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## Barney Hester

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## Barney Hester

by Darrin Doyle

So what about this girl? The one who hyperextended that inhuman jawbone to vacuum up my best friend. It took me fifteen years of therapy and ten years (running) of prescription drugs to convince me that it isn't normal behavior for girls to swallow the boys who like them. Even after all that, I continue to see her cavernous maw in every footprint in the snow, every dark hole in the trunk of a tree. Whenever a baby screams for its bottle, I hear Barney.

Women in general continue to terrify me. For fifteen years the act of sex was ruined: her mouth was in a different place, the head wasn't at the top of my body, but the gesture was the same.

Her name was Tanya. This is a false name. I swore to that demon that I would never repeat her real name again, not to any living soul (although I suppose that the Hesters, should they ever read this, would be able to supply her name. No matter.). I will never break my promise. I urinated in my pants as I made that vow. Urinating in one's pants is funny, in theory and in movies. When it really happens, when the body and the mind shut down entirely, when you feel that you are imploding upon yourself—then it's not funny. The simple act of documenting this experience is enough to set in motion those terrible soundless fears, those fears that she will appear at my doorstep or my window, tapping to be let in. I can see her smiling out there. Her eyes are black. Her teeth are white.

Behind the Hesters' house stood on an expanse of wooded land, maybe ten acres. More undeveloped acreage—wooded, barren, grassy—on every side of their house, gave the area a lonely, forgotten feel. The birds and crickets were louder than

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the cars. Barney used to tell me that the woman down the street, their nearest neighbor at two hundred yards away, mowed her lawn topless. This just proves how isolated these people were, on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, Michigan, close to the Rockford border. The street had very few houses on it.

One time at the Hesters' I stayed later than I'd intended. It was autumn; the sun abandoned us very early. Nightfall had descended swiftly and painlessly. Barney and I lay on our bellies in the basement, engrossed in our hand-held Coleco electronic football game. Ozzy Osbourne, from Danny's room next door, sang "Fairies Wear Boots."

When 8 p. m. rolled around I told Barney I had to go home, so he waited until I wasn't ready, reared back and leveled me with a punch to the gut. I folded. Then he ran upstairs and told his mom that I'd spit on the carpet. I walked out of the house trying to hold back the tears. My stomach clenched and I was having difficulty breathing. I hopped on my Huffy and rode away.

Normally I made a point of riding as quickly as possible until I reached The Beltline, which was the main road. On that night I could barely pedal. Sitting upright was an enormous job. It was a long, dark, sloping road. Streetlights were scarce. Small mammals scurried into the shadows. I'm not sure if it frightened Barney, his older brother Danny or his younger sister Margaret. They never seemed scared of anything.

That bike ride physically altered me forever. For reasons I was never certain of, I lost my balance and fell over the handlebars, directly onto my face. That's why to this day I have a crooked nose and a crimped upper lip. My front teeth were loose, my mouth was filled with blood. I raised my head, spitting. I had fallen in front of somebody's house; as I looked up, a light in the living room extinguished. Reflecting now, for



what it's worth, I'm pretty sure it was Tanya's house.

She was the girl who lived down the road from Barney. Here are some things you should know:

- 1) Barney Hester, at the age of twelve, was swallowed by this girl. This was a girl he loved.
- 2) I witnessed the event.
- 3) I didn't try to stop it.
- 4) Barney did not struggle as his head disappeared into her mouth. His arms remained flat at his sides. He did, however, scream like an unfed infant.
- 5) I loved Barney Hester.
- 6) He tried to kill me.

After the punching incident and the ensuing bicycle mishap (which I also blamed on him) I vowed I would never talk to Barney again. As usual, I was weak. He lured me back with his seductive charm and promises of abandoned *Penthouses* buried in the weeds behind his house. He was a handsome boy. Even then, in the fifth grade, I knew this, and I realize now that this was part of his hold on me. He had that confidence, that swagger, which good-looking males inevitably adopt. The fifth-grade girls used whatever means necessary to steal personal effects of his—a cutout football he made for a school project, a broken shoelace, his trademark black combs (he had a bucketful in his room)—and sneak to the corner of the classroom to cover them with kisses. The other boys used to get pissed off at this behavior. Not from jealousy, mind you, but because they thought it was insulting to our gender. Barney didn't mind the attention. He smirked about it. Nothing you did to him seemed to faze him.

His big brother used to whollop the living crap out of him.

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Maybe that's why I cut Barney so much slack. Gangly red-haired Danny's evening ritual was to sit on Barney's chest and play the drums on his face. With drumsticks. He adored whipping Barney's naked butt with wet towels until the skin broke open. He gave Barney Indian burns for *not doing* his chores. He tied Barney up inside the abandoned doghouse for *doing* his chores. He made Barney eat moldy cheese for not doing *Danny's* chores. His parents turned a blind eye to this terrorism partly because his mother was blind, literally (since birth), and partly because his father weighed 500 pounds. Mr. Hester seemed almost too fat to move; chasing down and punishing Danny was more than he cared to attempt. Theirs was a grotesque family. Even his little sister, with her innocent-looking plaid Catholic-school skirt, was not exempt from bearing their unsavory gene; she is an albino.

I'll lay off Margaret now. She's the one who cooks my meals and sleeps beside me at night. I won't risk losing those things. We're married. And she has nothing to do with the Hesters—her family—any more. I love her. When I go inside her, I'm not afraid. I don't worry about never coming out again. There are times when, inside her eyes, in their pink pigment glaze, I see Barney's face. He's usually spitting at me for allowing him to vanish. Just because I see him now and then in Margaret's eyes, it doesn't mean I won't remain with her forever.

Barney Hester was not a genius. After he disappeared, some people claimed that he'd been a genius. This is a lie. People always try to glorify the victim. He cheated on tests in school. I saw him doing it. As a matter of fact, I was often "coerced" (read: bullied) by Barney into supplying him with answers. His spelling was primitive. His implementation of the scientific method consisted of seeing how many BBs a garter snake could

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be shot with before it finally croaked. If it somehow turns out that Barney faked his disappearance, his own swallowing, at the age of twelve, then maybe I would concede that he is a genius. An acting genius for sure.

Sometimes, even after all these years, I look for him. I still live in Grand Rapids. It's a big city. It would have been easy for him to be absorbed into the streets. He could've become a prostitute, a thief, a gambler, a gambling prostitute thief, or a bouncer. Any of those romantic things.

When his parents found out Barney was gone, they spent a good deal of their money searching for him. I still have the milk carton with his face and statistics on it.

*Barney James Hester Five feet tall Age 12 Born November 12, 1970 Red hair One dimple in his cheek when he smiles Weighs 94 pounds Last seen wearing a blue Detroit Lions' jersey with number 17 and the word "Hipple" on the back*

For as much as his folks professed to care about him after he was devoured, it's worth mentioning that I had to provide the police with all of the above information, except for age and hair color.

My first clue that Barney had fallen in love was the smell of Dove soap. One day, with no warning, his hands reeked of it. He'd never smelled like anything other than burped-up Cheetos and bologna sandwiches, so the change was pretty obvious. I found out later that he was washing himself in excess of ten times a day. If he wasn't showering or taking a bath, he was scrubbing his face, neck, arms, hands—any area he could reach in his two-minute trips to the bathroom during Science class. One day his bookbag spilled and four bars of Dove tumbled out onto the floor. I desperately wanted to mock him for this, but



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couldn't bring myself to do it. He looked so damn pathetic kneeling down to pick them up. I didn't want to get punched either.

Talking to Barney was something one couldn't just "do." The moment had to be right, and it had to be on Barney's terms. Most days he showed no emotion other than anger and apathy. If he laughed, it was at someone else's misfortune. He talked tough, meaning he talked about everything that had nothing to do with anything. He talked football, MTV, cigarettes, bikes, private parts, baseball cards, video games, skateboards. I don't think he ever talked about food. Food didn't interest him unless it was covered with cheese, and then it only interested him in the same way that he interested Tanya.

Once in a while, however, Barney opened up. It was impossible to predict when this would happen. After baseball practice one day, we walked to my house. On the shoulder of the road we came across a dead squirrel. It was crushed and split open, with flies dancing on it. Expecting Barney to lift it by the tail and hurl it at me, I started running. I turned around eventually. He hadn't moved. He was staring down at the squirrel. I went back.

He said, "I don't think this was an accident."

"You think somebody killed it?"

"Of course somebody killed it. But they didn't mean to."

"You should go look up the word 'accident.'"

"This squirrel committed suicide."

Then he told me about his Uncle Lincoln, who had shot himself with an old Army pistol. He said it wasn't really a tragedy since his Uncle had wanted to die. Even his family agreed. Everyone was sad and everything, because Linc had been a pretty good guy, but the consensus among the Hesters was that everyone had the right to do it if it felt like the proper thing. Barney told me that every death was a suicide.

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"What if your plane crashes?" I asked him.

"Then it's the pilot committing suicide on behalf of all the passengers."

"You can't commit suicide for someone else."

"Jesus killed himself."

We went to a Catholic school, so this revelation really shocked me. "Jesus wasn't on a plane!" I said.

"He could've saved himself, but he didn't."

I couldn't see what his argument had to do with my argument, but I let it rest. As I said, Barney didn't open up too much, and I didn't want to risk getting ants stuffed down the front of my jeans. Barney removed his shirt and put it over his hands. He peeled the squirrel's body from the pavement. I followed him as he walked with it a few feet into the woods, then tossed it away as hard as he could. He said it was embarrassing for the squirrel, with everyone looking at it and commenting about it. He said the squirrel deserved to be away from all those eyes.

A week later, he told me about the girl who lived down the street. She was a few years older than us. Barney was smitten with her. He scrawled her name all over his notebooks and textbooks. I finally knew why he'd taken such an active interest in washing himself. I was sleeping over at his house one Friday night when he gave me the dirt.

"Her house is around the bend, on the right-hand side," he said, "She has really big tits. Her hair's long and black and stringy and when she sits on her porch, reading a book, she likes to twist the hair with her fingers."

That's all Barney knew.

I asked him, "Where does she go to school?"

He didn't know.

I asked him, "Where did she move from?"



He said he hadn't noticed anyone living in that house before, maybe they'd always been there.

I asked him if he'd seen her tits.

He slapped the side of my head for even thinking about her tits.

It became part of our ritual to ride back and forth past her house on our dirt bikes, hoping to catch a glimpse. There was an unspoken agreement that if she ever came out, I wouldn't open my mouth. Only Barney could talk to her, and I was to laugh extra hard at anything Barney said.

Most times, the house looked uninhabited. Once in a while a light would turn on or off and we would get really excited. Barney would stop his bike and pretend to tie his shoe. The drapes in the front window were always drawn, however, so we only saw shadows inside.

This went on for two months. I didn't see the mystery girl. Not once. Barney said that she obviously didn't like me, since she came out of the house "a lot" when I wasn't around. I was ready to give up hope. I'd decided that this girl was nothing more than a fantasy, a diversion Barney had created because I wasn't entertaining enough for him. A snowless December came and went, as I tried unsuccessfully to draw Barney into playing Coleco football, hunting birds with our BB guns—anything that didn't involve the dirty grey house at the bottom of the hill.

In January there was a blizzard, and with the snow came the girl. Her face was bleeding. She was ushered into the Hesters' house by the grotesquely overweight Mr. Hester, who normally filled his custom-made recliner from the moment he came home from the Keebler factory until Mrs. Hester woke him to get into bed. But with the twelve inches of snow came a lot of shoveling, and doctors had told Mr. Hester that he needed the

exercise.

He burst through the door with Tanya squeezed under his arm, her face squashed against his enormous stomach. I think Mr. Hester was, in his arrested condition of social retardation, attempting to both console and restrain her. She was squirming. She screamed. She bit his hand. Cursing, he let her go. She ran to me and started shoving, perhaps in her dazed state thinking that I was the one who'd hit her with the rock-filled snowball.

Barney was frozen to his spot on the carpet. I think there were a couple of things going on in his mind at that moment: first, he was paralyzed at the sight of his dream woman standing in his own house; second, he was horrified that it was *me* she was touching, rather than him, albeit in a rude fashion. If Mr. Hester hadn't thrown his bulk between us, I believe Barney would've joined in with Tanya's assault and I wouldn't be here today to tell this story.

The mess got sorted out. Danny was hauled inside by his ear. He was made to apologize, which he grudgingly did, before flipping Tanya off as he stepped out the door. Mrs. Hester brought some rubbing alcohol and bandages. Tanya snatched these petulantly and applied them to her cuts.

Barney and I sat motionless at opposite ends of the couch, watching. By the rapid blinking and the unsteady breath pattern, I could tell that his brain was going into overdrive. He didn't want to look at the fantasy girl, but his eyes, those pea-green things which for so long had only expressed rage and apathy, were pulled to her. He was terrified. It was the first of only two times I ever saw him looking weak.

Barney's parents left the room. The three of us sat quietly. After a moment Tanya asked Barney what the fuck he was looking at. I was almost knocked off the couch by the force of her voice. Barney hadn't lied when he'd said she had big

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breasts; they were gigantic. In fact, her whole body was rather large. If I can tell the truth, I thought she was homely and dumpy. I recalled the numerous times Barney had said fat girls were worthless. Her hair was like black seaweed. The nose on her face looked like it'd been pinched into the shape of a shark's dorsal fin. She had unusually long fingers, which she used to tug absentmindedly at her detached earlobes. They were pale, bony fingers. They reminded me of icicles. Judging by the dark ditches beneath her eyes, she hadn't had a good night's sleep in months.

Barney demonstrated great tact in laughing rather than trying to answer her profane question. I laughed too, but not as hard as Barney. Mrs. Hester shocked us all by coming into the room with a tray of hot chocolate. In two years she'd never even offered me a glass of water.

Barney threw me a look that meant I was supposed to help his mother. I obeyed, handing out the mugs before taking my seat once again. Mrs. Hester asked Tanya how her head was feeling. Tanya performed a courageous feat. She screwed up her face, distorted it into a queer, pain-filled grimace, then answered in a perfectly level voice, "It's feeling fine. Thanks for the hot chocolate."

I prepared myself for Mrs. Hester's wraith. She was an alcoholic with a mean streak. Although she was blind, she'd always exhibited an impeccable skill for reading intentions in the tone of people's voices, like a dog who smells shit on the wind. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd hurled the tray at the wall and gone rabid on Tanya's ass. Instead Mrs. Hester said, "You're welcome," and walked away.

After that, Tanya began coming over regularly. Barney had promised her that we'd "fuck Danny up" for the snowball. I was always invited along whenever she visited, because although



he wanted her all to himself, Barney confided in me on a number of occasions on the playground that she “was empty on the inside.” She frightened him. Her presence unnerved him. He said that over the years her guts had fallen out, little by little, and been eaten by stray dogs.

The three of us spent hours in the back yard, huddled over a floor-plan of the Hesters’ home which we’d scrawled into the snow. I realized in those moments that three is a good number. In a group of three, you are always next to everyone. It’s a perfect circle. That’s why Margaret and I have only one child. He’s a five year-old boy named Barney.

Our idea was to put Danny’s headphones on him while he was sleeping, then destroy his eardrums with his own music. First we’d talked about putting dog shit on his floor. Then we’d considered shoving a few pieces of broken glass into his tube socks. For none of the ideas we tossed around was a floor plan necessary, but Barney was a detail-driven boy and I wasn’t about to argue with him. The true joy of those nights was huddling together against the whipping, frozen breeze, flashlights in hand, watching our breath clouds mingle above the crude snow-sketch, our knees touching each other’s.

The actual execution of the plan was anticlimactic. Since we had to wait until Danny was sleeping, we chose a Friday. I spent the night, as usual, at the Hesters’ house. We told his mother we were going to sleep in the basement living room, which was next to Danny’s room and which also had a sliding glass door leading into the back yard. In front of the television we lay in our sleeping bags. Barney stuffed handful upon handful of Cheetos into his mouth.

At 2 a. m. Barney’s teeth were bright orange from the Cheetos when Tanya’s face appeared in all its bloodless glory at the glass door. Barney let her in.

We took turns sneaking up to Danny's door and pressing our ears against it. We had to flatten our entire ear on the door for ten seconds, or else it didn't count. This was terrifying, knowing that Danny could throw open the door at any moment and then do God-knows-what. He was like an ogre in a cave.

After two turns apiece, we determined that he was asleep. The mood turned solemn. We snuck into his room with a flashlight. Barney selected AC/DC's *Back in Black* from the leaning stack of records and I plugged in the headphones. Tanya had insisted on the privilege of placing the headphones over Danny's ears. As soon as she did, however, he woke up. Barney didn't even get a chance to drop the needle before Danny flung back his covers and started screaming obscenities at us. He jumped out of bed. Tanya kicked him in the shin with her boot. She ran out of the house, leaving the sliding door wide open. The breeze played on the curtains and stirred up the newspaper that was lying on the sofa. Danny punched Barney a few times in the mouth. That was that.

If Tanya had ever been interested in Barney, which I doubt, she lost interest after the prank was complete. That's not to say she didn't come over anymore. She did. The three of us took long walks through the woods. We shot BB guns at birds. We threw snowballs at cars on the Beltline. Despite her rotund figure, Tanya proved to be a remarkably fast runner. She had a natural gift for vanishing into the trees, making no sound whatsoever. Whenever a car skidded to a stop and the driver hopped out to chase us, Tanya became a blur, sprinting smoothly over snowmounds and dead branches, through bushes and fallen saplings, until inevitably she was gone, only to announce her appearance later, when the coast was clear, by pelting Barney in the face with a snowball.

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Barney took these assaults, as well as others, as signs of affection. How could he not? He was blinded and weak. Love to Barney meant punching, spitting and cursing. But I sensed different motives in Tanya. After all, she never spoke a word to Barney. She talked exclusively to me. When she spit grape seeds at him or thrust her smelly feet in his face, it was with a violence I couldn't ignore. For his part, Barney was so smitten that he could barely talk. The result was that I was constantly in the middle. They each talked to me, but never to each other.

Despite Barney's efforts to the contrary, Tanya and I were occasionally left alone together. Tanya took these opportunities to criticize Barney's clothes, his hair, his house—anything she could think of. Because she always whispered these derisions, it imbued them with a sense of urgency and secrecy. Her lips curled into a grin. She dripped profanities out of her mouth like slow, sticky molasses. Her eyes moved in her head, glancing to the left and right as if she could sense the presence of another being in the room. I became steadily more focused on her breasts as the days went by. When her fingers wrapped themselves around a throw pillow, I imagined she was grabbing my hands, my head, my shoulders—anything—to pull me in for a taste of her moist lips.

Recently I was downtown for the annual Thanksgiving parade when I bumped into Danny Hester. He was alone, staring at the newspaper machine. I was reminded of Barney, years before, mysteriously contemplative, hands in his pockets, looking down at the mutilated squirrel.

With my son Barney in tow I tried to hurry past, but Danny looked up. He recognized me. I hadn't seen him in eighteen years. Except for the added age lines his face was mostly unchanged, but he seemed to have shrunk. And he wasn't Danny anymore, he was—



“Daniel Hester. Remember me?” He shook my hand vigorously. He looked queer in his trenchcoat and three-piece suit. He didn’t ask about Margaret, but he did tell me that Mrs. Hester had “kicked the bucket six months ago,” from a stroke. The unspoken message, of course, was that I should pass along the news to Margaret. She’d divorced herself from Danny and the rest of his family eight years before, and the Hesters seemed to accept this reality in the same way they’d accepted Uncle Lincoln’s suicide: it was unfortunate, but unchangeable.

Danny smiled down at little Barney, then rubbed Barney’s head. I could practically hear the violins as he broke into a sappy, rambling speech about the old days. It was pathetic. He said he felt like shit the way he’d treated Barney when they were kids. He said that Barney had talked about me all the time, even when we weren’t friends anymore. Looking at my watch I mumbled something about taking my son to the movies. Danny shook my hand again, not wanting to let me go. I peeled myself away from him.

After we walked a few steps, I heard him calling after me. I turned around. He said that he’d heard something about Tanya. She’d migrated west, to California, to be an actress, leaving bits of Barney, I presume, in toilets all across the USA.

Now I suppose I should get to the point. My shrinks have always told me that writing things down is a way to finalize, to purge, to mend.

One Saturday afternoon at the beginning of April, Barney’s parents announced that it was time to get the family some new church shoes. Amid the protests, they corralled the children. Surprisingly, Mr. Hester offered to drop me off at my house on the way to the mall (usually they left me to fend for myself).

As we all fought our way into the pumpkin-colored station wagon, Tanya materialized on their doorstep. Mr. Hester, try-

ing to be polite, invited her to come along. She refused with a simple shake of the head. She walked to the car, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me out.

"I need help," she whispered. Her fingers were crushing my humerus.

"They're giving me a ride home," I said, with the inflected meekness I'd adopted in her presence. Whenever possible, I did what Tanya commanded. She truly frightened me. I'd once seen her pull off the head of a dead crow we found in the woods. She took it home to use its beak as a "pen" for her diary.

"My parents can give you a ride," she insisted.

The entire Hester family was listening to our exchange. Mr. Hester was letting the car idle. Barney wasn't just listening, of course. He was glaring. I tried to pull away, but her icicle fingers wouldn't break.

I relinquished. "I'm gonna stay here and help Tanya," I said. I stared at the ground.

Mr. Hester spat a vindictive looger onto the driveway and backed his car into the road. He didn't like Tanya. Nobody did except Barney.

She led me to the rear of the Hester house. I didn't know what she had in mind, but all possible scenarios seemed both repellant and alluring. She jimmied open one of the windows to the utility room. She boosted me. I climbed inside. She followed. As I brushed myself off I asked her why we were breaking into Barney's house. As an answer, she ran away, out of the utility room. I saw no choice other than to tag along.

For the next two hours we wreaked havoc on their home. From the refrigerator we retrieved an onion. We broke off small chunks of it and planted them everywhere—in the teakettle, under the plastic placemats, inside the bottle of dish soap, in the cookie jar. We poured honey into the coffee maker. We



taped together random pages of the *Merck Manual of Medical Information*. We diluted their mayonnaise with Vaseline. We greased a few doorknobs with butter. As we did these things, we giggled uncontrollably. There was no talking, only giggling. I was delirious, and I couldn't figure out why. Perhaps it was sexual tension. Perhaps it was the freedom of running rampant in this house where'd I'd spent so much time being reserved and polite, constantly afraid.

Soon after our orgy of subliminal vandalism, Tanya took me to the living room. I settled into the sofa, I calmed down, and the prospect of the Hesters returning reentered my mind. I told Tanya that we should leave. She pinned me to the couch. She sat on me. She took off her shirt and in a marvelous burst of blubbery flesh unleashed her breasts. She commanded me to kiss them. I obeyed, pecking like a bird at the strange pliable mounds, avoiding the nipples at all costs.

She grew impatient. "Put them in your mouth," she said.

I opened up as much as I could. Neither of them would fit, but I tried. Now and then I glanced up at Tanya. She was staring down at me, her chin doubled, tripled, giving her throat the look of two smiling mouths stacked upon each other. She watched me without joy, judging me as if I was a suckerfish busily eating the algae off the glass of a fish tank. For a few moments nothing existed but the vast fields of those pale mammarys and the looming face above.

I think she knew that the Hesters would be arriving home. I think she knew that Barney would be the first to open the door (using his mother's key), and that he would do everything in his power to usher us out before the rest of his family could see what we'd been doing. That's what happened.

Barney came in. He saw us. His face deflated. Without hesitation, without a word, he locked and bolted the front door. Danny started pounding on it. Tanya slipped into her shirt and

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we all walked hastily to the back door. Tanya, I remember, was laughing. I was stunned and ashamed, but more so I was terrified that Barney would murder me. Instead, he pushed me out of the house and out of his life.

I've never told Margaret, or my counselor, any of this. Margaret believes that my absence from her home for those eighteen months was a result of my parents banning me from being with Barney. That's what Barney told his family. He needed to save face, and so did I.

I stayed far away. The summer passed. I dreamed of Tanya many times. They were nice dreams, dreams of vulgar, sloppy kisses, of squeezing our hands together until they were one piece of flesh. Later, the nature of my Tanya dreams changed, but they began that summer.

I missed Barney. The look on his face as he'd escorted me out the door—the confused stare, his eyes quivering in his skull with rage and pain—haunted me. I wanted to hang myself. Barney had been my only close friend. I stayed home on Friday nights. I read my comic books, rode my bike around my neighborhood, stared out my window.

When the sixth grade began, my pain worsened. Being in the same classroom with Barney, and being ignored by him, was almost intolerable. He never looked at me, spoke to me, or referred to me in conversations with other people. In his eyes, I'd vanished. I got used to it eventually—I had to—by buddying up with the class reject, "Stinky Harold" Trebek. Barney went out for all the sports—baseball, football, basketball and even track—so by default I had to drop those activities.

My parents were concerned about me. I was growing taller but my weight wasn't keeping up with my height. My appetite shrank until I was only eating from necessity. My entire life philosophy changed in those eighteen months. Sports no longer

interested me. Deciding to devote my future to Veterinary Medicine, I took up collecting Wild Animal cards with fervency. I experienced the first uncomfortable pangs of doubt in the existence of God.

When seventh grade rolled around, I was totally alone. Stinky Harold had moved away during the previous summer, so I was the class reject. The other boys sported acne and dirty mustaches, talked about newly-sprouted pubic hair in squeaky voices. I was taller, but otherwise externally unchanged. Friendship seemed like an investment I couldn't afford to make.

I should probably be grateful for those solitary months. During that time my thoughts inexplicably turned to Barney's little sister Margaret. I realized that she'd always been there, on the periphery, a quiet, soothing presence in the chaos of that unsettled home. She had smiled at me when no one else would. She had a pretty face. Her eyes, I discovered in my reminiscing, had often lingered on my face, but I'd ignored it. Tanya faded from my dreams and Margaret stepped into the vacancy. I fantasized about calling her. I even dialed up their house a few times, only to hang up the phone when Danny or Barney answered.

Then, for reasons I've since figured out, Barney thrust himself back into my life.

He slipped an invitation into my desk. I still have it here in my Barney Scrapbook. On a red sheet of construction paper, he wrote, and I quote: *You are invited too selebrate the 12<sup>th</sup> berth day of Barney James Hester, onthis Saturday at 7pm. Please bring a presint for him.*

There was no name on the abominably-spelled document. I thought it had to be a mistake, possibly a joke.

He approached me the next day as I stood at the urinal in the boys' bathroom. His first words to me in almost two years

were,

“Draining the lizard, huh punk?”

He seemed jovial. I detected no hidden malice in his tone. I was thrilled and nervous at the prospect of forgiveness, but the past eighteen months felt like too enormous a chasm to bridge during a toilet break.

He asked if I was coming to his party. I said I didn’t know. He frowned. He said that it was going to be a blast; his parents were buying him a ColecoVision, which he didn’t have to share with Danny. There was going to be pizza from Fred’s, the best in town. He was vague when I asked who else was coming to the party. At last I promised that I would be there. Even after eighteen months apart, I couldn’t say no to Barney.

My parents dropped me off. My mother told me to behave. I told them that I would catch a ride home from one of the other kids. With present in hand, I paused in front of the unremarkable Hester home. For some reason, I expected it to have changed after such a long absence. After all, I was different, Barney was different, the world was different. The house was the same.

Danny opened the door. Out of habit I tensed up, expecting at the very least a scathing insult. He let me inside without even a nod of his head. He was sullen and quiet, I soon realized, because Mrs. Hester was in the middle of one of her notorious alcohol-induced cleaning frenzies.

For a drunken blind woman she navigated the room with remarkable precision, sweating, hauling the vacuum here and there, cursing under her breath, dusting shelves, polishing the windows. She glanced up when I came in. “Who is that?” she said, not even attempting to hide her annoyance, “Who’s in my house?” Danny tiptoed away.

“It’s Earl Brinkman,” I said.



She had an impeccable memory. "You're the one who spit on my carpet, aren't you?" she snapped, "you gonna apologize for that?"

"I'm here for Barney's birthday party," I said, "he told me seven o'clock." For once I felt afraid because Danny had *left* the room.

"There's no goddamn party," she said.

I was turning to leave when Barney appeared. He motioned for me to follow him. I followed. Mrs. Hester forgot about me and resumed scrubbing the baseboards.

In the basement, we plopped in front of the television. No other kids were there. Danny came out of his bedroom wearing his black Cain's Karate jacket and his white karate pants. Before leaving for his lesson, he reminded us not to go into his fucking room. I'd forgotten how much I hated Barney's family.

"Where's my present?" Barney asked.

I handed him the package. He opened it. It was a pair of walkie-talkies. I'd chosen these over anything else because they implied that we would use them together.

"We can go hunting in the woods with them," I said, "like we're soldiers or something."

"Let's do it," he said.

We grabbed his guns and headed out. He carried the powerful ten-pump Ryder pellet gun, while I received the one-pump Daisy air rifle. I never asked about the absence of other kids. I was elated by the notion that Barney had selected me as his sole party buddy. I was his best friend again.

That feeling lasted approximately thirty minutes. Walkie-talkies in hand, we split up. The sun was disappearing fast. The world was growing dimmer by the minute. I tromped through the woods, heading east, scanning the leafless overhead branches for movement. I received a transmission.

"Nothing over here," Barney's voice said, "over."

“Me neither,” I said, “over.”

I wandered further, through a dense patch of trees, until I reached a small clearing. The woods seemed completely vacant of life. I fired at a log. I pulled the walkie-talkie out of my jacket pocket.

“Where are you?” I said, “this sucks.”

“I think I see something,” his crackling voice whispered, “I’m getting closer.”

I heard the snap of a branch. I turned. I strained my eyes for a moment before realizing that Barney was squatting behind a tree at the edge of the clearing, less than thirty feet away. He was aiming his rifle at me.

The gun cracked, followed by an intense stinging in my left hand. I dropped my gun. I ran. Barney followed. I could hear his footsteps crashing. He pumped his gun and I counted along with it. When it reached ten, I covered my head. He fired again.

I dashed through the clearing, my arms and legs ablaze with adrenaline. I arrived in another mess of trees. One of his pellets snapped a branch near my shoulder. He kept calling out the same phrase over and over—“I’m gonna get you!”—playfully, as if this was an old game between pals.

My only thought was that I should get to somebody’s house. He would never shoot me if other people were around. In my disoriented state I didn’t know which house I was approaching when I finally made my way toward the road. It was Tanya’s house.

She was seated atop the picnic table, staring into the trees as if expecting someone to emerge. Up the sloping back yard I ran to her.

“Help me,” I said, “Barney’s after me.”

“Oh he is, is he?” she said. There was something strangely theatrical, even by her standards, in her voice. I’ve played it

over enough in my mind to know. "Well, let's just see about that."

Barney came stomping into her yard. He was winded, pale and disheveled. This is how I remember him. He pumped his gun with cool deliberation, adding his own element of drama to the scene. It was too unreal for me. I hid under the picnic table and covered my face.

Peeking through my fingers, I saw it unfold. I will tell you what happened.

Tanya walked forward. Barney walked forward. They were like gunslingers. I couldn't see Barney's face. I saw Tanya, in her dirty blue jeans, start to skip. She skipped towards him, singing a little song, "Barney, Barney, you forgot your hat. Barney, Barney, I'll punish you for that."

"Get out of the way," Barney said. His voice was tiny. "Or you'll get it right between the eyes."

"Barney, Barney," she said. She wasn't singing anymore. "Give me the gun, sweetie."

The next thing I knew, the gun was hurled into the air. It landed with a crash on top of the picnic table. I recoiled at the noise.

When I looked up again, Tanya and Barney appeared to be engaged in a peculiar dance. With her hands on his shoulders she pranced around him, chanting "Barney, Barney," over and over again. He was motionless; his shoulders slumped. He was gazing directly at me. The way his eyes looked at that moment has never left my mind; it was an empty look, a surrender, a blame. All at once, he burst into tears, working himself into a cacophonous, plaintive wail that defies description, if only because of the horror it creates in my body and mind. With that, his head disappeared into her mouth, followed by his neck, his arms, his Detroit Lions' jersey, his parachute pants, and his blue Converse sneakers.



That's all I can see. The rest is buried.

I was repacking the Barney Box yesterday, preparing it for the trip to the garbage dump. It's got a few pocket combs (some with strands of red hair still intact), the old hand-held football game, a bunch of pictures, his school notebooks, the birthday party invitation—even his pellet gun is in there. It took a few years to get this stuff back from the Grand Rapids Bureau of Missing Persons, and it still retains the musty odor it acquired there. Now it's all trash.

I couldn't bring myself to throw everything away. Reliving that period of my life so vicariously over these past few months has brought it too close once again. Just yesterday, while Margaret was at work, I peeled through the box in search of the walkie-talkies. For some reason it seemed appropriate to keep these, although I wasn't even sure if they still worked.

I could only find one of them. I searched through the box again, taking everything out, without any luck. Confused, I sat at my desk with the one walkie-talkie in hand. I stared at it. It felt as if everything I'd said to Barney, everything he'd said to me, was contained in that one tiny piece of plastic. For the hell of it, I pressed the button.

"Earl to Barney," I said, "come in, Barney."

A few seconds passed. I smiled. I was about to toss the thing in the box when, in my hand, the walkie-talkie came to life with a loud crackle.

"I'm here," a voice said.

I dropped it onto the hardwood floor. It broke. My entire body trembled uncontrollably. I told myself that I'd imagined the voice because there was no other explanation, no logical reason that he should reappear after such a long time. If he was calling from the Other Side, then I didn't want to speak to him. My life was complicated enough. I wondered if he'd been swal-

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lowed with his walkie-talkie in his pocket, that the police hadn't recovered it, that my best friend Barney Hester had been frozen in time, perpetually twelve years old, all these years just waiting for my call, out there in the timeless void clutching his radio, praying to be contacted by his only friend. I'd never attempted to reach him. In all the years following his disappearance I'd only thought about myself, only thought about what he'd done to me, when all along I'd done nothing for him. I'd betrayed him. He'd been calling out to me for years, in my dreams and in my waking thoughts, and I'd never known how to reply.

The door creaked open. My son Barney was standing there in his Grover pajamas. He was holding the other walkie-talkie.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he said.

HP