

It's Always the Quiet Ones

by David Hicks

So a few days ago I'm hitching west on I-80 when this guy pulls over in one of those huge four-door pickups. He doesn't talk, not even in the beginning when everyone asks you where you're going — he just drives, slapping the steering wheel to the music real fast with both hands like the coked-up boys back home who end up going to CBGBs just to dance it off. He's got some manic shit on his tape deck: Barracuda which I like, some guy named Jon-Luc Ponty which I don't like, that song The Devil Went Down to Georgia which is just fucking stupid. But at least it wasn't that Tammy Wynette shit I had to listen to on my last ride, with this anorexic trucker who kept popping speed and washing it down with a mix of coffee and Coke. I thought I might get Hersheyed by that hopped-up psycho so I pretended to sleep all the way through Indiana.

After a while he switches tapes and asks me where I'm headed. I usually say west and then look out the window, like I'm searching for something vast and mysterious. I know it's retarded, but what else am I going to say? But this time I point straight ahead. I'm going to wherever this highway ends, I tell him. How's that for a destination.

I reckon it ends at the Pacific Ocean, he says.

Then California here I come, I say. I think, maybe I could see the place where the mountains come down and then there's the water.

He asks me where I'm coming from, so I tell him, and then I wait for the usual *Damn, I could never live there. You got bullets coming in your windows at night?* But he just nods and says cool. Name's Jonny, he says. No h. And he sticks out his hand.

I shake it, all right, but I keep looking out the window. News flash: Iowa ain't flat. It's rolling hills, all green and pretty like some kind of movie — big change from all the trees, dead deer and concrete I saw for the first three days. And there's miles and miles of corn, but not

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a single tractor. It's like it just grows itself. I thought I'd see the mountains by now, but no way. It's like the Midwest is some kind of marathon to get through, to see if you want to get to the real west.

He asks me why I left, and I guess I should have expected it, but I made it all the way through Pennsylvania, Ohio and two I states without anyone asking. So I keep staring out the window until he puts another tape in and starts drumming on the wheel again. Kansas, for Christ's sake. Dust in the wind.

Why did I leave? Cause my brother's an asshole, how's that. Cause I broke up with Eileen and then felt like an idiot. Cause maybe some things I don't want to talk about.

Then get this, there's an exit sign that says *Brooklyn, 2 miles*. I shit you not: there's a Brooklyn Iowa. I tell Jonny to just let me off and I'll take the A train home. He turns down the manic violin shit, points out the window and tells me he lives there. Heartland of the heartland, he says. He tells me he just came back from Iowa City, news to me cause I didn't know Iowa had a city. He went to "State" last year, just a semester, before he had to drop out. Now he drives an hour just to go to a summer class once a week.

So now it's my turn to say cool. Believe you me, sometimes leaving is a lot tougher than sticking it out. And at least he got into a college. Me, I don't know what I'm going to do. My guidance counselor told me I should apply this year, but there's no way my old man can afford it and it's not like I'm going to get a scholarship for stickball, right?

Jonny asks me about it and I tell him I don't know, maybe I'm done with all that. I tell him I'm lucky I passed my junior year, but just between me and you, I got like the third highest average in my class and I won the Science Fair award. Not that anyone knows that, of course, cause the day they gave out the awards my whole family was at my lard-ass brother's state championship game. He made second team All-American at catcher, you can look it up. In the picture he's the one that looks like Babe Ruth.

I look at myself in the side mirror, to see if there's been a transformation yet. My hair is normally dark, but now it's greasy like

a Puerto Rican's. I got a little stubble on my face, which looks cool, and of course zits everywhere, not cool. I stick out my lower jaw so I look like the Boss. I've been grinding my teeth again, so every time I wake up I have this dead rat breath and when I spit, brown shit comes out. I haven't brushed my teeth in a while, let's put it that way.

I look over at Jonny. It's like we're the same picture, but he's the positive and I'm the negative. We don't have too many blonds in the Bronx, except in Throgs Neck, the Irish section, where Eileen lives with all her fellow McCartys. Eileen's got pimply skin and a cute nose and she kisses with her mouth wide open like she's at the dentist. She wears a baseball cap like the one Jonny has on, only his doesn't have a team name like the Mets or Yankees, it's got the name of some company. So around here, I'm thinking, they must root for tractors.

Jonny tells me he'll let me off at the exit so I can continue my journey to the Promised Land. He says he's sorry he can't take me any further. Then he turns down the music and clears his throat.

Say, he says, you want to see about it?

See about what, I say. Brooklyn, Iowa?

He gets all embarrassed. Starts the wheel tapping again.

I look back out the window, way out, to where the sky and the ground come together. So this is what a horizon looks like. It's still light out, but there's a star up there, clear as day. Or maybe it's a planet, maybe that's what they look like.

So I tell him sure, absolutely. Let's see about it. I slap the dashboard and it almost causes an accident. He's a little jumpy, this one. What the hell, I say, I could use a bath.

He nods, goes back inside that little concert hall in his head, then exits and goes down the main road for a while. But then, get this. He cuts off onto a dirt road, yells out a kind of yee-haw and turns right into a fucking cornfield. We're plowing over the stalks, the truck's crashing up and down, our heads are banging up against the roof. Brown and green things splatter onto the windshield, Jonny's laughing like a maniac and he puts the wipers on but that just

smears it all into mud and we can't see a goddamn thing. And you know what it is? Grasshoppers! Unbelievable. Big as frogs. I almost say to him *Hey cut the shit you stupid fuck*, but I figure this must be a shortcut to somewhere, right?

But I'm wrong, like I am about most things. He has no idea what he's doing. Next thing you know he's laughing and swerving the truck around, getting stuck in the mud. Finally he stops and looks at me and his face is all red like he was crying. Puts it in reverse until we get back to the road.

I ask him if he's okay, but really I'm thinking I got myself into something I can't get out of. After all, this is where all the weird psycho shit happens — out here, where everyone's all white and decent.

He starts driving again, tapping to the music like some kind of Morse code, like *SOS*. Just trying to show you a good time, he says. He keeps his hands moving.

Who the hell knows.

So we get to Brooklyn, Iowa and it's like one of those Norman Rockwell pictures in my Aunt Carm's house: red barns, cornfields, happy yellow dogs, and those huge bullet-shaped towers I can't remember what they're called. We drive down a long straight road with mailboxes a mile apart until Jonny finally says Here we are, home sweet home. Big white house, blue shutters. American flag blowing in the breeze. Little red tricycle on the front lawn. One of those windmill things on the mailbox. Swing set with a little blond kid on it. I feel like tapping my heels together and saying *There's no place like home. There's no place like home.*

Inside it smells like Thanksgiving, and the whole family gets up to see what the cat dragged in. There's a skinny blonde girl so right away I'm thinking about Eileen; there's a dad with a beer in his hand; a red-cheeked mom with her apron on like she wasn't expecting company. The little boy, he stays out in the yard, swinging on the swing, humming to himself.

What throws it all off is the mom. When Jonny introduces me the dad and the little sister give me a friendly hello, shaking my hand

like I'm a judge from the All-American Family Contest, but the mom, she gives me a little wave, walks down the hall and doesn't say a word. Not exactly June Cleaver. Then again her son just brought home a hitcher that looks like road kill, so.

In the living room there's a huge picture of the family, one of those cheesy ones with the puffy clouds. They all look a few years younger. The sister, Leah's her name, is in a cheerleader's outfit, that's right a cheerleader's outfit: royal blue, white and red, same colors as my school back home, good old P.S. 71. Jonny has a football in his hand and one of those old-fashioned college sweaters, way too big for him, black with a gold letter *I* on it. The dad's sort of slouched, and his hair is parted so straight you could see your reflection in it. He's got one hand on the mom's shoulder, the other on Jonny's. Mom looks pregnant, her boobs so big she could feed the whole family. No one's smiling for real — they all have those fake, tight smiles — but still, we're talking All-American here. In my family picture back home, we're all smiling big smiles. I mean, the old man beats the crap out of me and my brother's a hard-on, but still, we're all smiling.

They're just getting dinner ready, even though the sun is still up. The mom, who ditched the apron and put on a tight pink shirt, comes into the kitchen and says *Please call me Johanna*. She points to the pot of boiling water and lets me know I'm welcome to dinner, mind you it's nothing special, just ham and mashed potatoes. Then in her quiet voice she tells me I can stay at her home for as long as I want. How about that? For all she knows I could be some mad rapist, right?

The dad asks me where I'm from, and when I tell him he says Huh! Never catch *me* living there. Then he looks around and everyone gives him a little laugh, except Jonny, who looks at me like *Don't listen to him*.

The mom asks if I'd like to go get myself some corn, and I look at Jonny to see if he's driving me to the local Pathmark, but he nods his head to the backyard, starts to get up, but then sits back down like he has one of those electric-fence collars on.

Not straight back, he says to me. That there's for feed. Head towards the silo.

See, it's like they have their own language out here. It's not even English.

In the big field the stalks are only up to my shoulders, but out by the silo it's over my head. I tear off a few corns, and when I do I get attacked by grasshoppers. I try to pick one up off my shoulder, but it takes me a while, and when I finally get it, he tries to bite my finger and I lose him. I'm not saying I was afraid of it, I just never seen one before. Why would anyone be afraid of a grasshopper?

I hear the dad inside yelling at Jonny for getting the truck all muddy, so I stay outside a while, holding the corn. I take a deep breath of clean country air and my throat starts burning.

When the yelling stops I go back in, and the little kid is in my seat. I dump my harvest on the counter, go over to the table and mess up his hair. It's just like Jonny's, all light and yellow like the corn. Hey little guy, where'd you come from? I say, and as soon as I say that, they all stop smiling. All of a sudden it's like we're playing Truth or Dare, and they're all scared I'm gonna make them go first.

Nowhere, the kid says, like it's the first word he's ever spoken, and everyone laughs like *heh heh*. After that I don't see the kid at the table for two days.

So the mom puts the food out and Jonny helps her, and listen to this: at the dinner table, nobody talks. At supper back home my mom's quiet, okay, but my dad's always making some kind of Neanderthal noise, my fat-ass brother's always yelling at the Yankees on TV and Aunt Carm, let's just say if she ain't talking, she ain't breathing. Here, the only one who talks during dinner is the father. His name is Hale. He looks like Jonny except his face is red all the time, like he's about to explode.

After dinner Jonny's mom tells me I can stay in Hale's den, the room between their bedroom and Leah's. It has a pullout couch that's gotten a lot of use, and a window that goes out to the roof of the back porch. After dinner I take the longest shower of my life and the water in the tub turns brown, like I'm washing off years of shit.

When I go back in the den the couch has been pulled out, the sheets are all changed and some of Jonny's clean clothes are sitting there folded up nice and neat. They smell more like fresh air than the fresh air does.

After I put them on I open the window, climb out on the roof, and sit out there watching the Show: a thousand miles of cornfields, railroad tracks that end in a V where the land runs out, no buildings whatsoever. Have you seen this? It's like I'm on some other planet. Then the sky turns all kinds of purple, the red sun fries into the ground, and I just lay back on the roof, watching the moon get brighter and brighter. *I'm going to do this every night*, I tell myself. That's when it hits me I might stay a while. Until I figure out what I'm doing, anyway. Not that I don't know what I'm doing.

I know this much: right now I'm over a thousand miles from my brother. I've been watching the odometers, adding it all up.

When I finally wake up the next day Jonny and his dad are downing beers at the kitchen table, both of them with those Hee Haw overalls on. The mom says Well hello there sleepyhead and makes me some eggs with bacon and toasted homemade bread, thick as cake. After he sucks down his beer Hale crumples the can and squints at Jonny. Jonny looks away, but then he chugs his too, lets out a huge belch and tosses it in the garbage, two points. Leah's watching a soap opera in the living room, the same one my mom watches every day, like it's her religion. The little one — Joseph's his name, only they call him Jo, like his name is a breath — he's behind the TV, near the outlets, popping golf balls in his mouth. This is what the kid does. He wanders around the house entertaining himself while his family treats him like a piece of furniture too useless to put their feet on.

Have a seat there, Fonzie, Leah says to me, little smirk on her face.

Whoa, good one, I say. Did you practice that before I got here? She smells like that perfume, the one that smells like baby powder.

I take a bite of my toast and the butter drips down my chin. We all hear Mom get into the truck and head out to some arts and crafts thing "with the girls."

What's the deal? I say, and I point back at the drunks. Love's Baby Soft, that's it.

You look like that guy on Happy Days, Leah says, and she puts her hands out and goes *Ayyy*.

Yeah I get it, I say. What's the deal with them, I mean.

I know what you mean, she says, and she burps a little burp. And no, you don't get it.

Hale's wearing his Iowa Hawkeyes tee shirt and raggin on Jonny for being in the marching band whereas he himself played football for State and granted he didn't get very good grades but at least he didn't drop out like his wuss son who had some kind of wuss nervous breakdown. Then he crunches up the can to show his manhood but he ends up jumping up from his seat yelling *Jeesus!* and *God dang it!* and stomping around the kitchen shaking his hand and getting blood all over the linoleum. I look at Leah but she's seen this show a few times and knows how it ends. Jonny gets up, his face all white, but Hale grabs him by the shirt and slams him back into the chair. He puts his head in his hands while his dad stumbles around the kitchen looking for a bandage. Finally Hale goes into the bathroom and doesn't come out.

So.

That night me and Jonny dump some beer and ice into a cooler, pick up his girlfriend Raichel and her friend Mishelle, and drive into town. Mishelle is still in high school, my age. She keeps her head down like a turtle. You might say she's a little homely, but I beg to differ. She's got a soft neck, and a funny way of talking, like Eileen. I like it, is what I'm saying.

We're crammed into the back seat, listening to bad music, and after a while I go to hold her hand and she lets me. Then she leans over and tells me I have sad eyes. News to me. She says she can tell I'm a nice person, in spite of, and for however long I stay, if I'm ever

feeling lonely and just want to sit and talk, that would be nice. So we do that, we sit in the back and talk. And it is, it's nice.

So here's what they do for kicks on a Friday night in Brooklyn, Iowa. All the boys get in their pick-ups, gather up the girls, and they cruise down the main street, which is *called* Main Street, all with the same radio station cranked, windows open, one truck right behind the other. Kids wave, yell shit to each other, and sometimes they beep, but mostly everyone just drives up and down the street. Then they get to the end, make a U-ee in the Safeway parking lot, and drive back down. That's it. That's what they do, all fucking night.

So we cruise past the ice cream place, past the hardware store, past the burger and milkshake joint where waitresses rollerskate up to your car like in American Graffiti. Jonny taps at the wheel, lifts two fingers once in a while to say hey to the other guys. He's got his left elbow out the window, his right hand somewhere in the vicinity of Raichel's lap. We're all drinking beers and listening to the same ELO song everyone else is listening to, just hanging out. Then a bunch of yokums going the other way yell out *Hey, motherfucker!* and I'm thinking now there might be a fight, but Jonny just acts like my brother, looks straight ahead, and everyone keeps driving five miles an hour, one pickup after another.

The headlights behind us light up the back of Mishelle's hair, and she looks pretty, so I lean into her and give her a kiss. She keeps her mouth tight, not like Eileen at all, but then she puts her head back a little and opens up, so I keep kissing her. Then I slip her some tongue and forget about it, call in the National Guard. She puts her hands on my shoulders and holds me back with her arms straight out like this. What was that? she says. Raichel and Jonny look back at us.

My tongue, I say. Like what else?

Oh, she says, like she's thinking it over. Okay. She settles back in the seat, and Jonny and Raichel turn back around. You can do it again, she whispers to me. But just be gentle.

Back home Jonny's mom is still up, watching some news story about a cat that got stuck in a tree, seriously. She asks me how the night went and she reminds me of my Aunt Carm so I tell her about it, about kissing Mishelle, and she gets a kick out of that just like Aunt Carm would. Well, she says, putting her feet up on the coffee table and wiggling her toes, which by the way are painted red, like whore red. If she gets so excited about *that*, she says, just wait till you get to her tits! And then she giggles, like she just said a bad word.

It's always the quiet ones.

So then what? she says, taking a sip of her beer and smiling at me like I'm her new boyfriend. She's got world-class knockers, I don't care how old she is. And that's when I realized we were the only ones up.

So I tell her that after that, all four of us went parking in the cornfields, and me and Mishelle swapped spit in the pickup part of the pickup and she showed me where the constellations were.

Which cornfields, she says.

How should I know, I say. Isn't it all just one big cornfield?

We both see headlights coming across the big window, and a truck pulls into the driveway.

You have no idea what goes on in them fields, she says, back in her quiet voice, like something stopped in her throat.

Well, she got that right.

Later, in the middle of the night, Jonny scares the shit out of me by coming into my room and sitting on my bed. I almost screamed like a girl but then I saw it was him. What the fuck.

Thought you were up, he says, pointing at the light.

I always leave it on, I tell him.

Raich says that Shell's still a virgin, he says. I can smell his beer breath. She said you should just do her, he says, loosen her up. He punches my shoulder and laughs his hyena laugh. I'm thinking great, tomorrow the whole town'll know about my tongue going in Mishelle's mouth and her saying *What was that*. Mishelle told me that's what it was like out here, somebody does something and the

next day everyone knows about it. I told her back home you could murder the old lady in the apartment across the hall and nobody'd know. *Same difference*, she said.

Sure, I tell Jonny. He's slapping his thighs with his palms. Go to bed, I say, you're gonna wake everybody up.

Do her, he says again. Loosen her up. I'm telling you, he's blitzed.

Yeah okay, we'll see, I say. And then his face changes, like he's about to cry. I'm thinking holy shit.

This house, he says, looking around the room. You have any idea what's going on?

I just sit there, right? On the wall behind his head is an old black-and-white picture of a football team, and I recognize the red-faced guy on the end of the back row, like where they put the players whose uniforms never get dirty.

Then he gets up and leaves. Just like that.

I try to go back to sleep, but it's brutally quiet. What's going on? *Nothin's* going on. No sirens, no cats howling in the alley, no brothers laughing on the corner, no Puerto Ricans screaming at each other in 34D. Just the weird grasshopper noise outside, like a bunch of people trying to play violins with broken strings.

I hear someone from the parents' room walk by in the hallway, and I get all tensed up and I know I got no business telling you this, but since I'm telling you everything anyway, I'll tell you that when I get nervous, and I'm in a strange place, I all of a sudden feel like dumping my drawers. So I stare out the window, at the cornfields lit up by the moon, and try to think of something nice. I think about Eileen, but that makes me feel like shit, so I think about Mishelle instead. But not about fucking her. About the way she puts her head back, the way the skin on her neck smells, the way her voice curls around my name. It calms me down.

Later I hear the footsteps going the other direction, no toilet flush, and I'm thinking it's Hale coming back from Leah's room. So that's what's going on, I think. Only her bedroom's right next to mine and I didn't hear nothing. Anytime she moves in there I can

hear it, especially when she talks in her sleep. Even if it's two a.m., I'm up. I'm always up. Even when I'm sleeping, I'm up.

So I go out to check on her. The porch roof goes under my window and hers, so I go out my window, crawl over to her end, get on my knees and peek in. I can see everything, because she left the light on by her bed. She's sound asleep, ass up, big tee shirt on.

The screen is open a crack, so I slide it up and crawl through her window, to make sure she's okay. She's sleeping like a little girl, her mouth wide open. I know what you're thinking, but give me a break, I didn't do nothing.

So I'm standing inside her room in the dark. I can hear the blood rushing around in my head. The grasshoppers sound like a million screeching violins. And check this out: it was all about me. I mean I felt like her, lying in my own bed. Like I was asleep but not asleep and someone was in my room. Like I was nine or ten years old, and I'm lying in my bed, my back up against the cool wall, and it's summer, and I'm in my underwear, listening to the mariachi music from down the hall, and someone is coming into my room and I know what's going to happen and I don't want it. I open my eyes a little, and I see a pouch up in the corner, a sack of spider eggs probably, but it looks like a big dirty eyeball. And it all feels so real to me I almost stain my tighty-whiteys right there in Leah's bed.

All right, so I was sitting on her bed. But at the foot of her bed. By her feet. I don't want to be like everyone else.

Anyway.

After we eat breakfast the next day, Hale tells Jonny it's Saturday so he better not forget to clean up the barn god dang it and while he's at it wash the god dang truck too.

Johnny says we're going riding first, and Mom comes out with her first words of the day: Where at, she says.

Hale looks at her, but she keeps staring at Jonny. Then Hale looks out the sliding door, out at the cornfields. Yeah, where at? he says.

So we go flying down that same flat road we came in on the first day, the other direction this time. I'm sitting behind Jonny on his motorcycle, my arms wrapped around him like if I can save him I

can save myself. He's driving way too fast. He smells like soap, cause the guy washes himself ten times a day like he's got some kind of fucking disease. But everything else smells like cow shit. It's the ugliest fucking country you can imagine.

I yell in Jonny's ear *Hey are we going all the way back to the real Brooklyn?* but he's not answering me. He's going eighty-five, we don't have helmets, and I'm thinking a pebble, a bird, one of those kamikaze grasshoppers, and we're dead. We do some pretty fucked-up things in the Bronx, but this is fucked up.

Next thing I know we're stopping near the cornfields again, near the same spot we plowed through the first day. These fields look all pretty from the highway, but as soon as you're in the middle of them, it bugs you out. Your skin starts itching, the noise is like a horror movie, and those fucking grasshoppers are everywhere. They hop on your shoulders, jump in your hair. You just can't see them, even when you're looking right at them. And people don't talk about them, like maybe the little criminals will just admit the error of their ways and leave town on their own. The day before, I saw a crop duster spraying the fields and I thought, Yeah right like that'll get rid of them. It went back and forth over the corn, real low, like just a hundred feet off the ground, until it came right near the house, right over the dinner corn, right over the swing set. That night I looked at the corn on my plate and I thought, What am I eating? I mean really, what the fuck am I eating?

So Jonny stops, gets off the motorcycle and asks me when I'm leaving. I put my hands up like excuse me, I didn't know I wasn't wanted. But then he looks up at the sky, and his face is all blotchy like his dad's, and I get that he wants to tell me something but what's the use if I'm just going to take off. It wasn't my fault, he says. Then he looks at me.

Look Jonny, I say, whatever it is, don't give yourself a heart attack about it.

What do you know? he says. You don't know jack.

My brother always calls me a retard, but I'm not a total ignoramus. I was smart enough to run away, anyway. And right now I

got a psycho drummer having a breakdown in a cornfield and I don't know how to ride a motorcycle, but I can see the highway and I know it goes west or east, my choice.

He looks at me, but it's like I'm not even there.

And the truth is? I'm not. I'm not there. I'm way the fuck away already. It's what I do. Before I actually go, I'm gone.

Wanna know what I'm doing a thousand miles from home out here in I O Fucking Wa? I was playing ball at the park the other day with my lard-ass brother and for no reason — well here's the reason, we were down a run with two outs and I popped out to left with Mister Overthefence on deck — he threw his bat at me and it knocked me on my ass. I just walked away, kept going over to the Bruckner, stuck out my thumb like some guy in a movie, got a ride over the GW, and here I am in Happy Land. Swear to God. Never thought I had it in me. I've been thinking about him every minute since, if you want to know the truth. I can still feel it where the bat hit my shoulder.

So I don't know what Jonny says to them, but that night Johanna doesn't offer me an extra helping of dumplings, Leah doesn't call me Tony Danza, Hale doesn't grab me a beer when he goes to the fridge, Jonny keeps his hands on his lap, and Little Jo is back sitting in my seat, like he was there picking the paint off the table and everyone just sat around him by accident.

I eat a little bit, but then I had enough, you know? I can't take the silence. What's the deal? I say. *Que pasa, mi familia?* But no one answers. I stare at Johanna, and she looks back at me like I'm a frisbee of cowshit under her shoe.

Finally the father squints his eyes at me. No deal, he says. No problem at all, Rocky Balboa. He shoves the big pot over towards me and lifts off the cover. Help yourself to some more stew, he says.

This morning, I slept in. Johanna didn't wake me up for breakfast, and nobody said nothing about me going to church, so for a while, the house was quiet. I thought about calling Mishelle, just to talk, but who needs that shit, right?

When they get back from church Jonny comes in my room, sits on my bed. Doesn't say a word. He's got his hair combed, parted like his dad's.

So, I say. It's you and your mom? What the hell, I got nothing to lose. I feel like Columbo, got it all figured out. He looks at me.

What? he says, even though he heard me loud and clear.

I act like my brother and I don't say nothing. Dust in the wind.

You're sick, he says. He shakes his head and gets up. He can't even look at me now, he's so disgusted. What the heck are you talking about, he says. Is this what people in New York are like?

Did I say Columbo? I meant Dumbo.

Later I come out when I hear the usual dinner commotion, but it looks like I wasn't invited. They're sitting around the table, holding hands and saying grace. We thank God for our food, thy bounty, that whole song and dance. My mother, she's an angel here on earth, she makes us say that shit every Christmas and Easter, only no way do we hold hands. I peek around the wall and the only one who sees me is little Jo. He opens his eyes and goes like this to me with his finger.

Later Hale and Jonny are watching TV, some show about how to build a new home in a half hour. Looks like all you need is the right tools and the know-how, and I certainly don't have either one. The only thing my old man ever taught me how to fix was a poker game. When I sit down they switch over to a car race, and we watch the cars going around in a circle, stupidest sport on earth. They're both holding Busch beers in those Styrofoam can-coolers. Hale sort of waves it at me, but I tell him no thanks. I mean, how many beers can you drink?

I'm leaving in the morning, I tell them. Thanks for putting up with me. Jonny laughs a little laugh, gets up and goes to his room. Hale just nods, like that's what he figured.

There's some pot roast in the fridge, he says. We called you for dinner but you must have been out daydreaming on the roof.

Yeah right.

I tell him I'm just a city kid, I'm supposed to be headed west. Gotta see those Rocky Mountains, I say. Hale keeps squinting at the TV, at the cars buzzing around and around. People must just watch this shit so when the big crash happens, the real big one, they can say they were there, they saw it, they witnessed the scene of the crime.

Sure are some strange things going on around these parts, I say. That's how Mishelle talks.

And what's that supposed to mean? he says. He hits the mute button.

Nothing, I say. See why my brother calls me a retard?

Who the heck sent you here, he says, but so low I can hardly hear it. He's still watching the cars, but quiet now. You know what, Mister City Kid? he says. You don't know bull crap. His knuckles are red, and he looks like he might cry, beat the piss out of me, or both. What the heck do you know, he says.

I know what I know, I say. It's what my dad always says.

You think you do, but you don't, he says, and he starts jabbing the top of his head with his finger, still watching the TV. It's all in your goddamn head, he says, then he points his finger back at me. *You're* the strange thing going on around these parts, he says. Tell you what: why don't you head on back to the dirty part of the country, and the rest of us will just keep on living the good life right here. He raises his beer can to the television like a salute. Heartland of the heartland, he says.

Johanna comes into the kitchen and stands there, watching us. From Jo's room in the basement I can hear a thumping noise, like he's throwing a ball against the wall. Nobody's talking. The cars go round and round, not making a sound. The ball keeps thumping from somewhere inside the house, like the heartbeat of some monster.

So.

I go out on the back porch, but sit on the other end to watch the moon come up. It crawls up over the edge of the earth like some pissed-off God, all blood-red and bruised, and hangs over the cornfields, making everything glow like it's another planet — like

there's nothing there you could possibly understand, it's all so true and unbelievable. And you just have to sit still, you have to take your time and clear your head, because it all depends on how you look at things. It goes from red to orange, and then to yellow, and then it's a huge white plate in the sky. You can see every crack, every stain. I think, if I look hard enough, I can see where those astronauts put the American flag.

The phone rings, and I hear Jonny's mother pick it up in her bedroom, her voice all shaky like a grandmother's. The racecars buzz around in the living room, and Jonny's stereo thumps from his room, violins screeching. A star shoots through the sky like one of those crop dusters, and I try to hear that too. But mostly it's the grasshoppers making the noise. They scratch out their song like it's all synchronized, like they've all been working together for centuries, keeping things the way they've always been.

Once after work me and Eileen walked to Edgewater Park and lied down on our backs, holding hands and looking for the comet. We heard some crickets, but mostly car horns and some guys drinking brews over by the trees. Eileen said she wished she lived in a place where she could see the stars, some place like Nebraska or Wyoming or Iowa. She said all the blank space in the sky wasn't really blank; there were all kinds of stars and planets we couldn't see because of the city lights. She told me there were places in America where you could see planets in the sky without a telescope, just by looking up at night. Especially in the mountains, she said. You could tell which is which, she said, because the planets were strong and bold and the stars were the ones blinking and dying. That's when I told her what happened to me. I told her it happened a lot, not just once. She just listened. Then she rolled onto her side, put her hand under my shirt and pressed it onto my skinny heart, like she was feeling it beat. Like she was amazed there was a heartbeat there at all.

The next day, I broke up with her. So now you know the kind of guy you're dealing with.

While I'm at it, that memory I told you about, the one I had when I was in Leah's room? I wasn't nine or ten, I was fourteen. All right? Now fuck off.

She's lying next to me on the roof. Leah. She crawled out her window all sleepy with her hair messed up, wearing the big tee shirt she sleeps in: *Iowa State Cyclones*. She almost tripped off the roof, but I jumped up and grabbed her.

Vinny Barbarinoooo, she said, and she poked me in the ribs and pulled my hair. You still don't get it, do you. Then she yawned and stretched out on the roof next to me. Two minutes later she was breathing into my shirt.

There's a grasshopper up here, how it got here who knows. Probably hitched a ride in my hair. Next thing you know they'll be inside the house, like it's their ultimate goal to invade all the homes of Iowa and then Indiana and Illinois and then, before you know it, all of America. And it will never be on the news, because everyone will just be watching the cars go round and round while the grasshoppers sit on the couches right next to them, drinking a beer. This one is as big as the palm of my hand, swear to god. It's like he's nuclear, like swallowing pesticides all his life has made him indestructible. If you look at them up close, they're pretty ugly, all bloated and bug-eyed. But I guess if you look at anything up close, it's pretty ugly. I think about squeezing his blotchy head until it explodes, but then I feel sorry for it. After all, I got no solid evidence to use against it in a court of law. Plus I don't want to get anything toxic on Leah. So I toss it down to the ground. No doubt they land on their feet.

Leah's panties have pink hearts on them. I can see them in the moonlight. Her arm is going up and down on my chest.

I pet her hair and feel her breath in my armpit. I always wanted a little sister.

Inside, from the basement, I can still hear little Jo throwing the ball against the wall.

There's a big star near the horizon, maybe a planet. It's really bright, strong and steady. Maybe it's one of those planets near the

sun, one that looks all cool and pretty but on the surface it's a huge ball of lava. Or maybe it's one of those that looks solid but really it's all vapors and stains. I don't know. I can't tell from where I am.

