

JEFFREY GRIFFITHS

STARFISH

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Mike felt his father's hand rest on his head, draped like a starfish over a clam. He dug his fingers into Mike's scalp and pulled up.

"Christ, Dad," Mike winced, but continued to tie the laces of his running shoe. He swatted at the plastic ivy that hung down from the half wall. It swung back to rest against his ear.

"That didn't hurt," his dad said, rolling his eyes. "And don't curse."

"It felt like an Indian burn," Mike said without looking up.

"My old man did that to me all the time and I didn't whine like a baby." Mike's dad unzipped his navy-blue slacks and tucked in his T-shirt. He snapped the clip of his stretchy belt to its gold buckle and stood by the front door. He squinted as he surveyed the neighbourhood through the three circled windows that intertwined to look like bubbles.

Mike tugged his laces and got up off the kitchen chair. He stayed back while his dad stepped onto the cement porch.

His dad ran a comb through his shining hair and slipped it into his back pocket. He walked splay footed to the station wagon and climbed in behind the steering wheel. Mike waited by the passenger door while his dad stretched across the seat and pulled up the lock.

In the car, they sat without speaking. His father turned the dial on the radio and stopped when he heard Sammy Davis Junior singing "The Candy Man". Mike shook his head and looked out the side window.

"Oh, doesn't this meet your standards?" his father asked. "What do you want to hear, more of that acid rock?"

Mike didn't respond.

"I saw the hit parade chart that you got from the record store," his dad said. "This song is right up there. It's modern, you should like it."

Mike gave a sigh. "It's all right, I guess. I just like the heavier stuff."

"You guys sounded pretty good the other night," his dad said. "But the singer was a little out of tune."

"We're still learning those songs." Mike chewed at the cuticle on his thumb. "Which song did you hear?"

"I don't know, but it was damn loud." His father pushed in the lighter. "Shit, I always forget this thing is busted." He steered with his elbows as he put a cigarette between his lips and struck a match. Mike put his hand on the dashboard when the tires rubbed the curb.

“Jesus H. Christ, that’s one way to wear the white walls off,” Mike’s father snickered, and went back to having one hand flopped over the top of the steering wheel. He sucked in the smoke and blew it from his nostrils.

Mike ran his finger back and forth over the dark hair above his lip.

“Are you ever gonna shave that off?” His father grinned. “It’s like a hedge; it’ll grow back thicker if you trim it.”

Mike’s hand dropped to his lap.

“I think it’s time for Mikey to get a razor.”

They drove for ten minutes, his dad humming along with the radio and Mike tapping on the metallic armrest.

“Here we are,” Mike’s father said as he pulled up behind the plaza. Dan’s Variety was crudely painted on the banged-up steel door. Mike’s dad grabbed the pack of cigarettes off the dashboard and pushed it into his jacket pocket. He opened the back door of the store with the bent key. Mike followed him in and stood with his hands in the front pockets of his brown cords. They both shivered. Mike’s dad turned the dial on the thermostat.

Mike flipped the wall switch. The florescent lights flickered. His dad plugged in the kettle that sat on the small kitchen table.

“Burr,” he said. “Winter’s comin’ early.”

Mike went into the store and took a small carton of milk from the fridge. As he gulped it down he surveyed the chocolate bars. He grabbed a Jersey Milk and ate it as quickly as he could. He added the foil to the ball he was creating in the back room.

“We have to put out those new chips today,” his Dad said. “Maybe open a bag to let people try. The guy from the chip company left us five free ones.”

He filled a stained mug with boiling water. He measured a spoon of instant coffee and dropped it into the cup. He lit another cigarette, which he held between his teeth. Squinting from the smoke, he stepped behind the counter and opened the cash register. He placed the cigarette in a round black ashtray, the kind that usually sits in a stand with a chrome airplane on top. He gulped his coffee while he counted the coins in the till and wrote the totals on a matchbook.

Mike poured a bag of chips into a small wicker basket.

“Oh, put a paper napkin under the chips. Looks cleaner,” Mike’s father said.

Mike poured the chips onto the wooden counter, spread a paper napkin in the basket, held the basket under the edge and swept the chips back in.

His dad watched and shook his head. “That’s one way to do it.”

At nine his father flipped over the door sign from closed to open, shoving it back into the window frame beside an advertisement for the High Bouncing Super Ball. In the advertisement were two people in bathing suits, on what appeared to be a California boardwalk. They stared into the sky at a small black dot. In the corner of the picture was a close up of the super ball. So many ads

covered the window that daylight was almost entirely blocked. A line of sunlight reflected off the empty chip bag. Mike rubbed his eyes.

Mike ate a few of the salt and vinegar chips. He used his sleeve to wipe away the sweat on his forehead.

The first customer entered at 9:15, a big guy with grey hair. He looked like an aging football player. He smiled at Mike. "You look a little tired there, Mike." He winked at his father. "Your dad workin' you too hard?"

"I try," Mike's dad said.

Mike smiled. "He gets me up at 6:30 and we don't leave the house until almost 8:30." He held up two fingers.

The customer said "Peace," and held up his same two fingers.

"No, two hours." Mike laughed and wiggled his fingers. "I was up until one last night watching the late show."

His dad shrugged. "Not my fault. I hit the sack at 11."

"I don't want to start a feud," the customer said, as he looped the red handle of a plastic milk jug over the chrome pole and let it fall. He grabbed a full jug from the fridge. "I'll take a pack of Players too, Dan."

The customer paid and waved as he pushed open the door. A chilly breeze took his place.

"You ever heard of his son?" Mike's dad sipped his coffee.

"Mr. Thomas?" Mike asked as he pulled cartons of cigarettes from a box.

"No, Gomer Pyle."

They looked at each other.

"His son is in University. He's going to be an engineer."

"You have to go to University to drive a train?"

"Okay smart ass." Mike's dad tilted his head. One side of his mouth sloped down as he jutted his jaw. "Watch your mouth, you little bugger."

Mike put his head down and continued emptying the box.

At 10 o'clock a woman came in. She had long brown hair with bangs that brushed her eyelashes. She was wearing a black maxi-coat with brass coloured buttons. She looked about thirty.

Mike's father stood up straight and said, "Good morning," sounding like a bird.

"Hello," she said.

The woman slowly poked around the store, picking up products, looking them over. She seemed especially interested in a dusty little statue of a big-eyed girl that had World's Best Mother written on the base.

"How much is this?" She held up the knick-knack and looked at Mike's father.

Mike's dad slid on the slick tile floor as he hurried out from behind the counter. "No price tag?" He turned to his son. "You missed one here, Mikey."

The woman smiled at Mike's father. "Is this your son?"

"Sometimes I'll admit to it."

“You have the same eyes.”

They all hesitated. Mike’s dad scratched his neck.

“So, how much?” The woman smiled again.

“Jeez, I don’t know, we haven’t had these things come in for ages.” He took the item from her hand. He turned it over, inspecting it, taking his time.

“What the hell. Why don’t you just take it?”

“Are you sure? I’d rather pay for it.”

Mike shifted his head back and forth as his father spoke. Mike’s mouth hung open. The woman stared.

“No, I can’t even remember how much the damn thing was.” Mike’s father held it out to her and then pulled it back as the woman reached out. “Wait. I’ll put it in a bag for you,” he said, and walked back behind the counter. He pulled a brown paper bag from a shelf under the cash register and gently placed the figurine inside. He folded it down twice and creased the edge.

The woman’s glance shifted between Mike’s dad and the door.

“There you go,” his dad said.

“This is awfully nice of you,” she told Mike’s father, and nodded at Mike.

“Hope I see you again. You know, come back soon.” Mike’s father reached for his cigarettes as she left the store. He cupped the match and looked up at Mike as he inhaled.

Mike reached for the chips in the basket.

“Don’t fill up on that crap,” his dad said, shaking his head.

“Nobody’s trying them.” Mike’s hand flopped to his side.

“We’ve only been open for a bloody hour and a half. At this rate all five bags will be in your stomach before lunch.”

“Jeez.” Mike huffed out loud and went to the back room. He shoved one of the kitchen chairs.

“Take it easy in there,” his father called.

“It was in my way,” Mike said.

For lunch, Mike walked over to the Bright Spot to grab a clubhouse sandwich for himself and a toasted western for his dad. He sat by the cash register on a chrome stool. The snack bar was busy. All the booths were full. The young girl wrote down his order and clipped it up for the cook.

“Busy day?” Mike asked the girl.

She feigned an exaggerated wipe across her brow as she filled a small glass with Pepsi and slid it to Mike. “Here, it’s free.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. He drank it down all at once and swallowed a burp.

Mike watched the girl’s fluid movements as she placed plates of hot beef sandwiches and deluxe hamburger platters with french fries and coleslaw in front of the customers. The majority of the patrons were alone and read the newspaper or pocket novels as they pushed food into their mouths. Mike stared at the business cards pinned to the wood trim around the windows. Many were yellowed with green paint clinging to the edges.

“Are you going to the dance tonight?” Mike asked the girl as she placed the wrapped sandwiches on the counter.

“I doubt it,” she said.

He handed her five dollars. “The band is pretty good; they’re the ones that do Carry Me.”

“I hate that song,” she said.

“They do some heavier stuff too,” Mike said.

She glanced around the room and totalled bills.

Mike picked up his order and stood up. He waited while the girl filled coffee cups. He waved to her when she looked at him. She motioned for him to wait.

She went behind the counter by the till. “Are you going tonight for sure?”

“Yeah.” He shuffled his feet and put his hand behind him, on the door handle.

“I’ll probably go, too.”

“Great,” Mike said, and hurried out to the street.

When Mike walked back into the variety store the woman in the black maxi coat held the door for him as she left. Mike smiled. He looked at his father and pointed at the closing glass door. His dad shrugged.

His father’s eyes were fixed on a customer as Mike sat the toasted western sandwich on the counter. “I’m going to grab a pop,” he said.

“Fine,” his dad said, watching the man standing at the magazine rack.

The man’s hair was long but thin on top. He was unshaven but not enough for a beard. He wore a yellowed wool jacket with a knitted picture of a hunter and hound on the back. A T-shirt with Keep on Truckin’ written across it stretched across his bulging stomach.

Mike’s dad lit a cigarette and ignored the toasted western. He walked out from behind the counter and stood at the end of the aisle, watching the man.

“Is there anything that I can find for you?” Mike’s dad asked.

The man looked up. “What’s that?” he asked, sounding surprised.

“I just wanted to know if you wanted to buy a magazine.” Mike’s dad’s eye twitched. Mike came out from the back room wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

The man flipped a page and continued to read.

“The problem is,” Mike’s dad said, raising his voice, “is that the magazines get creased and nobody wants to buy them.”

“I’m sorry,” the man said abruptly. He slapped the magazine on the rack.

“Look,” Mike’s dad said. “I can’t have people just reading here, it’s not a library.”

The man stared. He walked right up to him. “I was trying to find a decent article, but you don’t seem to have anything that requires any intelligence.”

Mike had stopped by the cooler where he could see his father’s face.

“In that case I guess you’ll be on your way then,” his dad said.

“You’re an asshole,” the man said.

“Hey, that’s enough of that crap.” Veins rose up on his dad’s reddening forehead. “Just get the hell out or I’ll have the cops in here.”

The man shook his head, disgusted. His hands shook. “Don’t worry yourself. I’m leaving this shit hole little store.”

Mike’s dad moved to one side. “After you,” he said, swooping his arm until he pointed at the door.

The burly man grabbed a handful of salt and vinegar chips and stuffed them into his mouth.

“Just get the hell out!” Mike’s father yelled.

The man pulled over a rack of bread as he left.

“That son of a bitch,” Mike’s dad said, and ran out the door.

Mike stepped outside onto the sidewalk in time to see his father knock the man down from behind. His father kneeled on the man’s back. “You’re gonna pay for the damage, you bastard.” He grabbed the man’s hair and pulled. The torn strands stuck out between his fingers. The man cried like a little kid.

Mike’s dad stood up. “You’re not worth the effort,” he said. He turned and walked back to the store.

Mike sat in the back room holding his ball of foil. His dad lit a cigarette and stared at the door.

Mike put on his jacket and slipped out the back door.