

Homecoming King

by Alan Rossi

John Lipkin took a drag off his cigarette and rummaged through his desk drawer looking for pot. There wasn't any. He remembered looking last night, but he looked again now. There wasn't a damn thing, just some stems and seeds. He rubbed his temples, thinking of his father telling him to get off dope and other things or, if he was going to stay on it, to pull the seeds from every bag because they caused impotence. He snuffed the cigarette out in the ashtray.

He could call JP. If he was home he might have a bag.

He could go over to Laura's place and smoke with her, but she was probably gone already.

He decided to make tea. There were enough stems and seeds for this. He went down the hall to the kitchen. On the way he noticed the pain in his ankle and saw that it was a little swollen. It wasn't bad. He tried to think of what he had done last night but couldn't remember.

Water began to bubble and he poured it into a coffee cup with the stems. The water colored green. It wouldn't taste good, but it might do the trick. He let the tea steep for a few minutes, the water swirling green, steam rising up into the room. He poured some vodka into cup and looked out the window onto the main road into campus, waiting for the tea to cool. There wasn't a soul on the roads, not a sound in the complex. The nearby campus was empty. Everyone had gone home for the week. Early that morning John had waited for a phone call from his father telling him when to come home for Thanksgiving dinner, but the call never came.

John stood watching out the window now, the tea warm in his hands. He listened to the sleet on the window. He put both his hands around the cup and drank it slowly, letting it warm him up. It was okay, he thought. It wasn't so bad being there without anybody. There was a good freeze coming down. It was quiet. He had the

place to himself and could turn up the heat while it froze outside. Nobody was there. He could use the kitchen and make a dinner. He could put on Bitches Brew and play it loud and late.

After he made another cup, stems and vodka and hot water, he put on his overcoat, his Lions hat, gloves and a scarf. He didn't know where he was going. He went down the four flights of stairs, tea sloshing out of the cup onto his gloves. It burned through the gloves and then outside the cold hit it and he let his car warm up, his hands at the vents before going.

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On the road, John thought he saw JP's truck pass onto the highway. He followed, but when he got next to the truck it wasn't JP inside.

He got on the loop going north. They would just be putting the turkey in, he thought. His father would be drinking a whiskey, absently reading the paper and watching football. Aunt Jen and Uncle John wouldn't show up. The roads were too bad. He was going to show up though. He didn't know why. It hadn't come to him yet, but it would. He just knew he had already made the decision to go. His father hadn't called and he was going. Maybe he had quit school, but he was working now. He wanted to let his old man know something. He wanted to let them all know something. It was his family too.

On the freeway a few cars crawled to their destinations. He passed a snowplow and took the off ramp to Windham Lakes. The golf course sparkled white green. The lake on eighteen was a dull mirror and he stopped the car and got out. He didn't know what he was going to do when he got there. His father would throw him out. Maybe he wouldn't do anything. Maybe he had called last night and John had missed it. He sipped the last of the tea and vodka and tossed a few rocks into the lake. They hit the surface, skidding on the ice, sometimes breaking through, leaving a small hole. He thought if you could be careful enough you could reach in that hole, gently pick up the thin surface of the lake and see beneath it, the fish swimming in the deeper, warmer parts, though there

probably weren't any fish. He remembered that Superman once froze a lake with his cooling breath, then carried the huge icicle to a burning chemical plant, dropping it over the flames and saving dozens of important scientists. There weren't any fish then either. John tossed another stone and finished the tea on the way back to his car.

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He sat in his car two blocks away from his house, watching it. He waited a long time, not thinking of anything except that he was out of the house and they were in it. It wasn't so bad, though. Sitting there, watching the street was okay at first. From some houses smoke rose out of the chimneys. Then it began to get colder. He hadn't seen a single person out on the street and he could feel the temperature falling. John warmed his hands on the heat coming from the dash. The sleet was falling harder.

It was his family too, he thought. He hadn't missed a thanksgiving in that house. It was his house too. He was a part of it as much as anyone. He had bought knives to cut the turkey one year. A set of good fucking knives. It was cold out and he was going in. He turned the car on and drove to the driveway.

He was all the way to the door before he remembered he had no key. The spare was gone from under the rug. He checked above the door, under the flowerpots. It was cold out and he didn't have a key but he wasn't about to knock. He stood there shivering for a moment. He didn't know what he was doing. Then he tried the door and it opened. It was warm and smelled good inside. He could hear the television. Football was on in the kitchen and the family room. He rushed through the hallway. His father sat at the kitchen table with a whiskey, reading the paper, but really he was watching the storm outside. John didn't look at his father. He went straight for the kitchen. There was an assortment of meats and cheeses, picked over, and somewhat scattered on the countertop. The dog came up to him and smelled his crotch. It slowed him up, but he kept moving. His sister and grandmother sat in the family room with the tv on. His grandmother was asleep. His sister turned to look. The

dog was at his crotch, nuzzling it. He pushed the animal out of the way, still moving through the kitchen.

What the hell, his father said.

He didn't listen. He didn't know what he was doing, but he was very calm. He was just doing it. He went straight for the knives. They sat near the toaster, the set he bought a long time ago for his father with his allowance. It had been a Christmas gift. His father used them to cut the turkey every year.

What're you doing? his father said.

John didn't answer. He grabbed the big carving knife. His father came after him. John held the knife out, looking at him, not knowing what he was doing. The dog was at his feet smelling them.

I'm taking this, John said.

You can't take anything from here.

I'm taking this. This is mine. I bought this for you and now I say it's no longer yours. This is mine.

His father came closer, and John held the knife out further, pointing it at him. Don't move, he said. I have something to say.

His father looked at him for a minute, then backed away and went toward the garage. Take it if you want, his father yelled. There are other things, too. How about you take those? All the shit that's yours.

I have something I need to say to you, John said.

Noise came from the garage, his father tripping over the toolbox. John dropped the knife. Without thinking he grabbed the turkey from the oven. His sister was in the kitchen now.

You're crazy, she said. What the hell are you doing?

He tucked the turkey under his arm like a football. It wasn't even hot yet. They had just put it in.

You're nuts, she said. You've smoked yourself into idiocy.

The turkey juices went all over his coat but that didn't matter. The dog jumped up, biting viciously at the bird, pulling a leg away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his grandmother sit up.

Where's he taking the turkey? she said.

John went out the front door quickly. It was still coming down outside, heavier now, sleet and snow. He got in his car and put the turkey on the seat beside him. The garage door went up. He saw his father getting into the family car with a box filled with records, footballs, and old sneakers. John pulled out of the driveway fast, skidding on the ice, nearly knocking over the neighbor's mailbox.

He didn't know what he was doing but it all seemed very important, like it had to happen.

The streets were bad now through the neighborhoods. It was hard to drive fast without the tires slipping. His father was behind him. John didn't know where he was going. He tried to think of where. He tried to think of a good place to pitch the turkey with his father watching, just toss it right out the window, into an open trashcan or the goddamn lake. He watched his father's car in the rearview mirror. When he was sure his old man wasn't ready for it, he turned right, hard and fast, skidding on the ice, going up over the curb into a lawn, knocking over a plastic deer, coming back out of the lawn and heading toward his old high school. His father wasn't behind anymore. John drove past the school to the practice football field. He remembered being there with his father before, practicing for hours in the summer, the grass green and dried brown in other spots. The field was white now, covered over in ice.

He took the turkey and went to the trunk. There were old footballs, baseball gloves and the tee he'd used when he was a place-kicker still in there. On the field the grass cracked under his feet. The field goal posts were glazed in ice, and behind the field the trees swayed and creaked in the wind. He took the turkey out from under his arm and teed it up. It took a while, trying to get that fucking turkey teed up, but it worked finally. There was a little steam coming off the bird. John took three steps back, two steps to the left and kicked the bird to the uprights, missing badly. He felt pain shoot up his leg and remembered that his ankle was swollen. This was a small bird and it was heavier than a football by a good deal and would probably hurt to kick even without a swollen ankle.

His father pulled up in the car. He carried the box and dumped the pile of old junk onto the field. Then he ran to get the turkey.

You want to kick the turkey, his old man yelled at him. Let's fucking *kick* it then.

I want to tell you something, John yelled back. I don't want anything from you.

I don't want to hear a goddamn thing, his father said. Let's kick this thing.

John watched him jog up to the tee. His face was red. His old man planted the bird on the tee, holding it with the tip of his fingers.

We'll have to move it closer, John said. It's too heavy.

His father moved the bird and the tee ten yards closer.

John stood there, watching him. Then he backed up, hearing the crunching of the icy ground, and kicked the bird dead-on through the uprights, stuffing flying out, a leg breaking off at impact. His father ran after it and brought it back.

You want to fucking kick the bird, his father said. You want to do whatever you want. Fine.

His father teed it up again and John kicked it through again. Pieces of turkey flew apart, a wing here, but it was a stubborn bird, knew which season it was, and it held together. The ice sheeted down now, mixing with snow. John's face was wet and cold. His father's dark hair was coated white. His old man's eyebrows were crusting over.

John ran to get the bird again. His father teed it up and John put it through. He got it again and brought it back. John was winded now, sweating, and it was cold. His right foot ached from kicking the bird. The turkey was going to pieces. A wind picked up and he looked over at the pile of old junk, layered in ice. He started laughing.

His father was yelling through the snow and the wind, Again. Let's go again.

Pieces of the turkey were strewn across the ice, covered in the storm. John felt the cold on his face, and knew that his nose and ears were tipped red, the way his father's were.

You want to kick it, his old man said. Let's kick the shit out of it. Let's really fucking kick the hell out of this thing.

John took his normal drop back, just like he used to do, and got ready to kick it again.

It's time that I said something, he said.

But he didn't know what it was anymore.

He watched the snow covering his father's hands. They were shaking, holding the turkey, shivering. The box of old junk on the field was covered with snow and ice. John imagined that if you could find the perfect piece of ice and lift it up maybe everything would stick to it and come up easy like a scab, and you could see beneath the surface to some warmth. John watched his old man freezing there, and felt his own face and foot freezing, going numb, and decided to keep kicking as long as he could.

