

Straight Out of the Can

by Tiff Holland

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It's Sunday, so Mom's at the dining room table, doing the books. Every Sunday, she throws a roast in the oven, pork or beef, and while it cooks, she does the payroll. Dad's in there with her. He double checks her numbers. My brother, Bob, is collecting for his newspaper route, and I'm staying over with a friend. It's the first time in years, I'm not there on a Sunday morning.

My other brother, Mike, has been camping out with the Carter boys down the street. For breakfast, he had beans, straight out of a can, and they were the best thing he ever ate.

"These are the best," he told them.

"The best beans?" Joe, the youngest one asked.

"No, the best anything," he answered. "They're the best thing I ever ate."

Joe giggled a little because he figured it was the joint that made Mike say that, but Mike swore it wasn't. He figured it was because they were eating outside. Mom never let us eat outside or camp outside or even have a ketchup bottle on the table, and even stoned, Mike knew that was probably it. He ate every bite, scraping the can with the spoon before he stood up to announce he had to go home.

"Why?" asked Dave, the older one.

"I have to help Bob collect," Mike told them, hitching his jeans up.

His pants were always falling down because he never wore a belt. They nodded. Really, he had to go to the bathroom, he hadn't been in the two days they'd been camping out because unlike Joe and Dave, he couldn't squat in the bushes or even go inside their house where their mom didn't want them anyway, that's why she let them camp out. He could only go at home.

Mike takes Lakota home which seems like a long walk because of

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the big hill, and he meets up with Bob right at the crest. Bob is finished collecting, and he has a pocketful of tips and a pocketful of bubble gum which he won for getting the most new subscriptions. His picture was in the paper as carrier of the month for the most new subscriptions. My folks were in the picture, too, he's smiling from between the two of them with his Akron Beacon Journal bag slung over his shoulder. He's probably chewing some of the gum in the picture. My folks are smiling, too, and it's the last family picture I have with anyone smiling, even if it isn't really a family picture since Mike and I aren't in it. Bob is always really generous with his gum, and he offers Mike a piece on the walk home, and Mike is glad to have it because his mouth is suddenly very dry, and they look funny, the way they always do when they walk side by side because of the huge discrepancy in their sizes, Mike so very big, and Bob so very small.

In the meantime, Mom has sent Dad out to get the beauty supplies she's left in the car. She has a box full of shampoo and astringent, and she needs to do an inventory and to get the receipt out of the box, and Dad meets up with the boys on the street behind the house. Mike is telling Bob about the beans, "the best you'll ever have" trying to get Bob to go back with him later, after he's gone to the bathroom, and Mike's talking loud, the way he always does because that's just the way he is. Of course, it pisses Dad off. Dad is always getting onto Mike for being so loud, and he tells Mike now to keep his voice down which makes Mike mad because they're outside after all.

"Crissakes," Mike says, loud, like always, but not yelling.

"Don't cuss at me," Dad tells him, putting down the box.

"I'm not cussing," Mike is exasperated, but he lowers his voice. He can never please Dad, and he knows it. Dad steps over to the boys. We always call them The Boys at my house, my mom does, and my relatives and everyone in the neighborhood. Dad takes a good look at Mike or maybe he gets a smell of it on him, and he knows Mike is high.

"Have you been doing drugs?" Dad asks, and he raises his voice.

"Remember," Mike can't resist, wagging a finger back at Dad, "keep your voice down."

I'm not there, remember. This is the one Sunday of my whole life I'm not there. I'm imagining this. It's easy to imagine. There's always been yelling at my house. Dad has always picked on Mike.

Dad shoves Mike then, and for a change, Mike doesn't back down, he crowds back in. He knows he's taller than Dad. He's almost a foot taller than all of us and at least fifty pounds heavier. He can see the future.

"Don't," he pauses and pokes a finger back at Dad, "shove me."

"Don't," he takes a step towards Dad "tell me what to do."

It's like show motion and then, suddenly, fast forward, Dad cocks his arm back to punch Mike. Mike's too slow, too naturally slow and too stoned to get out of Dad's way but Bob pops in between them, pops up like a jack-in-the-box between them and sticks his skinny little kid arm up to ward off Dad's full-grown blow.

I don't hear it, but it cracks. It cracks and then there's mayhem, cause Dad knows right away what he's done, and Mike is howling as if Dad had connected because the only thing that could hurt worse than if Dad hit him is Dad hitting Bobby. Dad's yelling at Mike, "Look what you made me do," and Mike's yelling, "Bob, Bob," and then "Mom, Mom," I miss all of it. The whole thing. I don't see it, and I don't hear it. The roast burns, and Mom drives Bob to the hospital, and when I get back no one is there. They haven't even left me a note, and I don't know I only have one brother, that I only ever really had one brother until later that night. Mom will explain Mike lives with Gram now, and they'll tell me Bob fell out of a tree in case children's services asks around, and Mike will tell me, weeks later, it

was the bravest thing he ever saw, and it will be, for me, too, even though I didn't see it.

