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Note: This story contains language which may be considered inappropriate for young or more sensitive readers.

Templeton Appeared Stoic

for Lee

They say that I let him do it, that I knew what he was doing to those kids when he took them down into the basement, but all those people who think these things have never raised so beautiful a boy. When he was six or seven he would bring dead birds to me and ask me to make them fly again. He kissed my cheeks before he went to bed or out to play. Even when he grew older he never forgot or felt embarrassed about showing me his love. Now, I ask you how in the hell could a boy who cared for dead birds and never forgot to kiss his father hurt those kids? How can you take the words of fourteen year old boys against the word of a grown man? I ask you that. I ask you the same thing I asked the police on the night they took him away; I ask you the same thing I asked the DA and the judge and everybody in that goddamn courtroom on that day last April. And I say to you the same things I said to them. He's a good boy. He's never done anybody wrong. He's my only boy and my only child and he doesn't belong in a prison cell. Some of the women jurors and one big, bearded son of a bitch looked like they felt sorry for me, but once I was done testifying their faces went blank and for a second all anybody could hear was the cicadas, singing their song in the air outside. Then the DA said, No further questions, your Honor, and the judge said, Thank you, Mr. Templeton, you may step down.

I slowly got up, started to eye everybody in the courtroom, but stopped and shuffled my old bony ass back to my seat after I realized I didn't know half the people I was glaring at. For some reason it's hard to condemn people you don't know. If they'd held the trial here in Centralia I probably could have stood there in the witness box and silently damned

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everybody and their grandma until the judge said, Thank you, Mr. Templeton. I think you've damned everybody quite well. You may step down.

Once I was settled back there in the first row behind my son and his lawyer, I looked from the DA to the judge and finally to the jurors, who were glancing at Jacob with faces that weren't blank anymore. Some of them weren't even trying to hide how much they hated him. The DA was in the middle of calling another witness, but the judge cut him off --- said he'd heard enough for one day, which caught the jurors' attention. As he spoke they all seemed to bow their heads like kids'll do when they're being punished. Of course, they weren't getting the third degree; these folks --- none of whom I knew --- had been given the power to pass judgment and were remembering what that meant. They were saying to themselves, Nevermind this old man. Nevermind the fact that we're going to deprive him of his only child. Punishment must be dealt, right? We can make him suffer so let's make him suffer. Who really gives a shit about the truth?

At least, when the trial was over and done with, *The Ledger* quit printing Jacob's picture on the front page every other day and calling him names.

Child Molester. Homosexual Serial Rapist. Pederast. They're all inaccurate labels for what I am. Still, I suppose I'm more like a Homosexual Serial Rapist than one of these faggot peacocks. I'm not like them. I don't mix cigarette ash with shampoo to make eyeshadow or use Kool-Aid for lipstick or tape my dick between my legs and strut around in ass-hugging pants. Nevertheless, the niggers and wetbacks and white trash call me a punk as if I were no better than the peacocks. We're all punks to them. We're the lowest form of life

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in prison. I've been fucked three times since coming here last spring. It's December now and I've learned to submit to the men who are stronger than I am; I suck their dicks and that's usually the end of it. I suppose you might say I'm receiving my just desserts.

I know none of them would ever have told on me. I know Carl's parents forced him to tell. And after he told his story they --- Jimmy and Michael and Luke and Toby --- all began telling stories. And that's what they were: stories. Stories about a monster --- a predator who stalked the night in search of young boys to molest. Maybe their stories aren't all wrong. Maybe you should believe what they told their parents and the cops. Maybe you shouldn't question the words that put me away for the next forty years of my life: he raped me; he got me high, and then he raped me.

I kept the papers. Every single one. I couldn't help myself. But, the Tuesday after they took my son out that door the paper didn't get delivered so I called *The Ledger* and asked them what was going on. Of course, I knew exactly what they were up to. Nicole Jackson, one of Susan's old friends, answered and she said something like, Oh my, Frankie I just don't know what happened. I said back to her, Well, that might be so, Nic, but *you* know and *I* know what this has to be about. Somebody over there's decided that old Frank Templeton doesn't deserve a paper. Somebody over there's trying to punish me for something that's all going to turn out to be a bunch of rotten lies anyway! I could tell I'd upset her, because even before I was finished talking she started hiccuping. I remember when Robert left her she came over to our house and I found her hiccuping at the kitchen table and Susan patting the tear stains from her cheeks while she kept saying, I can't stop hiccuping; since I was a little

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baby I've always hiccuped when something didn't go my way. That must've been twenty years ago. A year or two before Susan passed away. Nic was real good to me for a few months after the funeral, bringing me pot roasts and casseroles until she saw I wasn't interested in marrying again.

Please don't get upset now, Frankie, she said in the calmest voice she could muster, which wasn't very calm considering how she was trying to hold back her hiccups. I'm sure this is all a big mistake.

A mistake! I said, but instead of calling her a goddamn fool, I took a deep breath and tried to reason with her, Listen Nic, you and me are friends so you don't need to be tiptoeing around the truth. Not with me.

Frankie, she squeaked in a real tight way like she was trying to hold back tears now, too. Frankie, you know I would never lie to you.

Sure Nic, I know you would never lie to me. Now, why don't you just let me talk to whoever's in charge over there nowadays?

She said she'd get Mr. Smith on the line right away and that she was truly sorry about all this, then she hiccuped one last time and put on some of that New Age elevator music. I sat right here in my livingroom and waited, trying to figure out why Nic wasn't being straight with me. Did she really believe what they were saying about me? Did she really think I'd let my son do a thing like that? Anyway, before I knew it Danny Smith's oldest boy, Lester, was on the line, saying, Hello, Frank, how's it going, today? I was a little taken aback by how nice he made his voice sound, but I decided I could play this game, too. I said, I'm doing fine, Lester, except for the fact that my paper was missing this morning.

Well, Frankie, I'm sure that was a mistake. I'll make certain there's a copy of today's paper on your doorstep tomorrow right along with ---

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Bullshit, I said. I just couldn't help myself; I tried to be nice, but I knew it was all bullshit. Lester was being too friendly.

Frankie, he said, there's no need to use that kind of language.

I'll say whatever the hell I want! Now, why don't you just come on out and tell me the truth; you're trying to punish me for what happened last week. You and whoever else carries any weight over there *nowadays* just decided to appoint yourselves the moral judges of Missouri. Of course, I didn't get a trial or a lawyer or anything like that. No, cause the moral judges are above the law, aren't they, Lester!

Frankie, I realize this is a rough time for you, but you got it all wrong. We --- I would never think to cause you any trouble.

Double bullshit, Lester. You know what I think? I think your daddy would disown you if he knew you were treating me like this!

Frankie, please, he said and I could tell he was starting to have a hard time staying calm, because there was a quiver in his voice now.

Forget it, Lester. I don't want the goddamn paper anymore!

Frankie, this is ridiculous.

This isn't ridiculous, Lester. This is me canceling my subscription. This is me saying the hell with you!

Now wait a minute, Frankie, you got to ---

But I slammed the phone back in its cradle before he could finish, and I have to admit that I felt big inside sort of like I used to feel after playing football --- my skin just vibrating and my blood singing in my veins. Still, I couldn't believe these sons of bitches. I tell you, these are the type of people who say I let my son do it, that I knew. These are the people who don't understand a goddamn thing.

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But, like I already said, I kept the papers. Every single one. The day after I canceled my subscription I drove to the McDonald's to buy the old rag and the next day I did the same, and soon this became a routine like drinking coffee in the morning or making love to my wife. I'd drive to the McDonald's, put the quarters in the machine and pull out the paper to see my son's face on the front page. Sometimes I even went inside the McDonald's to have myself a coffee. I made sure to sit in the middle of the restaurant so as to read my paper and sip my coffee in plain sight of everybody. I wanted all of them to know that I had nothing to hide; I'd furrow my brow and glare at the article on my son like it was the biggest load of horseshit I'd ever had the displeasure of setting my eyes upon. Then, I'd slap the paper down on the table, shake my head and sigh loud enough for everybody to hear. More than once, I leaned over to the guy sitting next to me, gestured toward the paper and said something like, Can you believe this bullshit?

This is how I did it.

First, I found out where the boys went at night. You'd see them inside the McDonald's or outside the movie theater, but I didn't like to go to those places because they were too public, too lit up. Where I liked to go and where I eventually found myself going night after night were the traintracks at the edge of town. You'd find the boys leaning against boxcars, smoking their mother's cigarettes and talking shit. Most of them would already be stoned from huffing paint and it was easy to make friends with them. I was at least ten years older than any one of them; I could buy beer and cigarettes; I was cool. After hanging out with the boys for a couple of weeks and bringing them gifts --- cans of spray paint, packs of cigarettes

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and sixers of Bud --- I finally asked two of them if they needed rides home. This was the second part of the seduction: getting a boy back to my room. That first night, a Saturday in late fall, I offered rides to Carl Martin and Jimmy Lane. After dropping off Jimmy, I asked Carl if he'd like to come back to my place. I promised him I had some paint we could huff and I think that was what made him say yes.

The third part I had to work on for months, and even after I went down on Carl that first night I continued to perfect it. I turned my room into a teenage boy's vision of paradise. I put up Magic Eye posters and draped banners of Pink Floyd and Nirvana in the corners of the ceiling. I put a lava lamp next to the stereo on my dresser and I littered the floor with Playboys. There were no chairs in my room; the only places to sit were on the floor or on the mattress that I'd positioned in the center of the room. It was on the wall in front of the bed that I designed the most startling piece of the paradise: I pinned up blinking Christmas lights and between the cascades of holiday cheer I hung three, full-length vanity mirrors. I knew how much these boys liked to look at themselves.

The fourth part involved the coordination of several different things: 1) the music, which I usually picked myself, saying to the boys something like, Have you heard this Hendrix song or this Grateful Dead tune (when I went down on Carl for the first time we were listening to *Crosstown Traffic* and four months later when I fucked Toby Reynolds --- the cops, and maybe you, would say raped --- we were listening to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*); 2) the paint, which the boys would spray into a plastic bag, then inhale (sometimes I gave them beer, too, but the paint was all I really needed to get them to where I wanted them to be); 3) the Playboys, which got their blood going after they were stoned out of their minds; 4) the Christmas lights, which I turned on once they were both high and hard (every last one of the boys loved those lights); and 5) the mirrors, which they looked into, laughing at their own

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reflections, their red eyes and slack lips. It was in this state of vanity and excitement that I'd start to touch them, telling them that guys did this sort of thing all the time. Not many of them refused. Carl was unzipping his jeans before I even got my hands on him. When they did crumple up and tell me to stop, I did --- at least until Carl introduced me to Toby, who I immediately wanted to suck and fuck, then throw away.

At the beginning of last summer --- May 8th to be exact --- they finally stopped printing his picture every other goddamn day and the routine ended. Still, some mornings I wake up ready to go to the McDonald's and buy the paper just like some mornings I wake up ready to make love to Susan, but she isn't there and I'm too old, much too old, to be stroking myself so I just lie there until the feeling passes and I can breath again.

Now, all those headlines and all the printed pictures of my son --- the mugshot, the high school yearbook photos, the pictures of him when he was a kid that the newsmen got from my sister --- they're all going into the fire. It's winter now and I like to keep a fire going at night, so I'm using every last *Ledger* as kindling. From the first one that said "Local Man Arrested on Rape Charges" to the last one that said "Templeton Sentenced to 40 Years to Life" --- they're all going to burn. I reread each article before I take the cover page, stuff it under the logs and set it afire with the long, red utility lighter my sister gave me for Christmas; anymore my fingers don't always do what I tell them to do so lighting a match is about as hard as catching a squirrel with your bare hands. Once the fire's going I feed each page to it one by one, and I don't feel bad because it's not like I'm burning a history book or the Bible. I'm just getting rid of the lies they printed.

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Tonight I'm on *The Ledger* from March 26th, 1998. The headline is "The Trial of Templeton Begins" and underneath it there's a picture of my son entering the courthouse. He's just a black shadow on the courthouse steps. In the background there's a line of protesters and you can make out one of their signs: ROT IN HELL TEMPELTON.

One line in the article itself grabs me and won't let go. I read it again and again, trying to understand what it means. This is what it says:

Templeton appeared stoic during the opening proceedings.

Now, I ask you, what in the hell is that suppose to mean? I'm his father and I don't know what it's suppose to mean so do you know what I feel like saying? I feel like saying let it burn, Jacob. Feed it to the fire.

Did I already mention that I'm going to visit him tomorrow?

I can't see her face in the water.

One morning when I was five years old my mother drowned in the bathtub. Whenever I envision or remember her dead she is covered by the red and white apron she wore when she cooked and cleaned. Frankie tells me that I never saw her body, that he had it removed before I was even awake. The only problem with what he tells me is that I've always been an early bird and the first thing I do when I wake up is go to the bathroom to pee. So here's little Jacob Templeton in his orange pajamas, ambling down the hall and rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his little tiny fists. He sees the bathroom door is shut so he gives it a little

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knock, but no one answers so he steps right in and makes a beeline for the toilet. In the morning light he feels an almost manly pleasure in watching his pee shoot into the toilet bowl. When he's done he stands on tiptoes, turns on the faucet and starts to wash his hands just like Frankie showed him, but there in the mirror is the bathtub and there in the bathtub is the red and white apron, the one he tugged on when he wanted his mother's attention, the one that got creases in it when she bent down to slap his bottom and send him out to play, the one that smelled like Dawn and roast beef.

Frankie is coming to visit me this afternoon and I think I might try to get him to talk about Mom. I want to hear his rendition one more time since the story's always changing on me while I think it stays simple and solid for him. All I know for sure is that she died, there was an investigation into her death, and the investigation concluded she slipped as she stepped into the bath, knocked her head against the tub's edge, and drowned because the knock on the head rendered her unconscious. If you want you can go to the library and read an article about the investigation on microfilm. Just find *The Ledger* dated August 16th, 1973, and then you'll know almost as much as I do, see almost as much as I see.

I can't recall or even imagine her face in the water.

In fact, it's as if her entire body vanishes --- melts like the Wicked Witch --- before little Jacob walks into the bathroom and starts to scream. Sometimes when he sees the apron --- the only proof she was ever there at all --- he screeches like a great horned owl while on at least one occasion he cooed like a mourning dove. Sometimes he believes Frankie; he really wasn't awake that morning; he slept through the sight and smell and near-taste of his mother's death as if God had decided to spare him.

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A man should have a sense of history, I tell myself as I wait in this room that is more like a cavern and filled mostly with nigger families who are waiting just like me. It takes me an hour to drive here, then twenty minutes just to get inside this room. The man at the front desk checks my driver's license, and I write my name in his book and my son's name, then there's a metal detector to go through and a pat down by a jumpy-looking kid who takes longer with the niggers than with me. Then, there are doors and hallways and cameras looking down from the ceilings. I feel like me, the niggers, and the one white woman are all part of something bigger than ourselves, like we're on the Trail of Tears or doing a death march, which brought me to this idea about how a man should have a sense of history. I'm sitting at the end of a long table that is the color of a robin's egg just like the walls, and I'm starting to ignore the whispers and laughter that fill the room. I'm keeping my eyes on the door that my son will be coming out of soon and I'm thinking about our history, about the violence that's been done to us. And I'm not just thinking of the shit everybody remembers like the Centralia Massacre that gets reenacted up there in the railyard every summer. What I'm thinking of are the stories my daddy used to tell me about the fighting my great granddaddy, John Ellis, did back in those days. Daddy had some good ones about Ellis raiding Yankee camps and stuff like that, but they never really got my blood going. The story that got me and made me want to go back in time armed with a machine gun was the one where twenty Union militiamen came to my great granddaddy's house one night while he was away fighting and told his wife Laura to fix them supper. Laura told the men to go away, she wasn't going to serve them just because they told her to. The Yankee commander demanded that she feed them and still old Laura refused him, then quick as a flash the men started ransacking the house. They emptied out cabinets and broke all of Laura's dishes. In

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the livingroom the men hooted and hollered and tore the curtains down, and I think my daddy said one guy ripped the carpet up by dancing on it with the heels of his boots. All the while Laura's two daughters stood against a wall, watching the Yankees destroy their home. After they ate, one of them led Laura and her youngest outside and before the door was even shut Laura heard Amy crying. She rushed back to the door and somehow managed to save Amy, telling the men to let her poor daughter alone. For God's sake, you have already done enough.

A man can't let this kind of violence get lost in history. I don't believe I ever told Jacob this story, but today would we a good day to pass it on since we've both become part of something bigger than ourselves. I'm not saying our house has been ransacked or nothing quite like that. What I'm saying is that they took my son away from me for something he couldn't have done and now they got him locked up like an animal. I'm saying that everywhere I go in town they look at me like I'm trash because they blame me for what he did to those kids, which, like I just said, he couldn't have done. I'm saying they've done enough damage to last the rest of our lives and I'm saying it needs to stop.

Toby Reynolds wanted it. He just didn't know he wanted it. Even when he testified and the prosecutor asked him to point to the man who "raped" him I could see, in his eyes and his trembling finger, that he loved what I gave him. How can I explain this to Frankie? How can I make him see that there's nothing really to deny --- that I'm in here not because I did something wrong, but because they *think* I did? I'm waiting in my cell, looking through the small window at the parking lot beyond the double set of razor wire fences and hoping to see

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Frankie pull in and park the old station wagon, the car I borrowed when I went out and "preyed" on the youth of Centralia. My cellmate, McIntosh, is sitting on his bed, tearing out pages of *The Lord of the Flies* and dropping them into a pile on the floor. Every so often he snickers and rubs his eyes like he's wiping tears away. I'd enjoy punching him in his face, but I'd rather stand here and watch for Frankie. Besides, McIntosh could kick the shit out of me and I hate how bruises look on my skin.

Toby's skin is beautiful, untouched by acne or razor burn. His hair is dirty blonde. His mouth is small like a doll's mouth, but the rest of him is big; he's muscular, plays basketball, likes to boast about his father's gun collection and dream of the dragon tattoo he's going to get on his shoulder when he's old enough. I told him that when he's fifty his tattoo'll look more like a gray chicken carcass than a dragon. He told me to fuck off. I don't care what it looks like when I'm old. I'm never going to get that old. I'm going to burn out.

Carl brought him to me just like he brought Jimmy and Michael and Luke. Usually I gave Carl a can or two of paint and he'd leave me with my new boy, but when he brought Toby last February he decided to stay even after I promised him three bottles and as much fun as he could handle on any night other than tonight. He sulked and got stoned in the corner while I did my little performance for Toby: paint, Playboys, lights and mirrors. As I started to massage his arms he pulled away from me, dropping the Playboy on the floor and asking me --- in a voice that was slow and weak --- what I was doing. I relied on my script, telling him that it's not some faggot thing; all men touch each other; they just don't tell anyone. From Carl's corner I heard giggling and I was about to tell him to shut up when I realized Toby had passed out. I felt like his unconsciousness was a greater insult than if he'd called me a fag and stormed out, but I controlled my anger. I was going to do this thing the right way.

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Frankie lost control once. He beat the hell out of me when I was a kid. He was always a quiet man, especially after Mom died, and I don't think he's ever been capable of making friends. There's something temporary about him, something in the way he used to bob down the sidewalk like an ostrich in a suit. Of course, he's an old bird now. He wobbles more than he bobs, wears his baby blue sweatpants for days and days and laughs at whatever's on the TV. Right up to the day they took me away, I'd give him a kiss on his cheek before I went to work or to look for my boys; I'd give him a kiss just to see that he's still alive.

Toby's dick was limp. I'd been working on getting him up for the past five minutes, but all I'd managed to do was coax out a few drops of piss. Carl continued to giggle and huff his paint and I realized that his laughter wasn't directed at me and my failed efforts, but at the lights and music in the room and the numbness in his brain and body. To suppress my frustration I did what I should've done in the first place; I took off Toby's shoes and socks, slid his blue jeans and underwear all the way off and removed his shirt. He was beautiful --- without blemish --- and as Clara Torry wailed on *The Great Gig in the Sky* I turned him onto his stomach (his pale hips were sleek like riverbed clay), then I licked my thumb and began to caress his asshole. I was sober as I did this. When I handled my boys I was always sober and kind.

The first boy's name was Chris. He and I were both eleven years old, and in my bedroom we played doctor or man and wife or prisoner. I liked the last game the most because when I was the warden I could do whatever I wanted to Chris and he couldn't complain like wives and patients do. I'd order him to take off his shoes and socks, then his shirt and pants. I'd walk around him, surveying him, telling him his underwear wasn't clean enough and that if he doesn't shape up then he's going to have to do all the laundry in the whole entire prison. He'd try to suppress his laughter as I poked him in the ribs with a plastic squirt gun and told

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him, OK, now prisoner number 12345 I order you to take off your underwear. When he was naked I'd like to command him to do a somersault or a set of jumping jacks. The game ended after I directed him through a number of increasingly elaborate exercises (Now, touch your nose to your knee and say monkey), because the laughter I'd been trying to hold back since the beginning would get the better of me and my tough facade would fall apart. And, of course, Frankie came in one day and ruined the fun, saw my naked friend and the plastic squirt gun in my hand and slapped me in my face before I could tell him we were just playing a game. Once he'd ushered Chris --- dazed and half-dressed --- out of my room, the real beating began. He used his belt on my back and ass and legs, and as my whimpers turned to high, uncontrollable cries my desire to account for what he'd seen turned to a hatred that spread through my body more sharply than the physical pain and directed itself (with shocking force) inward (I was a filthy boy who didn't deserve to be his son).

Between the rising and falling of the belt, it was my own fault Frankie was beating me and cursing me and asking me what Susan would've thought if she found out her little boy wanted to be a girl.

Toby is the first boy I fucked, but not the last (I plan to walk out of this shithole someday; I know parole boards look at your behavior and mine has been impeccable so far). When he came round Gilmour was singing *Money* and my patience and kindness were gone. All I had was a desire to fuck this dirty blonde kid, a desire compounded by all the time and effort I'd put in to getting him into this room and getting him hard. I lifted him up onto his hands and knees, reached around for his dick and I thrust. The first cry he let out and the feeling of his torn skin and the way he arched his back was almost worth the punishment that followed: the trial, the imprisonment, the humiliation of being unwillingly fucked three times since arriving here. What I'm trying to say is I'd probably do it again. I'd fuck Toby and I'd order Chris to

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undress and spin in circles for my amusement, because the desire outlasts the pain --- the hatred goes away (I don't know where!) and the blood dries.

What are you looking at Templeton?

The parking lot, McIntosh.

Somebody's visiting you today?

Yes, my dad's coming. I watch him tear another page from his book and suck in his lips, thinking about what he's going to say next. When he finally speaks his words are laced with an emotion I can't discern as envy or disgust or a combination of the two.

What was it like fucking those kids, Templeton?

We were talking for about a minute or so, but now we're both silent. It's like there's nothing else left to say.

I look at his green eyes, soft cheeks and weak chin, and think about how much he resembles his mother. I try to find myself in his face, but all I can see is the broad nose that gave my face a nice roguish quality (I wasn't a pretty boy) when I was in my twenties, but on him looks all wrong. I get images of Susan wearing my big nose instead of the small one she had.

He's tapping his fingers on the table and staring over my shoulder and it's loud in here now; all the voices are bouncing off the walls, which kind of deepens the silence between me and my son. I almost ask him how he's doing (my lips start to move), but then I realize I already did. He said he wasn't doing too bad.

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Then, with a suddenness that squeezes my heart, I remember how I want to tell him about our history --- how this isn't the first time we've been wronged. But before I can begin I see Jacob's

looking me in the eye now and I can tell he's waiting for me to say something. Did he ask me a question? I'm not sure so I decide to go ahead and start talking about our past. I say, Jacob, a man has got to have a sense of history. I like the way I sound when I say those words; I sound the same way my daddy did when he explained to me how to handle a .22 (Raise the barrel in your left hand, rest the butt against your right shoulder, relax, aim and fire), and I continue talking with that fatherly tone, hoping Jacob will catch it and get a chance to use it someday, too.

Who's a man who doesn't know what's happened before he was born? Can you even call him a man if he doesn't know? When I was a boy my daddy told me stories about your great great granddaddy who ---

But, Jacob doesn't let me finish; he cuts in and says, Frankie, what the hell are you talking about. I said do you remember when mom died.

This bugs me a bit (why didn't I hear him the first time?), and I ask him, Now, why do you want to talk about your mom when I'm trying to tell you about our history?

Mom's death is part of our history, he says.

I'm talking about the time before you were born --- before I was even born, I say. I'm trying to tell you something important.

Well, save it for another day, Frankie, he says and now I know he isn't going to let up so instead of fighting anymore I tell him what I remember about Susan's death even though the telling of it always busts up my heart. I tell him how it happened on a Monday, my one day off from delivering papers and the only day where I always got to sleep in. I tell him how I

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woke up and knew right away that something was wrong, but not because her side of the bed was cold; she was always an early riser. What struck me was there weren't any breakfast smells or sounds to tell me it was time to get up. I lay there for a while, waiting to smell the bacon frying or hear the *slurp* and *pop* of the coffeemaker, but nothing came.

In the bathroom, I just stood and stared for a long time, taking it all in. The shower curtain was torn. There was a dark streak of blood beside the faucet and there was pink blood in the water around her face. Her eyes were closed. She'd slipped.

Eventually, I lifted her from the water, put her down on the tile floor and dried her with a towel. I don't tell Jacob how I cried and spent too much time wiping the water from her breasts and the insides of her thighs. I don't tell Jacob how it was a struggle to get her into the night gown that she'd dropped near the toilet, nor do I tell him that, looking back now, I think about how much it was like some kind of sick joke. Instead of being a young and beautiful bride and groom we were middle-aged and married five years. Instead of undressing her to see her rosy whiteness I covered her up. Instead of making love to her I called the undertaker. The end of our marriage mocked its own beginning. Maybe it's like this for everybody.

The undertaker and his assistant were careful in putting her in the bodybag and on the stretcher. They barely made any noise at all as they carted her down the hallway, into the livingroom and out the door. I tell Jacob it was a good thing he's always been a heavy sleeper. He wouldn't have wanted to see what I saw.

But, Frankie, I'm an early bird, Jacob says in a real sharp way like I insulted him or something.

I ask him what he means and he furrows his brow and tells me that he's sure he saw her body, that he's sure he must have been awake before I was, but it makes me sick to hear him

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making up such a goddamn stupid lie so I cut him off, saying, How do you remember anything, Jacob? You were only five years old.

He says, I remember going to the bathroom and seeing her in the bathtub. She was wearing that red and white apron she always used to wear in the kitchen.

That's bullshit, Jacob, and you should know it.

It's not bullshit, he says. It's what I remember.

No it ain't! You're making it up.

I'm not making anything up, Frankie. I'm just trying to ---

She wasn't wearing her apron, Jacob. She wasn't wearing anything. Do you understand? I let those words sink into his face; he slowly closes his eyes and when he opens them up they're looking past me again. Finally I say, So, you see, you couldn't have seen her because you got it all wrong. You were asleep, Jacob, and you didn't wake up until after they took her away.

Frankie tells me mom wasn't wearing anything when she died and I remember or imagine (is there really a difference?) her naked body in the bath: her stiff, purplish nipples, her granular thighs and overgrown patch of pubic hair, slightly parted by the shriveled flesh of her cunt. Little Jacob screams like a little boy this time and costumes his mother in the first thing that comes into his little head.

Now, can we talk about something else? Frankie asks. He looks so hopeful and pathetic -- his eyebrows raised, causing three or four large creases to form on his forehead --- that I nod yes. As he starts to give me his history lesson, again, his eyes shine with a triumph he

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probably thinks he's hiding from me. Part of me listens to what he has to say while another part of me continues to reconstruct the morning my mother died. After I come to a satisfying vision of little Jacob's horrified, yet eager discovery of the details of her dead, naked body (he even touches her face, stirring the penumbra of blood surrounding it) and his burial of these details beneath the red and white normalcy of her apron, I leisurely turn my full attention to what Frankie is trying to say: The soldiers did everything but rape them. But I think in way they did the closest thing they could to that. You know, because they *intruded* and tore the house apart. Laura and her daughter Amy, who would become your great grandma, they were wronged just like we've been wronged.

But, I'm not a victim, Frankie, I say (partly because I get an urge to rustle the old man's feathers).

Yes you are, he cries. Don't you see what they've done to you.

I lean in close to his face, get a good whiff of his coffee breath and cheap aftershave, and tell him that I had sex with those boys and there's no reason he or I should deny it.

Shut your mouth, Jacob, he says and I lean back into my chair so that I can get a better look at his reaction; his jaw is quivering and he's looking around like the niggers at either end table heard what I just said. I decide to push him farther. I ask him if he remembers the time he beat the shit out of me.

What are you talking about?

My friend Chris and I use to take off our clothes and play with each other, I say. And one time you came in and spoiled our fun. Don't you remember, *Dad*? You whipped me so good I didn't go to school for the next two days. You had to call my teacher and tell her I'd come down with the flu.

I don't know what you're talking about.

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Still, you treated me awfully nice during those two days, bringing me grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, telling me you were sorry, but also telling me you had no choice. Any father would have done the same thing. I think you said those exact words.

He doesn't respond right away, but just stares into his soft palms that have been cut by paper, but never callused. In the summer, when I was kid, I'd go with him on his rounds every Tuesday, help him lift the newspapers into our old Ford pick-up, ride beside him all across the County in those quiet hours before dawn, and put the papers in the machines outside the empty offices and restaurants. I pity him now because he'll never know what it's like like to hold a boy, caress his chest and grab his dick. He'll never fuck a boy and feel him collapse under his hands. He'll stay this soft, old bird, wobbling around on his thin legs and calling himself a victim.

They say I knew, Jacob. His voice is hoarse and he still won't look up at me.

Knew what, Frankie?

They say I knew what you were doing to those kids --- that I let you do it --- but that ain't right, is it? How could I've known? The whites of his eyes are as pink as worm guts; he's staring at my mouth, waiting for it to move and give him words that can somehow absolve him not only of the guilt of raising a weakling faggot like myself, but also the guilt of having lived alone for so many years. I lean in close again and cock my head almost as if I'm going to kiss him on the cheek and without attempting to conceal the spite in my voice I say, You've become a bit of a night owl, haven't you, Frankie? Since you haven't had to wake up early in a long, long time and get those papers out to everybody, you've been staying up late, haven't you? I seem to recall you still being up, watching TV, when I brought one of my boys home. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't my boys and I have to go through the livingroom to get to the basement? Didn't we have to pass right in front of you?

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He shakes his head and rubs his left thumb into his right palm as if he's trying to erase something he wrote there or dig through the thin flesh. I feel sorry for him suddenly, and I touch the back of his wrist until he stops moving his thumb, then I pull away and look over his shoulder at the clock on the far wall. As the red hand makes it way to the six he asks me what I keep staring at and I say, The time. He turns around to have a look himself, and when he faces me again I can tell --- by way his shoulders drop and his lips part in a small, silent sigh --- he's relieved we only have a few minutes left.