

Josie Unlimited

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By Stephen Shifflett

For my students, past and present, at Keene High School

Prologue

John Houston beamed a ridiculous smile into the television camera. “Well, from what I understand,” he said, “this kid in my calculus class named Donnie beat up his girlfriend’s dad with a shovel. Now the man’s lay’n half-dead in the hospital and they’re not sure if he’s gonna make it or not.”

Donnie hated the local news media. That was the irony of the whole situation. How many times had he turned off the TV in disgust because the local stations were sensationalizing human misery? All for ratings and advertising money. But human tragedy is everywhere. It’s happening all the time. Why should he have to watch it every day on the six o’clock news? His own hell was troubling enough without having to hear about everyone else’s.

And now here he was, the star of one of their “breaking news” reports. The extent to which they had gone to sensationalize *his* story was absurd. They tried to make him out to be some kind of ruthless killer. The willingness of the other students at his high school to buy in to it all was just as troubling.

“Yeah, I think he could have done it,” said Sosha. “Just the other night I saw him beat the crap out of some guy just because he was flirting with this girl he likes...”

This kind of negative coverage, and really nothing else, made Donnie afraid the prosecutor would pursue aggravated assault charges. They might even want to try him as an adult.

All because of Josie. Donnie really couldn’t say that all this was her fault, but everyone knew that if it weren’t for Josie, none of this would have happened. And where was Josie? She hadn’t been seen since the incident. In everyone else’s mind, this diminished any sliver of credibility that she had ever had. But no one knew her like Donnie. Josie would come through somehow. She had to.

“Wake up, Master Donovan. It is now six-thirty,” said Donnie’s computer with a snobbish English accent. After the announcement, the computer started playing MP3 songs that he had downloaded and prearranged as the soundtrack to his daily morning ritual.

Feeling around on the nightstand, almost knocking over a cup of water, he found his glasses. He swung his feet out of the bed and walked over to the full-size mirror near his bureau. He put on the glasses and ran his hands through his brown, disheveled hair.

“You’re looking good today,” said his computer in a woman’s voice. “Have you been working out?”

“Why, yes,” he replied, pulling up the sleeve from his pajamas. But his muscles didn’t look much bigger than the day before. Or the day before that.

Thin. Over six feet tall. A narrow, angular face that verged on handsome. His intelligence made him an outcast, which was worsened by the fact that he was a full year younger than any of his classmates. His parents had put him in school early because he was already reading at the age of four. His father had wanted to move him ahead another year or two but the elementary school counselor had noted that he wasn’t doing well socially—self esteem issues, she said. Skipping a grade would have caused even more problems. This remained an issue even into high school.

“Well, maybe, by god, he needs to be with kids that are even older and smarter so he can have some friends!” Donnie’s father had screamed once, spraying saliva all over the principal’s desk. Not a pleasant memory of his dad—face beet red, his yellowish-brown eyes narrowed toward the principal, yet not a single blonde hair out of place.

For three years, Mr. Espenoza, the high school principal, had endured the wrath of Bill Darning, usually when Kevin, Donnie’s older brother, was on the verge of flunking a class (which, of course, would render him ineligible to play sports). He had endured such rants from Donnie’s pushy, overzealous father a long time, but now, with Donnie in high school, there was a new motive—a new dynamic in the Darning household. Mr. Espenoza ran his brown, massive fingers through his silvering hair and said, “Well, then, why not send him to the magnet school downtown? Not only will he be among other intelligent kids like himself, but he will be around others of the same age.”

“Other nerdy little kids like himself!” his dad had yelled, ignoring the fact that Donnie was sitting right beside him. “I know what you’re getting at. But damn it, that’s not what he needs. He doesn’t have to bleed me dry to get an education. Better yet, why don’t we just let him test out of this damn school and be done with it?”

Surely Mr. Espenoza detected that his dad’s motive for moving him ahead and getting him out of school was a selfish one. But what *was* the motive? Money? It had to be something more than that. Was it hatred? Maybe it was mere annoyance because he didn’t fit his dad’s definition of what a son should be. Who likes a know-it-all? A weakling? Donnie’s father fawned over Kevin. The athlete. The dumb one.

Funny how things like the scene in the principal’s office spun around in his mind. Even if not in present thought, it rummaged around somewhere in the back of the brain, ready to be called to the prefrontal cortex at a moment’s notice. Donnie leaned closer to the mirror—the small, narrow nose, the high cheek bones, dark hair that was too long in

the front (much to his father's chagrin). He wiped a lock from his eyes and paraphrased a line from Hamlet. "What a wonder is man. But to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

"Hey, Donnie. It's time for your morning workout," said another woman's voice from Donnie's computer. The voice was like one you'd hear from a party-line commercial late at night. (Call us now and join the party. Only \$2.99 a minute.) So he dropped to the floor near a barbell that appeared to have more weights than Donnie could possibly lift, and he began doing pushups.

After taking a shower in the hall bathroom, Donnie walked back toward his room. Through his brother's open bedroom door, he saw Kevin standing in front of his dresser mirror. He buttoned his Polo shirt but then unbuttoned it again. Though he was turning into a man, Kevin's face had a soft boyishness about it, with a puckish grin readily at his disposal to charm a female of any age or to disarm an angry parent or teacher. Kevin was the kind of guy always suspected of being up to mischief, but (because of or despite this fact) no one could help liking him. His boyish demeanor hinted of action, but never of thought or reflection. No one ever thought of him as a thinking person. No one ever thought of him as being smart.

People considered Donnie a genius. He had been reading the morning paper before Kevin could get through *Sam I Am* books—and Kevin was two years older. Donnie was doing Algebra at age eleven while Kevin could barely make it through Practical Math 101. At one time Kevin really tried, but he would get so frustrated. At some point in time, he just stopped trying. He started taking short cuts to get by. Donnie really couldn't place when it happened, exactly, but he thought it probably was around the time Kevin won the one-hundred-meter dash in eighth grade.

Donnie was there to see it. It was the main event of the day and the infield was crowded with coaches and students, in particular a sassy flock of ribbon-haired girls who had been giggling and batting their eyelashes at Kevin all day. He finished the race two strides ahead of everyone else. All spectators cheered him. The ribbon-haired girls flocked around him to give their congratulations until they were batted away by Coach Cliff, who gave him a fatherly bear hug and fawned over him as if he were his own son. "You gonna do good things in sports next year. Yep, I just know it," Coach Cliff said.

That night Donnie's mom announced Kevin's victory at the dinner table. Their usually inattentive father looked up from his mashed potatoes to say, "Well, no kidding. Maybe we've got some champions in this family after all." And even though Donnie, too, gave a look of approval and congratulations, Kevin looked at Donnie in a way that said, "Ha, I beat *you* out there in that race today, too." And now, every basketball game he played or race he ran, it was like Kevin tried to recapture the victory of that day—cheers from the ribbon-haired girls, the fawning coach, and the dad who finally paid attention.

After Donnie got dressed, he walked to the stairs. His mother was singing in the dining room below, so he sat at the top of the stairs, out of sight, resting his head in his hand. She was setting the table for breakfast, singing "Waltz Across Texas." Her voice was soft and motherly, but sad. Her low notes were distant and longing. "And when you look at me," she sang, "with those stars in your eyes. I could waltz across Texas with you." Donnie's first memory was of her singing this song. Of being in her arms. Head on her shoulder, face in her long, dark hair, dancing around the living room. He couldn't have been more than three or four years old. Kevin was at school. His dad at work. He

was alone with her. Safe. Warm. He surely wouldn't tell this to anyone. Boys weren't supposed to remember such things, were they?

"My heartaches and troubles are just up and gone..." She stopped singing to look at herself in the large, gold-trimmed mirror on the wall. "I hardly recognize you anymore," she said. "Where have the last ten years gone?" She leaned closer to the mirror and put her fingers on her cheekbones, softly stretching her freckled, brown skin away from her nose. Only a few wrinkles could be seen beneath her eyes, but the crow's feet at the corners had been there for a long time. Even if these were due to laughing, only the passage of time could have created them. And his mom hadn't laughed, it seemed, in a long, long time.

Her long hair was still jet-black. She always said it was her best feature and she took the greatest pains to keep it looking like it did. She always brushed it, and she had a habit of flipping it over her shoulder when she spoke to people—especially men. This was a characteristic of her personality his dad always picked on her about. Sometimes he was playful about it ("You are always trying to get my attention with that hair of yours, aren't you?"), but then sometimes he wasn't. Sometimes he would be mean and accusatory, especially now that she did it exclusively around *other* men.

But his dad could be just as bad around other women. There were plenty of females that caught his eye. It seemed that any woman under the age of thirty—even the ugly ones—provoked longing glances from him. And it wasn't necessarily the prettiness of girls that made him look, but it was the youngness of them. His mom was still pretty. But she wasn't young.

His mom stepped back from the mirror. "That little tart!" she yelled with clenched teeth. She walked over to the window and peeked out. She started talking to herself again. "I wonder if she'll be wearing those little shorts and that little tank top to school today. They'll send her little butt back home." She started massaging her temples in a circular motion. "God, that tart can't even be eighteen." She exhaled deeply. "She's gonna be trouble. I just know it."

"Who are you talking to, Judith?" Donnie's dad sat down at the dining room table. He was always the first one to the dining room.

"Oh, no one," she said.

Luckily, the master bedroom was downstairs, so he didn't have to deal with his dad until he was ready to come down.

His dad flipped his gray tie over his shoulder and, very business-like, picked up his fork and began eating. So many years of being an insurance adjuster had turned him into a machine. In his line of work, having to hear about the countless tragedies of policyholders everyday (car wrecks, illnesses, homicides, suicides), some adjusters broke down and quit because the overwhelming brutality of human tragedy was just too great. Some, however, became cold and assimilated their personalities to the job. His dad had been absorbed into the machine of Stratton Life and Auto long ago.

"Come on boys!" his mom yelled, setting out the rest of the silverware.

"Damn it, don't go yelling after them! If they're hungry they'll come down and eat. If they don't get here in time, that's just too bad."

She grimaced at him in a moment of defiance, but sighed resignedly and returned to the kitchen.

Kevin ran down the hall, almost trampling over Donnie. “Spying on people again?” Kevin asked, bolting onto the staircase. “Let’s go eat, butt face.”

Kevin’s breakfast was on the table before he sat down. His dad watched Kevin tear into his food. A wide smile brimmed on his thin, ever-parched lips. Kevin was the kind of son every man wanted. Athletic, good looking, not real smart but certainly not pretentious, either.

Donnie finally picked himself off the stairs and ambled down. His food was waiting for him, too, and he went methodically at his pancakes the way he did with his food every meal. He arranged his three pancakes in a triangle on the plate and put the piece of sausage in the middle. He spread the syrup in a circular motion, hitting the center of each pancake in the triangle. Then he put one dab of syrup on the piece of sausage as if he were dotting an *i*.

His mom hovered over the table. “Does anyone need anything?” she asked.

“Sit down and eat, honey,” said his dad, in a voice that was at once a command and a forced attempt at affection. “And for God’s sake, Donovan, can’t you eat like a normal human being for once?”

Donnie looked up at his father, pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, and then went back to his methodical routine of eating pancakes.

His mom came to the table with her own food. They ate in silence with only the sound of forks tapping plates and orange juice being gulped too fast. Periodically, his mom would look around the table, possibly to see if anyone needed anything or maybe to try to start a conversation, but then she would lower her head and go back to eating silently.

A few minutes later, his dad stood up and took the tie from his shoulder and smoothed it down over the front of his white shirt. “You boys don’t be late,” he said and then headed for the front door.

His mom tried to strike up a conversation. “I see we’re getting new neighbors.”

“I noticed that,” said Kevin, never looking up from his plate.

Conversation came pretty rarely these days. Sure they all sat at the table together during meals, but it wasn’t really a time to chat. The only discussions at the table were one-sided ones by his father, barking orders or reaming one of them out for some reason or other.

“Well, let’s go, butt face,” said Kevin, “or we’re gonna be late again.”

“Love you, Mom,” he and his brother said in rapid succession as they dashed out the front door toward Kevin’s Mustang.

Even though Donnie was the smartest kid in school—a boy genius by most people’s standards—he also was prone to fidgeting during the final moments before the last period bell, itching to get out of school.

Finally it rang. On Tuesdays, Kevin had after-school basketball practice. So Donnie could either go to the gym and wait for an hour, or just walk the five blocks home. The last time Donnie waited in the gym, he was hounded by the coach to go out for basketball. His flat refusal drew general contempt from the coach and the varsity team, especially due to the fact he could stand flat-footed under the basket and dunk a basketball. So, he vowed never to go there again during practice. As this was an unusually warm day for December, not that any kind of weather was particularly unusual for Austin, he decided to walk again.

The high school was practically in Radcliff Estates. The housing development and the school were built at the same time to accommodate the rapid outgrowth of Austin on its southwestern edge—one of those “white flight” school and neighborhood combinations. It made home conveniently close to school, and these little strolls through the neighborhood had become rather enjoyable. Though he had a general dislike of suburbia (he acquired a longing for the pastoral watching reruns of *Little House on the Prairie*), he couldn’t help enjoying the afternoons in Radcliff Estates. On warm days, children would ride bikes or play hopscotch on the sidewalks. The older kids would zoom around the neighborhood, stereos blasting and adults would yell for them to slow down. But this was part of life in his neighborhood. From house to house, the smell of laundry being done filled the air—that cornucopia of manufactured aromas, from orange grove to spring rain. And toward early evening, the smell of dinner being cooked—maybe a roast from the Petersons’ house, brisket from the Briarsons’, enchiladas from the Andersons’. And soon, the children would be called in, the fathers would come home, and the sun would set behind Radcliff Estates.

As he rounded the last corner and headed down the cul-de-sac of Radcliff Circle, a moving truck was parked in front of the house next to his. Half a dozen movers scrambled back and forth from the truck to the house, carrying furniture and some exotic-looking relics, probably from some faraway country. A very attractive woman with a dark complexion was conducting all the activity. The movers, who were all over the age of forty, would probably have been slow and methodical under normal circumstances. But this woman had them absolutely flustered. They looked like teenagers the first day on the job. “You cannot hold that that way,” she would say with a slight foreign accent, maybe Indian. “Put both hands underneath, like this. No no no. You will break that. Go slower.” Her voice was authoritative but sexy at the same time. How could grown men tolerate such bantering? They must have been enthralled by her—her long dark hair, her curvy hips. If it were anyone else, they would have dumped the furniture on the front lawn and made a few obscene gestures as their wheels hit the curb.

The woman had her arms folded below her bust, monitoring the progress with absolute authority. As Donnie stepped onto his own front lawn, the woman called over to him. “Ah, hello there, young man. You must be my neighbor.”

“Oh, hi there,” said Donnie, a little startled.

“We just moved in, as you can see.” She laughed heartily at her own joke.

“Yes, I see.”

“Well, you look like a nice boy. A good boy. I glad you are my neighbor. I will meet your family soon.”

“Oh, all right. Nice to meet you.”

Inside, his mother sat in front of the TV with a glass in her hand, twirling it around to mix its contents. Second time this week. Were these afternoon drinks going to become a problem?

“You’re home early today. Weren’t you going to stay for Kevin’s practice?”

“No, I told you, Mom. I’m not going back to that gym.”

“Oh, goodness. Something you want to talk about?”

“No, Mom. I’m just not going back, that’s all.”

His mother’s effectiveness at consoling her children had ended long ago. Either she just didn’t understand the subtle complexities of childhood pain and suffering that went beyond minor cuts and bruises, or she was just too wrapped up in herself to be empathetic.

Donnie threw his backpack on the kitchen table and pulled out his literature book. He grabbed a coke from the fridge and headed back out the front door. “I’ll be reading out on the front porch, Mom.”

“Okay.”

He sat on the porch swing and opened his book. The attractive lady was still supervising, alternately becoming angry then jovial, until a black Maxima pulled up to the curb. A wiry, dark-haired man got out of the car. He came to the woman’s side and the woman scratched his back and then tousled his hair, but the man didn’t really seem to reciprocate. He never smiled but made quick, deliberate gestures toward the house and the moving truck. The lady turned and motioned over to Donnie and the man waved at him half-heartedly. Donnie waved back meekly and then buried his head in his book.

As the man pulled away from his wife and started for the front door, a girl with long, curly hair, much like the older lady’s, walked out. The daughter, presumably. The man almost plowed over her getting to the front door, and the two didn’t even exchange glances. She sat down on the top step of the front porch and merely leaned out of the way when the movers needed to get by. She watched the proceedings with little interest and kept one closed fist beside her leg, as if hiding something. She, like her mother, was very attractive. Her long brown hair was curlier than her mother’s and her tanned skin a softer bronze. The movers cast sidelong glances that lasted a little too long. No doubt, she was a goddess.

With a flirtatious little wave with her free hand, the girl acknowledged that Donnie was looking at her. Busted, he dug back into his book. When he looked back up a few minutes later the girl had walked over to the narrow alley separating his house from hers. She was out of view from her parents, but now within speaking distance of Donnie.

A cigarette and lighter magically appeared in one of her hands. She put the cigarette in her mouth. She lit it and inhaled deeply. The girl was barefoot, wearing a spaghetti-strapped summer dress, leaning against the side of her house. In a much more noticeable accent, her mother yelled, “You better not be smoking the cigarettes again, Josie!”

Donnie looked up. Would she put it out? Dash for the backyard? Yell back at her mom to stay out of her business? Instead, she rolled her eyes and said, “Oh, please.” This was apparently for Donnie’s benefit.

“Amusing, isn’t it?” she said.

Donnie stammered. “What...what’s that?”

“I said, amusing, isn’t it?”

Donnie pushed the hair away from his face and tucked it behind his ears.

“How...how’s that?”

“This fiasco. It always is. We move about every other year. So I suspect we’ll get acquainted with each other and I’ll be gone before you know it.”

She was so forward. So deliberate. He hardly knew how to respond. “Was that your mother?”

She extinguished the cigarette on the house and threw it into the yard. “I’m Josie,” she said, walking toward the porch where he sat.

“So I gathered,” he said, looking down.

“What’s your name?”

“Donovan Darning.”

“And your friends call you Donnie?”

“Yep.”

“And your parents call you Donovan when they’re pissed off at you?”

“Right again.”

“Mine’s Josiyam Melanie Rosado. But call me Josie. You have a middle name?”

He blushed and began nervously pinching the corners of his literature book.

“Yep. Erasmus.”

“Erasmus? Tough break, kid.”

Though she talked of trivialities, her eyes bore heavily on Donnie with each of his responses, trying to size him up. Yet, she was so personable, using a tone of voice that brought Donnie into her inner ring of confidence, making any trifle seem like the most important thing in the world.

Josie stepped to the side of the porch. The white, wooden porch railing came to her chest. She rested her tanned, slender arms on the rails and put her chin on her forearms. Her skin was soft and brown. Unblemished. Her features were exotic—the long, subtle curve in her cheeks. Full red lips. She wore very little makeup. Thin, dark eyebrows curved above her eyes that were deep, emerald green, surrounded by brilliant white.

What had they been talking about? “So how, uh—how old are you?”

“Seventeen.” She laughed. “Don’t tell me. Let me guess—you’re sixteen.”

“Nope. I’m fifteen. But I’m a junior. Long story.”

“Hmm. Yeah, you look tall, but young. How tall are you?”

“I’m six two.”

“And I guess the glasses make you look more, uh, scholarly.”

Donnie shrugged. “Are you going to go to Palisades High?” he asked.

“The one over there?”

“Yeah.” His hair fell over his eyes, and he tucked it back behind his ears.

“That’s the plan, I think.”

Why couldn't they just skip the formalities? Who are you? Where did you come from? How can anyone possibly be so beautiful? He thought about those guys in the movies—those real suave guys who always got the girls. What would they do in this situation?

"God," he said, "I can't imagine the thought of going to a new high school. Having to get used to everything all over again. Why do you move around so much, anyway?"

She turned up one corner of her full lips in a pleasant smile. "Long story."

Partly to his relief, his father's car pulled into the driveway. Usually a dreadful sound. "Well, here's my dad."

"Dear old Dad, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, hello, Dad," said Josie as he strode business-like up the driveway from his car.

"Hello," he said, eyeing Josie for an uncomfortable moment. "Did you just move in next door?"

Josie rose up a little and rested her chin in the palm of one hand. She smiled coquettishly. "Yes, sir."

"I see," he said. "Well, Donnie, you come in for supper pronto. You hear me?" The door slammed shut behind him.

"Well, your father seems like a real idiot."

Donnie gave a confirming smile.

"Don't worry, my step-dad's an idiot, too. I haven't seen too many old guys that weren't, to tell you the truth. Someone ought to do a study on that—old guys who are idiots, how do they get that way?"

"And the women who love them."

There was a moment's pause.

"So, you got a mother to match?" she asked.

"Yep, got the full set. She's all right, though. Nothing like him. She's pretty mellow."

The door creaked open behind Donnie and he almost fell out of his seat. Josie stifled a giggle behind her delicate brown hand.

"Is that your father over in the front yard?" his Dad asked.

Josie turned around to look, her long curls bouncing on her shoulder. "Yep. Well, my step-dad anyway."

"I'll go over and say hello."

Josie sneered and nodded.

Donnie smiled. He was going to like Josie Rosado.

Donnie's dad walked over to Mr. Rosado. The men exchanged courtesies.

"Dad's a real socialite. A real man's man," Josie said. Was she being sarcastic or serious? Such ambiguity. She was more exciting than any book. A beautiful mystery never to be figured out.

In silence, they watched the men talk for a while. They would gesture to each other's house, sometimes laughing, sometimes nodding their heads in obligatory seriousness.

Dusk now. The sky was turning from orange to purple. The soft light made Josie more enchanting, more dream-like.

Before long, Mr. Darning came walking back across the lawn and Josie's dad yelled for her to come home.

"Looks like we're going to be having a barbeque tomorrow—if this weather holds up," said Donnie's dad, walking onto the porch.

"Can't beat this Texas weather, huh?" said Josie, laying it on a little thick.

"I guess not," he said. "Get your butt inside now, Donnie. Your mom has supper ready."

The door shut behind him, and Donnie started to get out of the porch swing.

"So, a barbeque in the suburbs. I've always wondered what those were like."

"You've never lived in the suburbs before?" asked Donnie.

"I've lived many places, but never in the 'burbs. This is quite a step up for us."

She leaned up from the porch railing and ran both hands through her hair with her fingers spread wide, pushing it back from her face. "Well, it was a pleasure, neighbor. Guess I'll be seeing you."

Twilight obscured Josie's form as she floated, ethereally, to the front door of her new house. Donnie glanced up to the front door of his own house. It once opened to the toil and boredom of his own personal hell, but tonight it would open, perhaps, to a new life—one full of hope and opportunity. Hope, the one thing that remained in Pandora's infamous box when she slammed it shut, was the one thing that remained in Donnie's control in the midst of his oppressive drudgery.

The next morning, Donnie sat at the breakfast table eating his triangle of pancakes, trying to come up with a plan about how to talk to Josie at school. On the one hand, Josie was new, didn't know anyone. On the other hand, Donnie didn't exactly hang out with the in-crowd. But was Josie the "in-crowd" type? Who knew? He tried to imagine seeing Josie with some of the different cliques that hung out at school and he just couldn't place her. Nope. She was a one-of-a-kind. Exotic. Beyond categorizing.

"Let's go, dumb ass," said his brother, breaking Donnie from his trance. "We're gonna be late again."

On the ride to school, Donnie watched his brother attentively, probably for the first time. Girls fell all over him, but they had always done that. He never really considered why. Looking Kevin in his boyish, brown eyes, you didn't exactly get the idea that much was going on in his head. Maybe some basketball plays, who he was going to get algebra answers from, or what he was going to say to some girl—although that just seemed spontaneous most of the time. Intelligence, in Kevin's crowd, wasn't an asset. Sure he was handsome and towered over most people—he was three inches taller than Donnie, even. But it was the way Kevin did things and the way he carried himself that drew people to him. Like how he shook the silver watch around on his wrist before he ran his hand through his shaggy hair. Or how he only smiled with the left side of his mouth, exposing half of his pearly whites, when laughing at someone else's joke.

Donnie started getting a headache. He had no chance with Josie. Or with any girl, so long as Kevin was his brother. Besides, Kevin was seventeen and so was Josie. At least Kevin had had a steady girlfriend for about six months. And that was a record for him. Before Carly, Kevin had had a new girlfriend every week.

"Dad said you met the new girl from next door," said Kevin, pulling into the Palisades parking lot.

"Yeah, she's kinda weird, though."

Kevin strained his eyes toward Donnie in a rare moment of concentration.

"Weird? What do you mean?"

"Well, they have to move a lot on account of her. She's probably been in and out of every juvy in Texas."

"A wild child, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he said, "but she's probably not your type."

"Don't get in a tizzy," said Kevin with a lop-sided grin. "I was just curious. I'm going out with Carly, anyway. The new girl's all yours."

Donnie sighed heavily and pushed the glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, all mine." He slammed the door to his brother's Mustang.

By lunch, Donnie hadn't seen Josie yet. Not unusual. Palisades High had about four hundred students and was big enough you could go most of the day and not see your best friend.

His lunch tray in one hand, Donnie handed the cashier three dollars and headed for his usual table. Each row of tables was numbered, which made labeling the cliques that much easier. The teachers and faculty (those who braved the lunchroom, anyway) sat at rows one and two. Athletes and other high school gods sat at tables three through six. The so-called average kids sat in various cliques pretty much from rows seven through

twelve, usually with the underclassmen in the last few. From there, it slowly trickled into the sub-cultures—kids who wore all black, or who did the drug *du jour*, or whatever, all the way down to row twenty.

Donnie sat at seventeen. A long way to walk with your tray, but pretty close to the dishwasher drop-off and the rear exit. Row seventeen had all the leftovers. No cliques, just misfits. But it wasn't so bad. It was a lumped category—computer geeks, Chess Clubbers, some freshmen and sophomore athletes. It wasn't unheard of to end up at the jock table by the end of the year. Just as likely, you could end up with the potheads.

As he passed by the jock table, one of the perky cheerleaders, Heather something-or-other, got pinched on the butt by a beefy football player sitting across from Kevin. She gave a high-pitched squeal and darted three steps ahead. When she did, a ratty dollar bill fluttered unnoticed from her lunch tray to the ground. Donnie stood and stared at it a moment, then looked up at Heather who never even turned around. He looked to Kevin but Kevin, as usual, darted his eyes away, not acknowledging Donnie's existence on school grounds. He bent over and picked it up, but became paralyzed by the thought of having to get her attention in front of everyone.

"I know you ain't keep'n that," said the football player.

"No, I...Hey there...Heath...uhm." His voice cracked. He walked quickly toward her and cleared his throat. "Hey, uh, Heather! You lost your bollar dill. I mean, uh, your dollar bill."

"Uh bu dee, uh bu dee, that's all folks!" yelled a girl from table four—Sosha was her name, known widely for her loose reputation. "You are one smooth player!" she said. A few girls around her chuckled, though one hit Sosha on the shoulder and said, "Be nice."

Heather smiled and took the dollar bill. "Thank you," she said and gave the football player a scowl. "At least there are *some* nice guys left in the world."

Donnie brushed by the cheerleader and practically leapt into his seat at table seventeen, almost spilling the food from his tray.

"Too bad there ain't no hole for you to hide in, man," said Donnie's friend D'Andre. "But you can have my jacket to cover yourself. I ain't using it."

His face flushed and burning, Donnie looked around to see if anyone was still looking at him. The "dollar bill" fiasco was apparently short-lived since everyone was back to feeding and gossiping. Relieved that Josie wasn't there to see it, he was keeping the hope alive that she, alone in a new school, would see his familiar face and want to sit by him. But when she finally walked into the cafeteria, he realized this wouldn't be the case. Josie had a whole entourage with her, popular girls no less, captivated by her antics.

"And then we moved to Jersey," she was saying, "and I never had to see that guy again."

First day here, he thought, and she's already way out of my league. He went back to his lunch, listening to Tim the Rambler go on about summer camp and peanut butter sandwiches.

"Oh, looky there!" Josie yelled. "It's my neighbor, Donnie."

Everyone at Donnie's table looked at Josie and then back to Donnie. Josie set her plate at her table on row four where her entourage was just settling down and then ran over to Donnie.

“Hey, precious,” she said, lavishing Donnie with hugs. “Isn’t he just the cutest!” she yelled over to the girls at her table. Musing his hair, she said, “See ya at the barbeque tonight?”

“Yup, see ya there,” he said, looking down at his tray.

Josie ran back to her table and continued an unfinished story without skipping a beat. The guys at Donnie’s table stared agog at him for a moment until Tim the Rambler said, “Well, like I was saying about this canoe trip at Camp Kickapoo.”

“Yes, you never cease to entertain us with your summer camp follies,” said Donnie with a new-found air of confidence.

Donnie's dad was soaking a meticulously constructed pile of charcoal bricks with lighter fluid. His mom was inside preparing beef patties and hotdogs for the grill. Donnie sat in a lawn chair a safe distance from the grill with a *PC Gaming* magazine in hand, casually watching his parents.

"I think Josie's mom is from India," said Donnie. "Are you sure they eat cow? The cow is sacred there, you know."

"What the hell kind of question is that? Of course they eat beef," his dad said.

Donnie went back to his magazine article about the latest attempt at virtual-reality gaming. He was always skeptical about the "reality" a machine could provide, but he was curious nonetheless.

"Why would he agree to come to a barbecue if he doesn't eat meat?" Mr. Darning barked. "Everyone knows you eat beef at a barbecue."

He closed the lid on the fiery coals and opened the vents on the top. "God damn it," he said and stormed into the house. He shut the glass door to the kitchen behind him. Donnie couldn't hear what he was saying to his mother, but he assumed it had to do with the cow-thing.

Donnie's mom picked the cordless phone up from the counter, hesitated, then put the phone back down without dialing. Donnie could see his dad yelling at his mom again. She picked the phone back up and this time dialed. After a moment Donnie's mom was doing her little fake laugh, nodding her head and fiddling with her hair. "Okay, okay," he could see her saying, "see you in a little while."

Donnie couldn't help a smug look when his father returned to the barbecue with the patties and hotdogs.

"Could you make yourself useful for once?" asked Mr. Darning.

"I thought you said you had it covered," Donnie said.

"You could do *something*."

"But you told me to stay out of the way."

"How about you just get out of my damn sight? That'll be a big help."

Donnie moved his seat farther out from the barbecue pit, but not out of his father's sight. He pushed his glasses to the top of his head and rubbed his eyes. Why did his dad get so frustrated with him? He would never understand his father.

But all these thoughts subsided when a pair of soft brown hands covered his eyes from behind. He had smelled that perfume earlier in the day.

"Guess who."

"It must be Josie, the girl who needs no introduction."

"Ha!" Josie laughed. "You're funny. A real comedian, kid."

He didn't much like being called kid, but was flattered anyway.

"Whatcha read'n?" she asked, taking the magazine from Donnie.

Donnie put his glasses back on in order to get a better look at her. She was wearing another summer dress. A blue one that accentuated the soft brownness of her shoulders and neckline.

"Oh, nothing. You wouldn't be interested," he said, trying to take back the magazine.

“Oh, how do you know?” She flipped through the pages hastily with disinterest. “You’re right,” she said, throwing it back into his lap. “So, how are those burgers coming along?”

Donnie rolled his eyes. “You’ll have to ask my dad. I haven’t been very much involved in the process.”

“Hey, Dadio. How those burgers come’n along?” Her head was tilted to one side as she twirled a strand of long, curly hair with her fingers. “By the way, Mr. Darning, we eat cow. We’ll eat anything so long as it’s cooked right.”

Mr. Darning smiled boyishly and wagged his index finger at her.

“Your parents called to ask if we ate beef,” Josie said to Donnie.

“I think he thought you were Hindu or something.”

“Oh, please. When we go to church we go to like a Methodist one or something.” She tilted her head back and her green eyes widened. “But we haven’t been in a long, long time.”

“So, are you not Indi-uhum. Indian?”

“How cute! Your voice just cracked. Are you sure you’re fifteen?”

He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Yes.”

“Oh, sorry. Well, I’m kind of Indian. I think we have some Romanian mixed in there somewhere, too.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“No. Not really. With my family tree, it’s kinda hard to tell. Hey, you are an inquisitive one, aren’t ya?”

“Sorry.” He was blushing.

“Well, offer her something to drink. And get her a chair for Christ’s sake!” Mr. Darning yelled. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. Dumb as a door post.”

Josie bit her bottom lip.

“Welcome to my hell,” said Donnie. “Come on. We’ll go in the kitchen and get something to drink.”

In the kitchen, Donnie’s mom was making herself a drink in a pastel-colored goblet that was one in a set of eight that must have been leftover from a former era. The goblet was full of ice and she was alternately pouring whiskey and Dr. Pepper into it.

“Oh, hello,” she said, almost dropping the bottle of Dr. Pepper.

“I’ll have what she’s having,” whispered Josie to Donnie.

“Uhum. You must be Josie from next door.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Delighted to meet you.”

“Likewise, I’m *sure*,” she said in a mocking voice. Not an auspicious beginning.

“Well, did you get all moved in?”

“Thanks to the ABC Moving Company. I didn’t lift a finger.”

“I noticed that,” Donnie said. “You just sat on your laurels while everyone else did all the moving.”

“Hmm. Been watching me, huh?”

“Well, no...uh, I mean.”

“What we have here is a peeping Tom, I see,” continued Josie. Mrs. Darning scowled at Donnie. Josie wasn’t making a very good impression.

Josie arched her dark eyebrows. “I’m only kidding, Donnie. No, I told my step-dad I wasn’t going to lift so much as a freak’n pillow if we had to move again. We’ve been moving about every other year since I can remember and since this time we’re supposedly *moving up* I said we could damn well hire a moving company. Oh, excuse my language.” Josie bit her bottom lip.

“So, is your father in the service, hon?”

“Ha!” Josie cackled. “Nah, he’s never been in the military. I guess you could say he’s a jack-of-all-trades kind of guy.”

Donnie’s mom began biting her fingernails. “So, uh, what kind of trades?”

“You name it. He started out as a journeyman plumber. This was before he could really speak English—before he met my mom. I’m not sure of all the other things he’s been but for all the time I’ve known him, he’s done construction and road work.”

Donnie watched as his mother took in the Josie experience, alternately squinting her eyes in disbelief, but then laughing despite herself. Donnie could always see the girl in his mom when she laughed. The way she put her elegant fingers to her mouth, the way the corners of her almond-shaped eyes crinkled up.

“And so you said the move to Radcliff was a step up? How so?”

“Well, my dad made a—let’s see, how did he put it?—a lucrative investment.” Her green eyes widened in excitement, as if she were giving away some well-guarded secret.

“Oh, how about that drink, darling? I’ll take a Dr. Pepper if you have it,” she said to Donnie as if they were a married couple at a dinner party. “Anyway,” she continued, in a quieter, more serious voice, “it was some sort of property venture and my step-dad just cleaned up. Now he’s turned to real estate fulltime.”

“So, he’s a real estate agent?”

“No, no. We *own* the properties.”

“You know quite a bit about your father’s affairs. You are a smart young lady.”

“Well, some would say nosey.”

As Donnie was pouring the Dr. Peppers, Kevin came into the kitchen.

“Make two more of those would ya, Donnie?” Kevin didn’t say butt face, so he knew without looking up that Carly was with him. Carly always showed a special affection for Donnie.

“I’ll make one for Carly, but you can get your own.”

“Ah, come on. I take you to school every morning, don’t I?”

“He’s got ya there,” said Josie.

“Hi there. You must be Josie from next door,” said Kevin. One corner of his mouth was turned up in a puckish grin. That grin he had for certain circumstances. But Carly didn’t notice. Carly had that good-natured naïveté, which could be counted as a blessing or a curse.

“Yep,” said Josie. “And what’s your name? I don’t think Donnie mentioned having a brother.” She wagged her finger at Donnie playfully.

“Kevin Darning. And this is Carly.”

“Why, you’re simply lovely,” said Josie, momentarily losing her tone of playfulness. She bit the side of her lip and shook her head as she took in the sight of Carly. Carly *was* lovely. She had straight, blondish-brown hair, and Donnie often imagined being Kevin, staring into those hazel eyes. She had brown skin, lightly freckled.

Like Josie, Carly didn't wear much makeup. The natural rouge color in her cheeks became quite red when she was embarrassed. How often Donnie had imagined kissing those cheeks and those lips.

"Oh, thank you," said Carly.

"All right. Here are the drinks, you lazy bums," said Donnie, conveying four pastel goblets (two green, two red) from the kitchen counter to the bar.

"Donnie might not have said anything about me to you, but he's sure talked a lot about you," Kevin said.

"Oh has he? And what has he said?" Why was he such an easy target? He hadn't known Josie for twenty-four hours and already she knew how to push Donnie's buttons.

"I can't say those kinds of things in front of my mother," said Kevin, employing the puckish grin again.

"Why don't we go outside? I think Josie's parents are here." Although she was trying a little too hard to be the perfect host, Donnie was thankful his mom had saved him from the flames.

"Well honey, are we getting the *kids* liquored up, too?" asked Mr. Darning sarcastically as all five walked out with their matching goblets.

His mom just rolled her eyes and took a drink from the goblet.

"Judith, this is K.J. and Ramya Rosado." The men had beers in their hands, standing near the barbeque. Mrs. Rosado was a little way off admiring the stonework surrounding the water garden.

"Hello, K.J. Hello, Rayma."

Mrs. Rosado walked closer to join the group, a beer in her hand, also.

"No, Judith. You say it *Ram-ya*," said the beautiful woman in a slight Indian accent. "It's short for Manoramyia. But that's not important. Thank you so much for inviting us to your lovely home. I know we will become the best of friends."

Very direct, just like her daughter.

Mr. Darning cleared his throat nervously. "K.J. here is in real estate."

"Yes, that's what Josie was telling us," said Mrs. Darning.

Mr. Rosado gave an uncomfortably long scowl in Josie's direction and Josie darted her eyes away and stared at the ground.

"Yes, real estate among other things."

"Oh, my father sells real estate," said Carly with a pleasant smile.

"Yes, some do," said Mr. Rosado, looking off toward his own house. He had an accent, too. But Donnie couldn't quite place it. Hispanic for sure, but not Mexican.

"I'm Kevin. This is Carly," said Kevin.

Donnie felt an elbow to his rib. It was Josie's.

"Oh, and I'm *Donhee*...uhum. Donnie." His voice had cracked again and Kevin and Carly smiled at each other.

"Yes. I met Donnie yesterday. He is a nice boy, I can tell," said Mrs. Rosado. "I bet he reads the books a lot. I can tell. I bet he is a very smart boy."

"He likes to think so, anyway," said Mr. Darning. "And this here is our athlete," he continued. "He was all-district in basketball last year. This year they're going to state."

"Ah, a very talented, good-looking family. How nice," said Mrs. Rosado. Her tone was direct and warm, but the proof of her sincerity lay in her deep, brown eyes.

Donnie waited for Mr. Rosado to chime in but he just watched everything intently. His dark eyes sunk deep into his face with large, graying eyebrows, and he had wrinkles that creased deep into his face, especially around the eyes. He had such an intense face that his stare was very uncomfortable. Mrs. Rosado did most of the talking, which Donnie didn't mind at all. Like Josie, she was very beautiful but had the more exotic Indian features—dark eyes, red lips—which were somehow more appealing on Mrs. Rosado than on any woman he'd ever seen.

"Well, it looks like the burgers are ready," said Mr. Darning. "Everybody grab a plate."

Mr. and Mrs. Darning and Mr. and Mrs. Rosado sat at the picnic table while the rest gathered up lawn chairs and sat closer to the house. Donnie ate his hamburger and nodded uninterestedly while Kevin and Carly exchanged all the obligatory pleasantries and get-to-know-you facts with Josie that Donnie had already heard. He glanced over to the picnic table. His mom and dad were sitting across from each other, which left each man sitting by the other's wife.

Mrs. Rosado seemed to be dominating the conversation. "So one time Josie snuck home with a puppy dog in her backpack!" She cackled. "And my Juanito here, he throws a big fit when he hears the little dog yelping and crying in the night."

"Ramya, I tell you not to call me Juanito. You don't even know what you're saying."

"But your momma calls you that."

"My momma's back in Puerto Rico, novia."

"I'll drink to that." She threw her head back and laughed.

Donnie's mother gave her fake laugh and threw her long brown hair over her shoulder. Every now and then, she would lean toward Mr. Rosado and put her hand on his shoulder. Mr. Darning seemed completely enthralled by Mrs. Rosado.

"Talk about drinking, Judith, where did you get these awful drinking glasses?" asked Mrs. Rosado, chuckling heartily. "Your kids give them to you when they were little? It's very nice of you to still use them." Donnie didn't think he'd ever heard his dad laugh so loud before. He couldn't see his mother's face but he knew she must be devastated. She leaned away from Mr. Rosado and kind of receded into herself. The goblets had been among the things she inherited after her mother passed away. Her mother had considered them antiques and so Mrs. Darning thought of them as prized heirlooms. His grandmother probably had bought them at a garage sale. You wouldn't exactly find these kinds of glasses in a Tiffany's catalogue.

"I think I'll go in and make another drink. Anybody want anything?" Mrs. Darning asked quietly.

"No deary, I'm fine," said Mrs. Rosado. The other two simply shook their heads.

Mrs. Darning walked by Donnie and the others on her way to the kitchen and Donnie got up to follow.

"Where ya headed?" asked Josie.

"I'm gonna get some more to drink."

"You know, it's a courtesy to ask your guests if they need anything," she said, narrowing her green eyes at him.

"Ya need anything?" he asked flatly.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Could you get me some more to drink?” She leaned in closer to Donnie and winked at him. “And put in a little of the good stuff.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that.”

She raised a dark eyebrow. “Afraid you’re gonna get in trouble?”

“No...but...” He blushed.

“Hey, I’m just kidding with you. You don’t have to.” She smiled sheepishly at Kevin and Carly.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Darning was pouring herself another drink. This one had less Dr. Pepper and more of the good stuff.

“Have’n fun, Mom?” asked Donnie.

“Oh, darling, we’re having an absolute blast.”

Donnie wasn’t buying it. “That’s good, Ma. How do you like the Rosados?”

“Oh, they’re absolutely delightful. I’m so glad we did this.” She hadn’t looked Donnie straight in the eye but he could tell she was holding back tears. Donnie had seen her break down before under less-dramatic circumstances.

“I’m glad, Mom.”

She capped the whiskey bottle and started for the door. “Looks like you and Josie are getting along well.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, don’t get too excited over her, Donovan. She’s too old for you and she’ll just end up breaking your heart.”

Just as Mrs. Darning was going out the kitchen door, Josie was coming in.

“Where are the facilities?” Josie asked.

“Right through there,” Donnie said. “Oh, I’ll just take your drink back outside.”

“You’re a true gentleman,” said Josie, already starting to pull up her summer dress.

The sun was going down. Radcliff Estates wasn’t so close to the city that you couldn’t see the stars come out. Above the houses to the south, a crescent moon was rising and Venus shone brightly close by. The stars in the sky variously started blinking into existence above the diffused light of the estates.

“Donnie boy,” Kevin said when Donnie returned to his seat, “Carly and I have discussed the matter and we’ve decided that you’re in way over your head here.”

“*We* haven’t decided anything.” Carly usually sided with Donnie on any disagreements. “You’re not in over your head but I hope you understand the situation.”

“Situation?” Donnie asked, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Well,” said Carly, “it’s obvious Josie has taken a liking to you, but I just hope you don’t think there’s more to it than there really is.”

“You’re a charity case in other words.” Kevin laughed.

“Oh, hush Kevin.” She slapped him on the leg. “You’re probably just jealous.”

“No, don’t worry about me,” Donnie said. “I know what’s what.”

Donnie scratched his head. An issue of age, he thought. That’s all. Sure, Josie was a little older than him, but such age differences could be overcome. Maybe it would be awkward at first, but later on down the road, a few years wouldn’t matter much.

“All right,” said Carly. “It’s just that Josie comes on pretty strong and I’m afraid she’s leading you on.”

“Trust me. I’ll be all right,” said Donnie, taking a drink from his goblet.

“Well, let’s blow this joint, Carly. I better get you *home*.” Kevin winked and nudged Carly with his elbow.

“Yes, we’re going straight home, Kevin. No funny business tonight.” Carly’s lips curled up when she laughed, and her hazel eyes glistened.

“It was nice to meet you,” Kevin yelled over to the picnic table. “I’ve got to get Carly home now.”

“Oh, nice to see you young man,” yelled Mrs. Rosado in her warm tone.

“You come straight back,” Mr. Darning said. “No funny business tonight.”

Kevin and Carly walked toward the gate and all gazes at the picnic table followed them out. They talked admirably of the pair in low whispers.

Why was Josie taking so long in the house? Donnie looked over his shoulder just in time to catch her taking a swig of whiskey from the bottle on the counter. She quickly put it down and ran out the kitchen door.

“Where’s that drink of mine?” she asked, lips puckered as if she’d just eaten a lemon.

“Here,” he said.

She grabbed it from him and almost downed the whole thing. “Did anybody see me take a drink?”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Whew. That’s some cheap stuff your mother has in there. She needs to invest in some higher-quality booze.”

Donnie laughed uneasily.

“You ever gotten drunk?” she asked.

“Nope.” He shrugged.

“Ever want to?”

“Mmm, I don’t know.” The bad-girl act was getting old.

“Hmmpf,” she said, putting her drink down and crossing her arms.

They both leaned back in their lawn chairs and gazed up at the stars. The night sky was now speckled with white, brilliant points of light too numerous to count. Except for an occasional outburst of laughter, the talk of the adults became hushed.

Josie sighed heavily. Donnie looked over, but she was lost in the stars, too.

The starry sky. The night. The secret conversations. And Josie. Donnie’s mind raced with thoughts and questions. What was it like to be an adult—to already be married, to already know what he was going to do for the rest of his life? Donnie had been born with a restless soul. Ever since he could remember, he had been searching for completion. Contentment. Inner peace. Shooting hoops didn’t make him happy. Neither did video games. They were child’s play. He was different in this way from anyone else his age. He never talked about it. But having a girlfriend. Would that make him content? Or should he just keep on searching and searching for the answer in philosophy books? In calculus equations?

“We’re all going in the house, dear,” his mother said.

He didn’t realize they had all gotten up from the picnic table.

“Come in real soon, okay? It’s starting to get really cold now.”

“And you should be getting home really soon, Josie,” Mr. Rosado said, his stern look piercing right through her.

“I don’t think we’ve got anything to worry about out here.” Mr. Darning laughed.

The kitchen door shut behind them and a light came on from within the dining room.

“Well, Donnie, it seems we find ourselves alone, in a tête-à-tête under a moonlit sky. Some would call that romantic.”

“I’d probably call it pathetic. It means we have nothing better to do.” Josie laughed at this half-heartedly. “Besides, it’s hardly a moonlit sky when the moon’s barely a sliver.”

“Well, where’s your sense of romance, Donavan? You should be so lucky to be sitting beside such a beautiful girl on such a beautiful night.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

The two gazed up at the sky again.

“Hey,” Josie asked, “whose window is that up there on the second story, beside that big tree?”

“Mine. Why?”

“You ever climbed up it?”

“Well, I climbed down it once when I was younger. I was grounded and wanted to get out of my room. I didn’t quite make it back up, though.”

“I bet I could climb up it.”

“I’m sure you could, but aren’t you a little old for climbing trees?”

“Not when it’s to get in a boy’s window.”

“Oh.” If it weren’t dark, Josie could have seen him blushing.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m about to freeze my butt off. I think I’ll skip on home now,” said Josie.

“Yeah, same here.” Donnie had been cold for a while, but he didn’t really want the night to end.

“Here’s my glass.”

“Yeah, I’ll just take them inside.”

“Well, good night, Donnie.”

She disappeared through his backyard and reappeared in the glow of her back porch light. She started to go in the back door but stopped and looked back.

“Oh, Donnie!”

“Yeah?”

“You might start leaving your window unlocked. You never know when you might get a visitor!” she yelled.

“Oh, all right,” he said as he opened the door.

“Hey!” he yelled, turning back toward Josie. “How did you know I hadn’t gone in yet? Can you see me?”

“No. I just knew. Good night.”

Donnie took the glasses inside and put them in the sink. In the dining room, the adults had become much less subdued and were to the point of hooting and hollering, no longer worrying about being overheard. Even Mr. Rosado was laughing out loud.

Donnie climbed the stairs to the second floor, went down the hall, and closed his bedroom door behind him. He unlocked his window and peered out. It was too dark to see the bottom of the tree, though, so he got ready for bed.

Once his glasses and his cup of water were on the nightstand (the last steps in his nightly routine), he curled up in bed and faced the window. His head swam with thoughts

of Josie. With thoughts of the night. And with anticipation of what the night might still have in store. He resolved to stay up for hours, if necessary, waiting for Josie. But after a few minutes, his eyes became heavy, and he fell asleep.

“Wake up, Master Donovan. It is now six-thirty.”

The voice from the computer came much earlier than expected. The MP3s started playing and he reached over for his glasses, almost knocking over the cup of water. He got up and looked in the mirror. Had he changed any? He somehow felt different. Ah, Josie. The window. He looked around to see if anything was different, if she had been there, but everything seemed in perfect order.

“Ooh, Donnie. You sure look good. Have you been working out?” said his computer in a sexy woman’s voice.

He looked at his muscles but no change in that department. He dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups. After the pushups, he began his weight-lifting routine, starting with up-right rows, lifting the dumbbell up over his head.

“Ooh, Donnie. Are you growing hair under your arms?” said a girl’s voice. But this voice didn’t come from the computer. It came from Donnie’s closet. Donnie almost dropped the weights to the floor. Josie walked out of the closet nonchalantly, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. She wore pajama bottoms, a tee shirt, and house shoes, all apparently her own.

She walked to the window and opened it. Donnie stood, mouth agape. As she stepped out onto the roof under Donnie’s window, she said, “By the way, Donnie, I think you need to do some laundry or something. It smells like something crawled in that closet and died.”

Donnie looked out the window after her. She got to the tree and made it down easily, despite wearing fluffy, purple house shoes. The window to the kitchen downstairs was far enough away from the tree that Donnie’s mom couldn’t have seen her descend, and when she started back toward her house, she ducked under each window just to be safe. She made it back to her yard undetected and slipped into the unlocked door of her back porch.

Later that day, Donnie walked home from school along his usual route. A cold front was going to hit soon. Biggest one of the season. Dark blue clouds were already amassing to the north.

The usual sights presented themselves on the walk home—parents arriving home with their children, some kids riding bikes down the streets, older kids zipping by in fast cars, blasting their stereos. All the sights were the same, but Donnie saw them in a different way. For the first time, Donnie saw himself as part of a definite linear path, one that began in childhood and ended in adulthood. Adulthood no longer seemed like a vague, distant shore that was ultimately unreachable.

He could see that definite path from high school to college, to marriage and parenthood. He had never really given a thought to whether he wanted to be married or not, whether to have children or not. He could certainly now imagine it under certain circumstances—for instance, with Josie as his wife. He imagined a Mercedes pulling up into the driveway of one of the houses he was passing. An older version of Josie, even lovelier with age, stepped out of the passenger’s side, wearing a blue business suit and dark sunglasses. A taller, more muscular version of himself stepped out of the driver’s side. Josie doted on him, hugging him and blinking her long, beautiful eyelashes, and then they kissed before entering the house.

A cool blast of wind that shot down the street brought him back to reality. The clouds were overhead now and bearing down fast. He quickened his step and rounded the corner to his own cul-de-sac.

Inside the house he found his mother sitting on the sofa in the living room with a glass of tomato juice. The lights were off. The television was even off. She obviously hadn't showered and the dining room and kitchen were still in disarray, just as they had been that morning. All the food had been put up, but no dishes were cleared away.

"Feeling bad, Mom?"

"Mommy's sick, love."

Donnie winced at being talked to like a kid. "Late night last night?"

"You could say that. You'll have to fend for yourselves tonight, I'm afraid."

Donnie and Kevin had had to get their own breakfasts that morning, too. Their father had already left by the time they made it downstairs.

"Dad made it to work on time this morning?"

"Your dad always makes it to work on time."

That was true. His dad was never late, and he certainly never missed work.

"All right, Mom. I'm going upstairs to do homework."

"All right, dear." She sounded like a pathetic child fishing for sympathy.

Donnie sat at his desk and opened his calculus book. He wouldn't have to spend much time here because he pretty much worked out most of the answers in his head while Mr. Hernandez fumbled around with transparencies at the projector. It was all just a matter of writing the answers out on paper. He was eager, though, to break open his English literature book. They were studying Romanticism and how Rousseau and Keats convinced a generation to act according to their hearts and not their minds.

Donnie worked at his desk for most of the afternoon as the silvery-blue sky faded to black.

Later in the evening, Donnie became hungry and his room was getting very cold. He walked down to the kitchen and found things as they were before—an utter mess.

"Mom! Do you mind if I turn on the heater?" Donnie asked. No answer.

He walked into the living room and found his mother curled up in a blanket on the couch asleep. She had been crying. His dad was not home yet and it was past seven. Rare. He was usually home by six sharp. Once in a while he called to say he was tied-up at the office, but Donnie hadn't heard the phone ring.

Donnie shrugged it off and returned to the kitchen. He made himself a sandwich, grabbed a coke, and walked back upstairs. In his room, he realized he hadn't turned on the heater. The thermostat was at the bottom of the stairs, so he put his food on his desk and headed back down. Before he got to the bottom, he heard the front door opening. He hung back for a minute in case it was his dad. Would he come in yelling obscenities, throwing things around the house? He wasn't afraid, really. Just curious.

"For Christ's sake, Judith, have you been lying there all day? Judith! Wake up."

Donnie stood just far enough down the stairs that he couldn't be seen in the living room.

After a seemingly infinite pause, Donnie's mother asked, "What?"

"I said, have you been lying here all day, for Christ's sake?"

"What? Well...yes. Maybe I have. What the hell is it to you?"

“What is it to me? You haven’t cleaned this damn house and there’s not any food on the damn table! *That’s* what it is to me.”

“You expect me to just go on about my day like usual after what happened last night?”

“Judith, we already talked about this. Nothing happened last night.”

“I know what I saw, damn it.” She began sobbing. “I know what I saw.”

“Good god, Judith, will you cut that out? I thought you got all that out of your system when you were drunk last night.”

“Don’t make light of the way I feel. I may just be a damn housewife and I may not be anything special, but you can’t expect me to overlook what I saw.”

“Judith, you didn’t see anything.”

“Bill, I saw the way you touched her, in the kitchen, when you thought I was asleep. I saw your hands slide down her arms. And then you held her hands. You pulled her close to you and stared into her eyes for a long time. Then *she* leaned forward and kissed you on the cheek. Donald, I saw it. I wish K.J. would have been here to see it. I bet he could kick your ass in a second.”

“Judith, like I told you, you just saw things all wrong. She surprised me in the kitchen. I didn’t know she was in there or where she had come from. After I caught my breath I just grabbed her by the shoulders and told her she shouldn’t be jumping out of bathrooms like that. You were slobbering drunk, Judith. How can you expect to see things clearly in that state?”

“So now you’re going to throw that at me again? I know what I saw, tipsy or not.”

“Psss. Tipsy? You call that display last night being tipsy?”

Donnie had heard enough. It would be the same old argument from here. Ever since his dad had discovered her afternoon drinking, he started blaming everything from chipped drinking glasses to bounced checks on her *sickness*. There was a time when his mother was more confident, when she knew men would swoon with a simple flip of her hair. But times had changed. This display bordered on desperation. His mom was overdoing it, of course, but Mrs. Rosado was pretty and he wouldn’t put it past his dad to flirt a little. But his parents weren’t the type to divorce, probably even if he were having an affair or something. Bored with the discussion, Donnie went back to his room to eat.

Around eight o’clock, Donnie heard Kevin coming up the stairs. Donnie was lying in his bed reading, and when he heard Kevin go by his door, he yelled, “Kevin!”

Kevin came back to Donnie’s door. “What, butt face?”

“Well, uhm, how did it go with Carly last night?”

“With Carly? What do you mean?”

“I mean when you took her *home* last night?”

“It was just like any other night that I’ve taken her home. What are you getting at?”

“Well, I mean, did you mess around with her?”

“Well, yeah, a little, but I’m not gonna tell you about it.” He narrowed his eyes toward Donnie. “Why do you suddenly want to know about that?”

“I dunno. I’m just curious.”

“Oh, I get it now.” Kevin started nodding, like when he figures out a math problem. “You want to know about *that* kind of stuff.”

“Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“Donnie, I’d be glad to have that talk with ya—the one that Mom and Dad can’t have with you, at least not for any practical purposes,” he said, laughing at his own joke. “But, Donnie. I want to make sure you understand something.”

Kevin came in the door and stood close to Donnie’s bed. He spoke the next words slowly and deliberately, emphasizing each word as if Donnie were hearing impaired. “She doesn’t like you in that way,” he said. “Can’t you get that through your meaty head? You’re just kidding yourself, man.”

“All right, all right. I get your point.”

Kevin stood for a minute, ready to refute any argument that Donnie might come up with, but then he turned away to go back to his room.

“Hey, Kevin.”

“Yeah,” he said, turning back toward Donnie.

“Were Mom and Dad still downstairs?”

“Yeah.”

“Were they talking?”

“Nah. They’re both just sitting there watching TV. Why?”

“They had a pretty big fight. I was just wondering.”

“What else is new? See ya, butt face.”

“Come up with some new cut-downs, why don’t ya!” he shouted at a slamming door.

Not five seconds after Kevin had left, Donnie’s bedroom window creaked open. Josie.