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JENNY B.

Paul Lisicky

THE NIGHT BEFORE my mother and I moved away from Fort Myers, I stood outside Jenny B.'s house holding the new pinch pot in my hand. It was a tiny pinch pot, with a dark red rim and blue and yellow stripes. It was the best one I'd ever made.

I pressed my finger on the doorbell. I heard voices from upstairs, then walking. I was afraid it was going to be the mother.

"You're here," Jenny B. said.

I put the pinch pot in her hand. She was wearing a man's t-shirt and a green rubber band in her hair. She picked at a scab on her elbow. "Did I wake you up?" I said.

"Come in," she said, and grabbed my hand.

Inside, there were piles of newspapers on the floor. I saw plant clippings in mayonnaise jars and a fish tank beneath a bright purple light. A wooden tv was in the corner. She put the pinch pot on a table.

"Jennifer," a lady's voice said.

Jenny B. looked at the ceiling. "My mother," she said. She rolled her eyes like she was embarrassed, but I could tell she was really glad. "My bedroom's back there. I'll come down in a minute."

She went running up the steps. Her arms flapped like she was trying to fly.

I found her room at the end of a hall. The covers were pushed down, and there were schoolbooks and finger paintings all over the bed. On a table I saw a half-filled glass of orange Hi-C. A bent straw was sticking out of it.

The door opened after a long time.

"She wanted me to rub her nude back," Jenny B. said. Her eyes got big and she pressed her hands across her mouth. She started giggling.

"What time do you go to sleep?" I said.

She laid down on the bed, pulled her legs over her head and counted. I sat still, looking at the white of her underpants. Then she let her legs fall down hard. She was staring at me with a funny look. Long pieces of her hair were sticking in her mouth.

"Let's sleep," she said. She patted the covers next to her.

She turned off the light. It was so dark. We laid together on the bed, listening to the house. For a while I thought she might be dead. Her breaths were so slow and small and quiet, but then I felt her body moving toward me. She licked at the place beneath my right eye.

"Why did you do that for?" My voice sounded upset.

"I don't know," she said.

We didn't say anything after that. A car drove by on the street. My heart was making beating sounds, like I was under water.

"Your mother's weird, isn't she?" she said.

Her face looked serious in the dark. She smelled like she'd just taken a bath. "I think," I said.

She reached for my glasses and took them off my face.

"Give them," I said.

She put them on the night table and laid back down again.

Upstairs her mother turned on the sweeper. I could hear her mumbling, saying bad things to herself. And then Jenny B. was pulling her underpants down around her legs.

"Your turn," she whispered.

I couldn't move. My hands were perfectly still. I thought about the time Jenny B. was in the high weeds. She was lying on her stomach, laughing, while the big red dog jumped over and over her back. There was a tractor rumbling in the distance. The dog was making a high yipping sound like a horse. I stood beneath a tree, waiting to beat it up with a stick.

"Jennifer—"

The mother turned on the switch. I sat up in bed, holding my waist. I thought I was going to be sick.

"Oh," she said. She held onto the doorknob, giving us a look. "I didn't know you had company. I'll be back in a minute."

The mother left the room.

Jenny B. smiled, her underpants still on the floor. She reached for my glasses on the table and put them over her eyes. I started getting mad. I was getting mad because she was still lying in bed, looking stupid, drawing pictures with her finger. She didn't care that I was leaving tomorrow. For a second I knew I could kill her.

"I'm going home," I said, and took the glasses off her face.

I started walking down the hallway. She didn't get up from her bed or say anything, but I was waiting. On the dining room table the pinch pot looked shiny and plump, like an apple.

