

When Dean's niece, Vanessa, still wore Peter Pan pajamas, she used to sit on his knee and play horsy. He would bounce his knee up and down and hum the theme from the Lone Ranger. She spurred his calf with tiny slippered heels and cried, "Giddy-up, horse! Faster! Giddy-up!" They always ended up collapsed against each other, laughing.

When she was old enough to wear clothes for curves—black dresses falling off her shoulders, cut-off jeans cut so far up her thighs he feared arrest, bikinis visible only through a microscope—he wanted her on his knee again. Their laughter still came, only his a little less naturally.

Naturally, he let himself forget when piggybacks and wheelbarrow walks wandered into the red-light district of his hormones. But his inner prosecution didn't forget. *Tell us, Mister Johnson, wasn't it in 1982 when your niece had just blown out thirteen of her fourteen birthday candles?* His inner court clamored for the electric chair. The Judge's gavel hammered. *He was an ordinary man*, his defense counsel insisted. An ordinary husband, an ordinary scholar, an ordinary scoutmaster; an ordinary athlete striving to overcome an ordinary arrhythmia. He rode twenty miles on his twelve-speed bike to visit C. Danny Savoie, a psychotherapist two counties away

"Your vanity deludes you into believing yours is a unique case," said his cowboy-booted neurosis wrangler. "The libido's over stimulation of the imagination is a universal phenomenon. Quite ordinary. Most conceal it." C. Danny gestured out his second floor window to the gloomy parking lot, to the backseats of the nation. "It's how we conduct ourselves out there in reality that matters to society."

Enter reality, ladies and gentlemen of the jury.

The Sunday after Vanessa's fifteenth birthday sleepover, Dean and his wife brought over her gift: two *Police* LP's—Exhibit C—he would enjoy only in her presence. They chitchatted with Ginny, Vanessa's cosmetically overdone mother. He nodded and grunted at the right times, but contributed nothing more. After instant cappuccinos prolonged by talk, Ginny made Vanessa peel off, instead of tear, the coppery wrapping paper on the LP's. "You should save it to conserve coastal rainforests." Ginny said. "One less tree means one less breath for humanity." The LP's eventually appeared. Hugs followed thank you's. *Shall we?* proceeded Uncle and niece, slipping outside.

Only the dark rectangle of Vanessa's bedroom window overlooked the backyard, a thirty-by-thirty patch of rank grass enclosed on the three sides that mattered by a cedar hedge. How many games of hide and seek they had played here? He knew her every hiding place. Even if her squeals gave her away, he would feign ignorance and walk by. When Dean had to leave, she threw her warm little body against his thick leg and plopped astride his running shoe, crying, "Don't go. Please, Uncle Dean, *pleeeeeease!*"

This afternoon, Dean did all the hiding in the dark recesses of his head, and very little seeking. They chased each other for ten minutes around a swingless swing set, slipping and sliding on the damp grass. "Faster horse. Faster," she cried. A chill breeze tailed horse and rider.

They stopped, breathing like bellows.

"Thanks again for the records," she said. "Uncle Dean?"

He snapped to from another reverie's welcome sign. "Yes ... yes you're welcome."

Despite the genetic bungling of her mother, she would one day induce coronaries worthy of sonnets. Her coppery hair cascaded down her shoulders in long ringlets, her green eyes throbbled like neon, her tight chest heaved, up and down, up and down,

moist where her skin showed through her v-neck blouse. Ginny said that she had just made Vanessa start wearing a bra. Dean wished she hadn't.

She asked for a piggyback.

"Please, Uncle Dean," she said. Her body radiated the heat of their game. "I'm not that heavy. There's no blubber on me at all."

Dean grabbed his back and told her he couldn't afford the chiropractor's bill. She snatched up his hand and pinched the curve of her waist with it—why, no blubber at all. "You used to carry me around the ocean," she said. The ocean was her name for Raven Lake in her Lilliput days, when he carried her around the lapping lake reassuring her that sharks (she accidentally saw *Jaws*) didn't feed in freshwater.

His heart palpitated as it hadn't in years as he sank to his knees. She hopped on his back with a little cry and locked her bare, brown legs around his waist and walloped his hip with her hand. "Three times around the yard, as fast as you can," she said. "Then up the stairs—just like always."

It was anything but "just like always". He still had the strength and stamina to sprint most of the way and still didn't feel any cramps or twinges in his joints. But he felt twinges in his moral being: a stomach cramp yarding on his vocal chords like a storm struck sailor yanking on a halyard. He bounded with her up the stairs and across the deck, into the living room where his wife and Ginny sat talking on the sofa. They shot him frigid looks. His laughter vanished. He sank back down, his knees creaking like an old swing.

"Look at me, Mom," Vanessa said. "Faster horse. Oh, please don't put me down. Please."

"It's my back," said Dean, groping for his lumbar spine.

"People grow older," his wife, Ginny's elder sister, said. "They shouldn't always do what they used to."

Vanessa walloped him again. "Brute," she said.

This year, like last year, she blew out thirteen birthday candles.

To his credit, Dean adopted a policy of strategic avoidance. Christmases and birthdays only. Keep the conversation light, to the minimum. Eyes above the neckline. Don't ask about school, don't mention boys, speak only when spoken to. He grabbed his back often and moaned and shunned the backyard and removed his glasses so the world took on indistinct edges. He no longer insisted Vanessa should drink wine on family occasions (Ginny insisted it was illegal), and stopped opposing Ginny's decision to send her to St. Mary's school for "a decent upbringing." When Dean's wife wanted to "pop by" Ginny's for a visit, his editor at the *Journal of Philosophy of Science* suddenly wanted him to re-draft his latest paper: Karl Popper had to be vanquished in flawless prose. He threw himself into raising money for his ten boys (Cobra Troop) for the summer jamboree in Kananaskis Park. They scoured the suburbs for bottles, assailed strangers with polished apples outside malls, and raffled off free Boy Scout labour.

It all worked well for the first nine months.

Thanks to his own wife, motive found opportunity. Ginny confessed over her Easter turkey carcass that she didn't have a cent to renovate her crumbling *manoir* (her name for it), certainly not in time to recoup her investment (an accountant, she called every use of her money an investment, even groceries).

Even with his glasses in his glove box, Dean watched his future loom up like gallows. "Your place looks fine to me," he said.

Ginny's cheeks streaked with a mascara freshet. "What matters is how the place looks to Jock. I'm a single mother, Dean—I can't afford to fix the roof. If he finds out how much it leaks, he'll demand Vanessa move back. With him. And that *woman*."

Dean's wife decided to be an accessory to the crime. She crowed about Dean's light teaching load that summer and his carpenter's heritage, his do-gooder ethic. The room on Ginny's Visa would stretch even further because Dean could buy materials at cost; his father still had a contractor's price set up at Span's Building Supply. That was how they could renovate on a college professor's salary. *And still make Dean's bail.*

All that month Dean failed to bring up the affair. He took his wife's failure to remind him as a sign that the whole idea (and Ginny's tears) had been fueled by too much chardonnay. But when he unpinned their calendar and covered up this June's Modrian with Botticelli's Venus, he peered at the red circle corralling July 10 and his wife's scribble: *D. starts Ginny's reno.*

July first through eighth, he pretended he hadn't seen it. On the ninth, when his wife finally reminded him, he arranged with Ginny the supplies he'd need, and with Doctor Savoie's secretary, his first available appointment—in September, the month of Turner's Slave Ship, when C. Danny returned from Thailand. Until then, Dean's consolation prize was a bright pink prescription in C. Danny's neat script: "Dispense with the *mens rea*, Doctor Johnson!"

At 6:07 a.m. of the tenth, he slunk out of bed in perfect, unfortunate health. He parboiled himself in a hot bath, then showered to rinse off the murky water he'd soaked in for an hour. After shaving, he picked off the old Christmas wrapping paper on a bottle of Old Spice, dabbed it on his pulse points as his wife did with perfume, and re-wrapped the box. His uniform: faded jeans artfully ripped along the knees, t-shirt worn through to show some transparency, and jean jacket bleached to a bone white, collar up. In the box of the Red Rocket, his rusting 1974 Datsun pick-up, he positioned and re-positioned his compressor, hoses, nail gun, and tool box. He ate a whole box of granola bars while he whirled around and around in a cross-county vortex of alleys, back roads, and cut trails that eventually spat him up on the rocky shoals of Ginny's driveway. He popped the hood and inspected the clutch slave cylinder he replaced last year. He cranked the steering wheel listening for the telltale click of a worn gear, but couldn't hear a thing.

On her doorstep, two cedar trees stood on either side like prison guards. Pop music throbbed. A recorded succubus moaned, "*Please Baby, take me to the promis'd land. Baby, can't you feel it?*"

He could feel it. The doorbell glowed a mute orange and fortunately shocked him when he pressed it. He would have to fix it: third on his list after the roof and his heart. At 9:47 a.m., he knocked, knocked again, and finally knocked open the door. He stepped inside. "Hello?" he called. "Ginny? 'Nessa?" He climbed the mangy stairs, half way. "Hello?"

"In here," Ginny replied, in a muffled voice.

He sidled into the stifling kitchen. Ginny sat hunched over the table, her head inserted in a white towel tent. Mentholated clouds billowed from a rift; her rheumy head billowed up next like an over-inflated balloon. "Thought it was Marshall. Do the roof next week. The pounding'll kill me. Sinusitis. Start with Vee's room."

The music throbbed through Vanessa's door. Dean knocked below the NO TRESPASSING sign. He called hello. The music erupted into slow siren song, a breathy

ballad in silk bodice. He eased open her door. He gulped her fruity ripe perfume, choked on camphor. There were other traces of rheumy Ginny. Dumped in the center of Vanessa's neat lair was a pile of paint cans, Polyfilla, brushes, rollers, crumpled tissues, Vick's. She had emptied Vanessa's drawers into labeled garbage bags, taken down her collection of pop mug shots, and folded up her white down comforter into a plump present.

He closed the door behind him and turned off her stereo, avoiding the gaze of the Gilligan Gull puppet perched on the windowsill, bought by Dean for Vanessa's ninth birthday. He opened her nightstand, rummaging around for nothing in particular, and pocketed a stick of gum. When her bag labeled Delicates: No Peeking spilled open, he was left clasping a handful of her lacey underwear and a 1960's government pamphlet on contraception—*Precautions for the Teenage Girl*. Her diary, clutched seconds later, proved more difficult to rationalize, since the little book had lain between her box spring and mattress.

The single knock came hard and swift and the door rattled open without another.

"Want the key?" Vanessa asked, bouncing in.

Dean handed over her diary.

"Moving your mattress. It fell out." At least the mattress looked moved, now perpendicular to her box spring.

"Men. They just want one thing." She giggled.

"Yeah. Help moving the damn mattress." He pinned a gold star on himself for his quick recovery.

Back and forth across the hall, they moved her things to Ginny's bedroom. She volunteered for more. She filled the cracks and holes in her walls with a putty knife, while he lay beneath her and fought with the rusted vent screws. There was no fighting his well-oiled fantasies. He thought the warm friction of his heart made the scent of cologne rise. He followed the path it should take. Up along thin legs not yet thickened by time, resting for a moment in the slight concavity between her hips, curling over her lower abdomen upward. She stretched up with the knife, exposing a walnut brown midriff as soft as a rose petal. A dusting of gold flakes she acquired somehow gleamed like a prize on her belly.

Precautions for the teenage girl. What precautions?

His screwdriver slipped from the screw slot, stabbing his knuckle. "Damn screws," he said.

"Must you swear in front of a lady, Uncle Dean?" Vanessa asked.

"Plain Dean is fine."

"Must you swear, Plain Dean?"

He laughed. The pamphlet was nothing more than a little theory to satisfy teenage curiosity; he could slip back into the warm womb of his fantasies. He thought that at St. Mary's, her school, the precaution must be abstinence.

The phone rang. "Vaa-nessa," coughed Ginny.

Vanessa dropped the putty knife and scurried over him to Ginny's bedroom.

"Hello?" she asked. She squealed. "Wasn't it just the most boringest time?" The rest was hearsay. She complained for ten minutes about her chances of making the honour role if Sister Lenora ("That fascist") insisted she play soccer.

Dean picked up his sanding block and sanded the dried filler. He sneezed.

"That's Dean," she said. "Nooooo, he's just my *uncle*. How tall are you, Uncle Dean?" He melted to the size of a fifteen year-old, couldn't stay that way.

"Five eleven," he said. He used to be six feet.

"Very mature," she said into the phone. "Not like *you know who*."

After she hung up, Vanessa swaggered back into the room wearing Ginny's straw sun hat. She extended her arm toward him, her hand drooping downward. "Rise, my loyal subject, and kiss the queen." She giggled. "Hi."

"My queen," he said, bowing. He took her hand, ready to kiss, taste.

She pushed away, brushing her pants. "Oh, you've got dust all over the queen. What help my Mom gets."

He marched on her, arms extended, gaze hypnotic: his Bella Lugosi impression.

"Back. Back. Don't touch me, beast!" she cried.

The phone rang. "Vee. Marshall."

"Hold that thought," she said, rushing back to Ginny's bedroom.

He wiped the dust off the wall with a damp sponge he found in the bathroom. Who the hell was Marshall? He couldn't hear her and remain unseen, so he distracted himself with working. Behind her door, he found a stickman painted on the wall with red nail polish. He began to erase it with his sanding block. He sneezed. Her tone sharpened. "You're so paranoid. It's only Dean. Uncle Dean. *Remember?* God, I hate you." He smiled at a white fibrous space where the stickman had lived. "I'll ask," she said. "But I don't know."

She stuck her tongue out at him as she ran past to Ginny. At the doorway, he pulled on his ear lobe to open his Eustachian tube.

"You went out last night," Ginny said. "Quit whining. I won't take you to the movie. Too true, I should be there. A girl your age, with a boy his age. Megan is a slut. I don't care how old I was. You haven't made the honour roll in two terms. It's got nothing to do with soccer. If he'll take you, fine. He's a good man."

Vanessa pounded down the hallway. Dean rushed back to her window, already peeling green tape to mask off her window frame. A ladder leaning outside her window beckoned him up to the roof. Someone had planted its bottom end in the only bare patch of earth in the rank yard; a little yellow path led from the ladder to a break in the cedar hedge.

"Uncle Dean," Vanessa said, coming up behind him. "Dean." She stood with her hands locked behind her back, circumscribing a half-circle with her foot, eyes following toe.

"Yes, my queen," he said. Her painted toenails gleamed red like brake lights.

"Would you do something for me?"

"Depends what."

"I'll never ask for a favour again."

"No?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"So your humble servant should—?"

"Take me and Marshall to the movies tonight."

His masking tape barked, peeling a length off the roll.

The phone wailed.

"Pleeeasssse."

Above the baseboard behind her, he spotted another red stickman, then another and another, a whole horde taunting him with waving arms. He lowered himself to his belly to rub them out.

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Dean didn't recall much about the movie, a space horror Marshall had crowed so much about. The flushing teens sat two rows behind him, six seats to his left. No matter how he shifted his head he couldn't catch their reflection in the corner of his glasses.

He heard more than enough to see.

When the on-screen spacefarers discovered their doctor with his eyeballs dangling down his cheeks, she giggled; squealed when the ship's cat was found sleeping in the freezer; *moaned* when the survey ship exploded—well before the movie's actual climax.

Dean shot up into the flickering light and marched towards the lobby. Vanessa waved dreamily at him. He swore Marshall had two hands when they entered the hot buttered movie house. Two hands, two arms, two legs: a sixteen year-old stick insect with a Hitler youth buzz. He rushed back with a bucket of popcorn, sowing kernels on the carpet behind him.

"Popcorn, kids?" he asked, stuffing the bucket between their closing heads. A pair of sunglasses stared at him from the base of the boy's skull. "What do you make of the biblical motifs, Marshall? Angels, demons, temptation, brings Milton or Dante to mind, don't you think?"

"More Edgar A," said Vanessa, filling Marshall's silence.

"Yeah. Edgar A," repeated her multi-tentacled boyfriend.

"Now take this guy," said Dean, nodding to the darkened screen, "whirling through space, oxygen running out, alone. About to be pulled into the icy seas of Io. Who does that make you think of?"

"Edgar A?" asked Marshall.

"You," said Vanessa.

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9:03 p.m. After the movie, Marshall wanted to go to RetroBurger, a 1950's drive-in where rollerblading waitresses in lingerie served you in your "machine." Slowing the car, Dean glimpsed teens tangled in the back seats of cars, so his foot pressed heavily against gas pedal. He drove them to Sea Shanties, a former chicken place whose interior had been "grotto-ized" (Vanessa). It had everything he wanted. A cacophony of foghorns, gulls, and bells to drown out young hearts; hanging nets, floats, and rubber fish ready to plummet at the first leer; a revolving ceiling projector that tattooed images of ships, pirates and mermaids against the grey, rock-textured walls. The images almost looked real if he forgot the fly corpses. He let himself forget the fly corpses—but not the teens.

"Can't we go back to the other place?" asked Vanessa.

"Sure," said Dean. "Some other time."

He bought them fish and chips. Double deep-frying, he informed Marshall, was an Anglo-Saxon aphrodisiac. Dig in, boy! Extra tartar sauce? Butter? Dean's stomach accepted a dry cracker—his last supper before the crime.

Marshall did all the talking, a supersonic effusion, punctuated by noisy sucks at his double-cream shake. Dean realized he didn't have an airtight case against him. How much easier to murder him, if the boy remained a drugged-out straw man he could steamroll with his truck. But he was the St. Mary's genius in biology and chemistry, having risen up from the ashes of his car collecting clan. He had removed his Tigers baseball cap when they sat down. He quoted passages from Darwin and Huxley. He held out her chair. He offered to pay for the food with marked bills. His father drank, his mother ate, his sister fasted. He took photography and hiked and collected butterflies. He spoke fluent French.

It wasn't French the two teen's spoke after Marshall finished talking. Their eyes locked, flashing out the semaphore of their secrets in winks and glances. Marshall punctuated his last message with a hand squeeze and excused himself to the bathroom. Vanessa, her tongue splintering a mint toothpick, spat out a silent "I know."

Dean and Vanessa averted each other's gaze to a little girl (*witness 1*) wearing a birthday crown shaped like a scarlet starfish. She struggled to inhale a chili dog while waving away her father (*witness 2*), who wanted to cut it up, or at least remove the miniature sail stuck in the center of it. "The big birthday girl" stuffed the hotdog into her mouth until her cheeks swelled like a puffer fish. Every two minutes her father shouted about her absent mother. Bored, the girl played with the cord of the yellowed blinds covering the front window. When the blinds clink-clinked against the grotto wall, she told her father "It's th' wind."

"Cute," said Vanessa, "children, I mean. At least at the right time. With the right person."

"Sure," Dean replied, absently. His mind was swiftly calculating the love calculus he had mastered in grade four. Score one point for every letter in the lovers' names that matches the letters in TRUE for the tens, the same for LOVE for the units. Dean Johnson and Vanessa Lee, four and seven equals a forty-seven per cent chance of love. And the other fifty-three per cent? Excused to the bathroom.

"We've known each other for a little while, Uncle Dean," Vanessa said.

"Long enough to be more than trite with each other." Too harsh, he thought. Too parental. "Chill", as Marshal had already said a dozen too many times.

Her first uncomfortable pause. "Do you remember how you said I had a bulbous head?"

"My little bulberosity," he laughed. "You blew out all your candles back then. I used to wonder when the rest of you would catch up."

"Member how we played piggy-in-the-middle with Anna Holmstrom?"

"Anna Banana. I was always the piggy."

"And the piggy-backs you gave me around the ocean, Raven Lake. Dad never. Is your back okay?"

He wanted to leave with her right then. Move, he thought. Grasp her hand, move and tour the motel country. But he couldn't lift his frostbitten hands from the metal table. If he could just soak them for five minutes in a sink of hot water. If he could just—he should have taken his glasses off when he'd slunk into the restaurant. He should

have thrown himself into a snow bank like St. Francis, naked but for a crucifix. He should have.

Marshall opened the bathroom door. He stood staring at Vanessa, his eyebrows raised, his hands palm up thrown out to either side of him as if he was juggling grenades. She shook her head violently, sending her suitor scuttling back into the bathroom. "He never washes his hands right," she said. "Oil."

Dean's calculator cleared to receive two new names: Marshall something. Subtract a point for dirty hands.

"You were always very liberal with me," she said. "You understand us. It's like you grew up but didn't forget. Like when Mom wouldn't let me drink at Thanksgiving. You poured me some wine and told her I should learn about alcohol with family, not at party with strangers. You just drive it underground, you said."

He slowly nodded. She had a prosecutor's memory for the spoken word.

"The same goes for a lot of other things," she said.

A chill breeze invaded their booth. The blinds rattled, lifted up, sunk down.

Marshall opened the door a crack. Vanessa shot up and ran to it, her three inch clogs clattering on the tawny tile. A flurry of sharp words; the door slammed shut. Smiling, she sidled to their booth. "Uncle Dean," began her request. "Dean."

"If you want me to buy you some beer or wine," he said, "I don't have problem with that. But quit being so vague. I can even drive you to the ocean—Raven Lake. Park a while." With me, he wanted to add.

She stared into the greasy remains of their meal. "It's not booze."

"I'm not a pharmacy. You'll have to find other drugs yourself."

"I don't mean drugs. Marshall doesn't even drink. What do you take me for? I'm shooting for pre-med for crying out loud."

He reluctantly returned Marshall's lost point for unseemliness. "Sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have—"

"I just want it to be safe. It's 1983 for crissakes. There are *diseases* out there." She glanced over her shoulder; a breath would have drowned out her voice. "If stupid St. Mary's got their way with their anti-contraception dogma, I'd end up like Rona Hoffman—pregnant because I relied on Saran Wrap."

"Pregnant?" he cried at whisper. "Did Marshall—?"

"We're adults. We take precautions." She leaned toward him; her hands took his. "His older brother caught him stealing his. We don't have any." Her whisper braved volume. "There's a pharmacy at the Safeway past the stop lights."

The blinds snapped up; the little birthday girl's father shouted at his daughter.

In the reflection of the exposed window, Dean saw two waitresses and the busboy appear at the head of the aisle behind him. They advanced on him with a shark-shaped cake, blazing with six candles.

"Look, Leah," the little birthday girl's father said. "Look."

Leah craned her head around, her eyes and mouth agape.

The restaurant erupted into Happy Birthday. Dean couldn't lip-read, but he knew Vanessa's lips moved to different words. Her voice confirmed it; it rose over the singing. "If Sister Lenora or Father Cassell's found out, we'd both be expelled. Six lubed is all we need. For a few days. Five dollars. I can give you the money—please, Dean. I want it to be right." She pressed a crumpled ten into the deep freeze of his palm. "Keep the change."

When the cake-bearers reached his booth, Dean rose on the final *to yooo-u!* and blew out the candles.