the back door to find Tommy.

By the time I rolled up to Tommy's house, it was almost dark. He sat on the front

step, drinking a can of Coke, his back on one of the posts and his feet on the ground. The porch sagged a little to the right, and he looked like he was holding up the whole house. I threw my bike to the ground.

*What's eatin' you?* Tommy asked.

*Ma's out with that guy,* I said and sat down next to him.

*So?* He said.

*So nothing,* I leaned back against the other post.

Tommy shrugged and held out the can of Coke. *I spiked it.*

I took it from him and had two gulps. It was half cheap whiskey and I coughed.

*Your mom's gonna start to notice if you keep stealing her shit,* I said.

*My mom doesn't notice a thing,* Tommy replied.

He took the can from me, drained it, crushed the aluminum between his hands, and tossed it over his shoulder. Tommy stood up, hopped down to the grass, and asked, *Want to see something?*

*I guess,* I said. He set off across his yard and I followed him. We stayed close to the side of the house, and Tommy kept his head ducked down a little. I asked Tommy where the hell we were going, and he told me to shut up for a minute.

The houses in his neighborhood were like mine. All of them were built too close together and too small, and somehow the roof and the walls looked like they'd given up on each other and just wanted to fall apart. We slid between houses and crossed backyards, til we were two blocks down and standing in front of a house with a kiddie pool in the front yard full of rainwater. Toys scattered over the dry, yellow grass.

*Remember Shari?* Tommy asked me. Shari was this girl who used to be in our class, but she got held back in fifth grade because she couldn't do math. Before then, we sometimes

hung out with her after school if we were bored. I liked her because she tried to race us on our bikes a couple times. Shari was a weird-looking girl, though. She had these bony little arms and legs, and her mom cut her hair way too short, and her face always looked kind of pinched and sour. I hadn't thought about her in a long time, not since she'd gotten held back and we stopped hanging out.

Tommy crept around the side of the house and then dropped down to his knees.

*What the hell are you doing?* I said and he snapped, *Just follow me, goddamn it.*

The ground under my hands was hard and packed-down. Tommy crawled forward and stopped underneath a window where a dim light glowed. With one hand on the windowsill, he pulled himself up and peered into the window.

*Tommy—*

*She can't see us,* he hissed.

I pulled myself up next to him and looked. Shari's bed was in the corner farthest away from the window, and she sat there with a book open on her lap and a pencil in her hand. The girl had grown like a weed. Her legs and arms had gotten even longer, but her hair was longer too, and her face was much prettier. Something about her just seemed softer. Her mouth was moving, and she stopped and erased something in her book with the pencil.

*I saw her naked the other night when she got out of the shower,* Tommy whispered to me. *Goddamn it, she's gorgeous. The things I'd like to do to her, I'm telling you. She wouldn't even see it coming.*

Shari uncrossed her legs, stretched and pointed her toes, and crossed her legs again. Her t-shirt was too baggy for me to really see what she looked like, but I could picture what Tommy had seen. I gulped.

*This is weird, Tommy. Come on, let's go.*

*And miss seeing her tits?* Tommy looked over, his lip curling up in a scowl. *No way.*

I didn't know what to say. I tried not to look at Shari, but in the silence my eyes darted over at those legs again and Tommy caught me.

*See? We just gotta wait around a while.*

*No, I ... I don't want to, Tommy. Let's go.*

I started to back away, but he grabbed my arm hard and snapped, *Quit being such a pussy.*

In Shari's room, the light turned off, and Tommy's face disappeared. He let go of my arm and groaned. Without a glance at me, Tommy crawled away from the wall, and I followed again. We didn't dare stand up until we reached the corner of the front yard. Tommy stood up and broke into a run, so I chased after him. Our sneakers hit the hard dirt and scraped across the gravel. No streetlights lined the road, so we ran in the dark, dodging between houses, the summer night over our heads full of neighbors cursing each other and dogs barking and car horns blaring down streets we couldn't even see.

I thought Ma might beat me home, but by the time I made it back she was still gone. I sat on the couch and waited for her, watching the TV on a trashy channel she never liked. Around midnight, when I heard the front door click shut, I stood up and caught her creeping down the hall, her purse clutched close to her side, head down.

*Ma,* I said, and she jumped about a mile in the air.

*Jesus, Shawn,* she said, blowing air out of her nose. She turned on the hallway light and we squinted at each other for a minute.

*How'd it go?* I finally asked her.

*All right,* she said slowly, but she held back a smile. *It went all right.* She started to

take off the bangles on her wrists, one by one. *Carl said he'd like to take me out again next weekend. I think I'll go.* She unhooked her necklace and I heard some of the beads jangle together. *He seems sweet, Shawn. I think he's a good man.*

I put my hands in my pockets and shrugged. *Sure, Ma.*

*Don't stay up much later, she said. Go to bed.*

As she walked down the hall to her bedroom, I could still hear all her jewelry clanging together, even though she was just holding it in her hands.

Since school let out for the summer, Tommy and I spent almost every day wandering around the streets in town on our bikes killing time. Harlan, Kentucky isn't much of town, though. Half of the stores on Main Street have closed. Ma said that since the mine shut down about ten years ago, most people in Harlan haven't managed to stay on their feet. My dad was one of a couple hundred guys who lost his job in the mines. He tried to pick up the slack by cleaning up a graveyard during the day and taking the odd night shift at a bar on the outskirts of town. Ma doesn't like talking about that time, though, and I don't remember much of it. Just that we never saw dad except for the odd night when he made it home to eat whatever leftovers Ma managed to throw together from the refrigerator to make spaghetti sauce. Kitchen sink spaghetti, she called it, and it was cheap and full of bits of hamburger and mushrooms. We ate it so often, dad started to refuse it, pushing his plate away at dinner and making Ma mad enough to spit. Things were like that for awhile, us barely scraping by. Then dad died, and Ma got a job and food stamps, and we lived off other people's kindness for awhile.

June had just started, but the heat was already thick. Tommy and I ducked into stores for a bit just to feel the breeze from a fan, but we couldn't stay anywhere long without buying

something or getting accused of loitering. At the end of Main Street, we threw our bikes down into the grass and sat in the shade of an oak tree with our backs pressed against the trunk. Tommy had sweated through his shirt and tugged at the damp collar.

*Good thing it'll cool down tonight, he said. We can start a fire then.*

*You still want to make a bonfire?* I asked. It was too hot to think about starting a fire, even late at night after the humidity disappeared.

*If we can find enough wood,* he said, tearing at the grass until his palm was full of blades. Whenever we could, Tommy and I spent nights in the woods a few blocks from our house. We'd been going there since we were kids, spending hours talking about the Louisville Blue Devils or the girls in our class or just shooting the shit. Used to be, Tommy wanted to spend every night out there in the woods. He didn't like being at home with his mom, who chain-smoked and watched trivia shows and rarely left the house. Now, though, I didn't have much of a reason to stay at home at night either, since Carl kept dropping by to say hi to Ma and me, but mostly to talk to Ma in the kitchen about the barbecue shack while he drank cups of black coffee she made for him.

*Is that Shari?* Tommy asked suddenly.

I looked over, and sure enough, Shari was crossing the street, coming in our direction but not seeing us, looking out for oncoming cars. She had on a loose t-shirt and a pair of jeans, for some strange reason. She must have been burning up in the sun.

*Shari,* Tommy yelled before I could stop him. *Hey, Shari!*

Hearing her name, she stopped for a second, looking for the voice. Tommy waved at her and yelled again. She put a hand across her face to block the sun, and her face changed when she saw us.

*Hey,* she said. *What're you doing?*

*Nothing, Tommy said. Come on, get over here.*

She squinted at us until she made it to the shade too. Then she gave both of us a once-over like she'd seen our faces in a WANTED poster. *Been a long time, she said. I thought you guys forgot who I was.*

*Sorry, Tommy said and I thought he looked a little sheepish. We didn't mean to. Honest.*

*I get it, the cool guys went to high school and gotta keep up their reputation, she said, and sat down in the grass. No hard feelings, though. Really.* She crossed her legs Indian-style and hunched her shoulders forward. Then she looked at me. *How you been, Shawn?*

*Fine, I said. It was hard to believe she was the same ugly girl who tried to race us on our bikes and lost every time.*

*My gran saw your ma out with Carl Everett the other night, she said. They were standing in line at the movies.*

*You know Carl?* I asked.

*Not really, she said. Gran just talks to him sometimes at the barbecue shack.*

*Yeah, well, your gran knows everybody, I said. Gran seemed to do everything in Harlan, from singing in the church choir to drinking at the bar on Saturday nights with half the folks in town. She lived at home with Shari and helped her parents wrangle Shari and her four little brothers and sisters. I don't know how a family that big can live in a house that small.*

*Shari paused. Gran told me she still misses seeing your daddy at the bar. She said he was a tough old son of a bitch, but he was a good man.*

*Yeah, I said. Lots of people in Harlan said that about my dad. At the funeral, I'd heard it over and over again from his old mine buddies, who patted me on the back and said*

son of a bitch quiet enough so Ma wouldn't hear. She didn't think a six-year-old should hear that kind of language, but that didn't matter much to me. What did matter was, my dad was dead. He'd made a couple bad bets during a late-night card game with a couple out-of-towners at the bar. When he couldn't pay up from the tips he made, they took him outside, beat him senseless and left him to die by the dumpster. We kept the casket closed.

*You doing anything tonight?* Tommy asked Shari. *Me and Shawn are going to the woods later. Gonna build a fire and have some drinks. Want to join?*

Shari squinted at him, even though the sun wasn't in her eyes anymore. That loose white shirt she wore was light as air and had buttons down the front. I could see the strap of her bra showing through, and the place where her neck and shoulder met.

*Sure,* she said. *Meet me by my house after supper.*

That night, Shari sat in front of the fire, smoking cigarettes she stole from her mom's purse, her long legs spread open. She still had on the jeans from earlier, but she rolled them halfway up to her knees. The fire made her skin the color of rust. Tommy and I sat on either side of her, stretched out by the fire. Shari pulled a small, half-empty bottle of whiskey out of her purse.

*I swiped it from the drugstore last week,* she said. *Nobody saw a thing. I could make a real job out of this, I swear.* She held out the bottle to Tommy. Even her arms were long, like stretched out pieces of clay. She was beautiful in this strange, terrifying way, like the videos of active volcanoes in Hawaii our science teacher showed us.

Tommy took the bottle from Shari's hand and gulped, then he passed it to me. In no time I felt like a rock sinking down deep, the ground covering every inch of me, and I liked it. Tommy's face neck and ears started to turn red, and I knew he was getting drunk too. When

the whiskey ran out, we shared the vodka Tommy siphoned from his mom's collection.

*You can hold your liquor pretty okay for a girl,* Tommy said to Shari.

*I've had some practice with my cousins,* she said. For a minute she grew quiet, staring straight ahead into the fire. Then her face broke into a grin. *I bet you I can jump clean over that fire.*

I let out a hoot of laughter and Tommy said, *Fat chance.*

*How much you want to bet I can make it over and you boys can't?*

*I'm not doing this,* I said.

*Pussy,* Shari said. The word cut through me and made Tommy laugh real loud. Shari stood up and walked back to the edge of the clearing, and then started kicking up dirt and grass, her eyes fixed on the fire.

*You think I can do it?* She said, but she wasn't looking at us.

*No way,* Tommy said.

Shari shook out her arms hard, as though an electric shock ran through her. She dug her feet down into the dirt again. There wasn't a lot of space between the fire and where she stood. But Shari took her first steps, fast and then faster, and her feet left the ground. I didn't think she'd make it. For a split second I pictured her landing right in the middle of the fire, screaming as she burned alive, and I imagined reaching in and pulling her out, rolling her across the ground, my hands on fire too, trying to cover her body with mine. But it didn't happen. Those long legs landed on the other side. Shari buckled and hit the ground hard, then came up laughing.

*See,* she shouted at us. Her hands and arms were caked in dirt. She looked so tough, and I didn't know if I was scared of her, or if I wanted to kiss her. Shari pointed at Tommy.

*You gonna try it now or what?*

Tommy didn't hesitate. He marched right over to where Shari had stood a minute ago and mimicked her, digging his sneakers down and kicking up grass, smirking right at her face. He was as tall as Shari but twice as heavy, and I knew for sure he'd land right on top of the burning logs.

*Tommy, come on, man,* I said. *Don't –*

But he was off, running hard, and he threw himself over the fire like he was trying to save his own life. He practically skimmed the top of those flames, and landed belly-down. He yelped out, *fuck!* and rolled over, holding on to his ribs.

*Shit,* Shari said and we both crouched by his side. *You okay, Tommy?*

*Course I'm okay,* he spat. He sat up with his teeth gritted, and shot a look at Shari. *You think you're so tough, huh?* I watched as he reached out a hand and ran it down her arm like he'd done it a million times before. It was weird, because I couldn't remember Tommy ever touching her before then.

*Yeah,* Shari said, shrugging off his hand. *I am.* She looked sideways at me and said. *Your turn, Shawn. You gonna go too?*

I scowled at her and didn't say anything. Tommy grinned and sat up a little straighter, trying to prove he wasn't hurt.

*Pussy,* Shari said, her voice sweet and mocking. She jabbed at my arm with her finger. *You scared, Shawn? Is that it?*

*No, this is just stupid,* I shot back. *You're both really goddam stupid, all right?*

I got up, and I couldn't seem to stand straight. Shari started to tell me not to go, then Tommy told her to let me. Somehow my feet took me away from the light of the fire and to the flattened-out trail out of the woods. The whiskey had done its job too well. I didn't care where I was going, and I was mad enough to holler at the moon. It took a long time, but I

broke through the woods and found the street. I walked without much direction and passed by the houses on Tommy's block, trying to find the way back home.

I woke up with a headache that morning and slumped at the kitchen table eating cereal. Ma walked out in her bathrobe, her long hair soaking wet from the shower and dripping water on the linoleum floor. She wrung out her hair in the kitchen sink and let it hang down her shoulder. She opened the blinds to the window above the sink and let in some sun that made me wince.

*Shawn, she said. I got a question for you. How'd you like to spend the day with Carl?*

*What, today?* I said.

*Yeah, she said. He's got a day off work. He thought it'd be nice to take you out someplace with him. Get to know you a little bit. You okay with that?*

I wasn't, but I sure as hell wasn't going to say so. Ma looked happy, smiling at me with so much hope. I had to say, *all right, I guess.*

*I'm so glad, she said, and when she came over to squeeze my shoulder she dripped a little more water on the floor. He'll be here in an hour or two. Shawn, you're a good boy, you know that?*

She left me in the kitchen to change in her room, and I had a second helping of cereal. By the time I was done and put the dishes in the sink, I could see Ma out the living room window, standing in the backyard. She only washed her hair once a week, and on hot mornings in the summer like this one, she liked to stand outside with her hair hanging over the clothesline. It was the fastest way to get her hair dry. Ma stood there with her hair dangling from the clothesline, looking up at the sky and the clouds.

Carl came to pick me up before noon, but we didn't make much conversation as he drove the pick-up truck out of Harlan. He tried to ask me about school and what my friends were like, but I didn't have a lot to say and I could tell he didn't care to ask much more than those two questions. Mostly, we both kept our eyes on the road ahead, and I tried to guess what he had in mind for us to do. I finally gave up and asked where we were going.

*Thought I'd take you out to the racetrack.* He said. *You ever been before?*

No, I said.

*It's a great time, let me tell you,* Carl said. *Have a few beers with the guys, make some money from the horses. I think you'll like it.*

I nodded a bit and thought about Ma and how mad she'd be if she knew what we were doing. She always said gambling was what killed my dad.

*Listen,* Carl said. *I just gotta say... you know I like your ma. Spending time with her in the last week or so, it's been the most fun I've had in a long while. She's... She's a fine woman, that's for sure.* I clenched my jaw tight and nodded at him. Carl got quiet for a few seconds, and then his voice dropped down lower. *I'm trying here, kid. It'd be nice if you'd try a little yourself.*

The parking lot by the racetrack was just a muddy field full of big tire tracks and empty cans of beer. Carl killed the engine. *You're gonna learn some new things today, Shawn,* he said and opened the door of his truck.

For hours I sat with Carl in the bleachers, baking in the afternoon sun until the skin on my arms and neck were raw and pink. Four of Carl's buddies were there too, sharing rounds of cold beer and cigarettes. Carl let me have just one beer, since I promised not to tell my ma. All of them placed bets on horses, circled and stabbed at the pamphlet with the horses' odds, clutched their tickets in their fists, and jumped to their feet every time one of their

horses rounded the track by us. The more money they lost, the more beer they ordered, until Carl was pounding his fist into his open palm and screaming at the passing horses, *Come on, you son of a bitch! Cross the line!*

I sat hunched with my elbows on my knees and watched another race start up. They shoved the horses into their cages, slammed the doors shut, and the track got quieter, but the bleachers kept on roaring.

*You gonna place any bets? Or you gonna just sit there all afternoon?* Carl asked me.

*No*, I said.

*Sir*, he said. *No sir.*

I look over and saw him scowling at me like I'd spit in his eye.

*You got a problem, Shawn?* Carl asked.

*I don't like the races*, I said.

*You don't say*, Carl's lips curled back. His gums were dark and puffy, his teeth yellow as piss. *So why don't you like the races?*

I wanted to look him the eye but I couldn't, so I just sat up straighter. *I don't know.*

*They force them to run. It's not really fair.*

*Force `em to run?* Carl laughed in my face. *Horses run. It's what they're for.*

*They're trained to run like that*, I said. *They don't know any better.*

The gates opened and the horses rushed out. I could see the power in their bodies. How they pushed past each other in blurs, all muscle and speed, the jockeys holding on tight and whipping them on faster and faster. Carl got to his feet and screamed for his favorite horse. Around they went, and on the second lap their bodies were slick with foamy sweat, but they kept going, the hooves loud as thunder against the ground, falling back and surging forward, throwing clumps of mud in the air. On the final lap, one chestnut horse edged out

the rest of the pack and crashed across the finish line.

*No good lousy fucking horse!* Carl shouted, and as he sat he pounded the wooden bleacher so hard I felt it shake. His buddies clapped him on the back and said they were sorry, but he smacked their hands away and wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. *Get up. We're going.*

I followed Carl out to the parking lot. He muttered hard words to himself, and yanked his keys out of the pocket of his jeans, nearly dropping them in a puddle.

*You shouldn't drive,* I said and tried to catch up to him.

Carl turned back to me fast, *What're you saying, boy?*

*You had too much, you shouldn't –*

Carl grabbed me by the collar of my shirt, nearly picking me up off the ground.

*You want to tell me what to do?* Carl's breath reeked of beer. *Go on, tell me again.*

*Tell me what I should do.*

I clutched at his closed fist and tried to wrench myself away, but he wouldn't let go.

*You got something to say? Go on, say it. I got time.*

I didn't say a thing, but as I looked into his face, all I could think about was a story Ma told me about my dad. Right after she had me, he told her that the only lesson a boy needed to learn in life was, *You shouldn't get into fights, but if you do get into a fight, you've gotta finish it.* Just then, as I stared Carl in the face, I realized I couldn't fight him.

*That's what I thought,* Carl said slowly, satisfied. He loosened his grip on my shirt, then finally let me go. *That's what I thought.*

I don't know how Ma didn't smell the booze on Carl. Maybe she did, but she just wanted to act like she didn't. She already had dinner on the table by the time we walked into

the house. She beamed at us, and shoed us into chairs. The three of us sat around the kitchen table together. I tried to sit up straight in my chair and focus on the dull pain from my sunburn instead of what was actually happening in front of me.

*How'd your day go?* Ma asked Carl.

*Fine*, he said. He had already dug into the mashed potatoes on his plate, the fork looking like a toy in his huge hand. *Didn't win shit at the races, though.*

*The what?* Ma had just dished some green bean casserole on my plate, and her hand froze as she held it out to me. I took it away from her fast, watching her face. A deep line had formed between her eyebrows. It was the same look she got on her face when I screwed up on a test or stayed out late without her permission. *You took Shawn to the racetrack?*

Carl glanced up at her with a frown. *Yeah. I did.*

Ma folded her hands on top of the table. *Shawn. How about you give me and Carl a minute to talk?*

Carl put down his fork and glared at her with bleary eyes. He was still drunk. I didn't move an inch.

*Shawn*, Ma said sharply. *Give me and Carl a minute.*

I walked out and crossed down the hall to my room. I sat on my bed and listened hard. About a million things ran through my head, so loud I could barely even hear what ma and Carl were saying. It was the race at first, Carl saying she had no right to tell him what he could and couldn't do, and Ma saying she didn't want me at a place like that, that we had dealt with enough of that shit in the past and she didn't want to worry about it anymore. They weren't really yelling, but it was getting louder. *You're a stuck-up little priss*, Carl said, *and you better watch it or else somebody might take you down a peg or two.* I didn't know what Ma said to that, and it was Carl's voice now that was loudest, drowning hers out. *You know*

*the way people look at you? It's a goddamn disgrace, everybody looking at you all the time, and it's gone to your head.*

For about a minute, I couldn't hear anything. Then I heard Ma scream, and I was out the door and stumbling over my own feet down the hall. Carl had Ma's hair wrapped around one hand like a long rope, and had an old pair of scissors in his other hand. Ma clung to the table, her hands digging into the wood, screaming, *What are you doing, stop!* He cut her hair before I could get to them. I watched Ma slump as her hair fell to the kitchen floor. Carl threw the scissors on the table and they clattered against the casserole dish. He started to rush out of the kitchen, and I got in his way, tried to throw myself on him, but he tossed me aside. *It's your own damn fault,* he shouted to Ma as he opened the front door. *You got no one else to blame.*

I wanted to go after him, wanted to beat him with my bare hands, but I couldn't. He was stronger than me, and he was bigger than me, and he was almost to his truck, walking like some kind of hero. I turned back to Ma. She knelt on the floor, long chunks of hair gathered in her arms. When she looked up at me with her face wet with tears, I didn't know what to say. Neither did she. She just looked down at the hair in her hands and on the floor and cried harder than I'd ever seen her cry before.

Ma was a mess for the rest of the night. It took a lot of time, but eventually she wore herself out and fell asleep on top of her covers with all her clothes on. I thought I'd try to sleep too, but being in the house and thinking about Carl made me want to crawl out of my skin. I checked to make sure all our windows and doors were locked, then rode my bike over to Tommy's house in the dark. Part of me didn't really want to talk to him, after how he acted the other night. But I didn't have anyone else to talk to.

All the lights in his house were off and the neighborhood was quieter than usual. I stopped on my bike, and let my feet drop down to the pavement for a second. I had this bad feeling down in my stomach, some kind of twisted, knotted rage. Kicking off the ground, I rode over the curb and through Tommy's yard, zig-zagging over to the next street.

At Shari's house, I left my bike by her mailbox and kept as quiet as possible. Dirty-looking yellow light from her window spilled over the bushes, and from a distance I could see Shari sitting on her bed like before. *Tommy*, I said into the dark. *Hey, Tommy*. When no answer came, I got even louder. *Tommy. Tommy!* Maybe I should have thought about it a little more, but right then, I didn't care about Shari hearing me or how things could go wrong. I ran into those bushes yelling for Tommy, and there he was, crouched under the window. I grabbed on to his shirt and dragged him out of the bush.

*What the fuck are you doing?* Tommy screamed at me, and I took my first swing. I hit him square in the face and felt the bones in my hand crack. For a second, I turned my head to the house and saw Shari staring out bedroom window, shouting at us, but I couldn't hear what she said. Then Tommy slugged me on the side of the head. I almost quit right then, but I made another fist and turned back around. It was my first fight, and I was going to finish it. I was in it for more than just me.