

Chicken

by Craig Lancaster

Puddles Palmer and I scooted along the high cinder-block fence, our bellies scraping as we inched our way toward the far corner, where we'd be covered by the night and an overhanging oak tree.

Puddles—not his real name, as you've probably gathered, but the kind of nickname a fat kid got tagged with in our neighborhood—kept stopping short, picking underwear out of his ass or taking a breather. This had the unfortunate byproduct of my crashing into his Keds with my nose.

“Dammit, fatass, keep moving,” I spat at him in a hiss.

“Sorry.” After a few feet more, Puddles stopped again. I slapped his Vienna sausage leg.

“I don't think we should do this, Richard. Let's go somewhere else.”

“The hell you say. Keep going. We're almost there.”

Finally, we reached the spot where the fence merged into a corner. There, the oak tree's leaves in full bloom, we were out of sight of the adults just ten yards away. We were able to sit on the broad top of the fence and take in the scene.

Puddles' mom, Paulina, was throwing another of her summer pool parties, and we'd invited ourselves in. On the stereo rigged up to two big speakers—Paulina, on account of her divorce settlement, had some great toys—Mick Jagger had just started telling us about these Puerto Rican girls, and I sat there and did an informal census of the neighborhood.

Paulina, of course, was there, along with Teddy Carson, the guy she was currently balling. I counted Bill and Megan Romersma, whose place backed up to ours and whose son, Jared, Puddles and I had ditched earlier, because there was no way we were going to get away with this if that little tattletale had come along. Randy and Sue Jepperson were there, too, a younger couple on our block who didn't have kids yet. And over in the deck chairs were my mom and pop, both of them a full decade older than anybody else there. Mom was

thirty-five when I was born; I was her miracle baby. Dad? I wasn't even out of junior high yet, and he was almost sixty. Their presence might have surprised me if not for the fact that Dad would go anywhere somebody else was supplying the Jack Daniels.

"You're sure they're gonna skinny-dip?" I said.

"They did last time." Puddles said this glumly. He wouldn't even look at me.

"Come on, Pete," I said, chucking him with my elbow. I hoped the invocation of his given name might cheer him up; there's only so much "Puddles" and "fatass" anyone can take, I reckoned. "This is going to be fun."

"I wish we'd just stayed at your house."

"Come on, man. Don't be chicken."

Puddles plucked a leaf from one of the overhanging branches and tossed it to the ground.

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Paulina was the first to doff her top, and I realized at once that my brilliant plan might have a fatal flaw: the considerable boner that had staked a claim in my shorts. Teddy soon followed, tossing his trunks on top of her bikini. The Romersmas and Jeppersons, perhaps more discreet than Paulina and her beau, slipped out of their swimwear while in the water. Mom, as I expected, stayed above the naked fray. Dad, halfway pickled, took off his pants, tossed them into the increasing heap and sat back down.

"Now," I told Puddles.

"But—"

"Now!" I said.

Fatass turned on his considerable rear end and dangled his legs off the side of the fence. I gave him a shove, and he hit the ground on the other side.

For the first time, I grew tense. Puddles' trip around the perimeter of the fence took longer than I expected, and just as I was about to jump down and go after him, I heard the sound I'd been waiting for.

The first firecracker of the package of fifty went off with a meek “pop.” But then the fuse hit its stride, taking them out two at time. Puddles was safely on the other side of the fence; he'd simply lit them and tossed them over.

Paulina screamed, her boobs jiggling. By the time everybody else scrambled out of the water and moved in to take a look, I was off the fence and at the pile of swimwear, shoveling it into a plastic bag. I got the bag, and myself, over the fence without being seen.

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I hooked up with Puddles at the bottom of his driveway, holding the jar we'd stashed in his front yard.

“This is so great,” he said.

“No shit, Sherlock. Give me the stuff.”

I set the bag on the ground and opened it wide. Then I turned the lid on the old peanut butter jar, slowly so I didn't spill the contents, and wrenched it open.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Ready,” Puddles said.

I poured the contents onto the clothes. Puddles and I had been pissing into that jar for a week, sneaking into my wooded backyard and letting fly with the whizz, then capping it and leaving it in the sun to cook. The stench nearly sent me to my knees.

I closed and tied off the top of the plastic bag.

“Shake that up real good,” I said to Puddles. He picked it up and did something on the order of a spastic flamenco.

We walked the bag up the driveway to Puddles' backyard fence and threw it over.

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In the hindsight of maturity and experience, I'd like to tell you that there was some huge punishment that came of that night, but the truth is, there wasn't.

Fatass blamed it all on me, naturally, and so his mother blamed me, too. Teddy Carson barked at me a few times when I walked by his auto-body shop, told me he'd kick my ass when I came of age, but that winter he got shot between the eyes by a near-sighted

hunter in the Piney Woods, and that pretty well ended any threat he held over me.

Mom told Dad to deal with me, and so we stood on our back porch, Dad's index finger sunk into his Jack and Coke, and we talked about it.

"Why'd you do it, boy?"

"I don't know. It was there to be done."

"That's no kind of answer."

"Are you going to ground me or something?"

Dad pulled his finger from his drink and flopped his arm around my shoulders. "Naw. Hell, no. You're a good boy, generally."

"Thanks, Dad."

"I just want to know where the hell you came up with a stunt like that."

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just wanted to see Puddles' mom naked. The rest sort of fell into place."

Dad took a sip and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Yeah, Paulina, she's got some nice cans." He looked at me, using his drink hand as a point of emphasis. "Don't go telling your mom I said so."

