

## THE COOK

BILLY AND SAM WERE at the door about the time I finished the sweet, brown milk left over from my Apple Jacks. That was my favorite part. I had to eat six whole boxes to get the bowl. It looks like an apple somebody cut in half.

Grabbed my notebook and out the door.

“Hey, Clyde, get your coat and let’s slide,” Sam said with a giggle.

It was hard to get used to the cold. I didn’t ever see snow till we moved to Denver. Mom had just packed up the station wagon and we left Texas. Dad stayed behind, but he came up sometimes and we stayed in a hotel and ate hot fudge sundaes. My brother Ethan—he was big, he was in the sixth grade and tried to tell me what to do—said it was called divorce. He said nobody really liked anybody after awhile. I knew Ethan sure got on my nerves a lot.

My coat was all folded up on the couch with my lunch sitting in a paper bag on top of it. I ran out the door and put my coat on at the same time.

Ice!

“We won’t be late today. We can pretend we’re in the Olympics. On your mark,” Sam said, crouching low.

“They’re off,” I said as Billy and Sam skidded down the shiny concrete, the rubber of their galoshes squeaking.

“Russia’s in the lead, but, wait, his skates are locking up. America’s coming on strong. An elbow to the ribs. Did the officials see it? No! America hits the finish line. Another gold medal for Kowalski!”

Billy rolled on the frozen grass. “Hey, no fair. And how come I’m always Russia? I want to be Australia. I’ll be a kangaroo and hop to the finish line.”

“There’s no ice in Australia, dummy,” Sam said. “That’s down at the equator and they swim all year long.”

We slid down the sidewalk, stopping to crack off hunks of ice with our galoshes. These guys were okay. They were only in the first grade, but Sam had a pool table in his basement. It took his dad an hour once to get Billy’s arm out of one of the ball-catching holes. Billy didn’t scream, but he wouldn’t play pool anymore.

## THE MORTICIAN

MAGGIE'S EYES WERE LIKE the creek water, muddy green and shiny with mystery. I watched her lift her boob and squeeze it.

"They dribble," she said. "It's not milk, Henry. More like water."

She crossed her arms underneath and lifted them high. She squinted at me again. I couldn't tell if she was happy, pissed off, or if the sun was in her eyes. Maggie was changing fast. We both were. Soon our baby would arrive.

It was Maggie's idea to hang out at Esperanza Hole, like old times. She was busy with high school and being pregnant and I had my job at the restaurant on Sixth Street. No time to be kids no more, she said. Our crowd had come here all the time last summer to escape the heat. Now it rained and our friends were busy partying.

Maggie waded into the murky water until her tummy disappeared. She looked brand new.



I had hooked up with her in Freddy's laundry room, out back of his parents' house. Me and Freddy were there with his girlfriend Cassandra and Maggie and this little runt Tomas. Freddy's parents were squawking at him about something or other—taking the trash out or studying. I don't remember. So Freddy dragged us out to the garage where they got their laundry room and said why don't we play Truth or Dare.

Tomas was a zit-faced retard and he asked what that was. Freddy said it's a game, and we sat down to play. Maggie slid down across from me and she was wearing one of those half shirts that exposed her belly piercing—she took it out when she found out about the baby. She wouldn't look right at me, but when she smiled the corners of her eyes crinkled in a sexy way I'd never noticed at school.

Freddy turned out the light and left us in shadows from the porch light outside. He pointed at Tomas. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth," Tomas said.

"You ever kiss a girl?"

Tomas' lips got tight. "Yeah."

"Not related to you?" Freddy asked.

## THE MALE NURSE

“GRANDMAMA CALLED LAST NIGHT from Heaven,” Marina said. “She asked how you were.”

Marina was my older sister by three years. She was only sixteen, but Mama said Marina is older than anybody, at least since Grandmama died. Every morning Marina crawled into my bed when my eyes were crusty with sleep and told me dreams.

“It was so real, Marco,” Marina said, her dark eyes wide. “Grandmama called from a pay phone. I could hear this other lady with a Yankee accent behind her telling Grandmama to hurry up, and dogs were barking.”

Marina’s lips turned down and her whole face tightened. “I said, ‘Grandmama, do you know where you are? Do you know you’ve been dead to our Texas home for five years?’ Grandmama didn’t say anything, then she said, ‘Oh, that explains a lot.’

“When I asked about Heaven she wouldn’t answer. ‘I really must hurry, Marina,’ Grandmama said. ‘There are people waiting.’ She whispered with the other woman for a second and they both laughed. And she said, ‘Tell Marco to take out the garbage and not get into fights at school.’”

I asked Marina, “Did she say anything about Mama?”

Marina smiled and leaned back on the bed. “I told Grandmama that Mama didn’t mean anything when she called her a fat, old cow. I said, ‘Mama was just being Mama and she was mad that she couldn’t go dancing because you wouldn’t stay home from bingo and baby-sit us.’

“Grandmama clicked her tongue. ‘I’m not mad. My daughter-in-law is a foolish little girl, so different from you. That clock radio was awful pretty, though.’”

Grandmama won a clock radio at bingo but it was broke up when the drunk cab driver sent Grandmama sailing through the sky and left the stuff from her purse, radio dials, and plastic slivers scattered like confetti. At least that was what Marina told me.

“What else did Grandmama say?” I asked. I was finally starting to wake up.

## THE DAUGHTER

AFTER THE ABORTION, CARLA couldn't stop thinking about Christmas trees.

She gripped the X-Acto knife and sliced into the green vinyl of the stool next to her, recreating the stair step pattern of a pine. Her editor, Arnulfo Saenz, had warned her about this habit, but lately she couldn't control the need to destroy things.

The holidays were a month away, and she wouldn't be able to leave this tiny Central Texas town and her six-month-old job as a newspaper reporter until at least the twenty-third. But that wasn't it. Christmas trees were how her family measured time. The trees were short and squat in every photograph, their branches guarding a mountain of shimmering toys that seemed to grow like a tumor in each successive year. When the grand unveiling time came, she and her brothers Mike and Bob would stake out different corners of the room to stack their piles of loot.

Carla finished cutting and eased the blade under her handiwork, lifting the small, vinyl Christmas tree gently from the stool's foam rubber insides and sliding it into her palm. She held it up to her face and sniffed.

Just then the door to the composing room swung open and the press foreman barged in.

Carla looked up at Dameron "Dam" Heitmiller's grin and flinched.

"Caught with your hand in the cookie jar," he said. "Saenz will can your ass if you're not careful, kid."

Dam was a muscular, fortyish man whose smirking eyes and slicked-back, thick hair made it always seem to Carla that he was laughing at her youth. There was no denying she looked a good five years younger than her actual twenty-three. She was the kind of thin, blonde, and cute that made her mother's friends defensive and her father's buddies goofy. Her only hope was to flirt back defiantly.

"Where's your Christmas spirit, Santa? A girl needs toys this time of year."

"I'll let that one pass."