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DONALD RAY POLLOCK

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*HOLLER*

I woke up thinking I'd pissed the bed again, but it was just a sticky spot from where Sandy and me fucked last night. Those kinds of things happen when you drink—you shit your pants in the Wal-Mart, you end up living off some crackhead and her poor parents. I raised the blankets just a tad, traced my finger over the blue "KNOCKEMSTIFF, OHIO" tattoo that Sandy had etched in her skinny ass like a road sign. Why some people need ink to remember where they come from will always be a mystery to me.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled Sandy up against me, blew my bad breath on the back of her neck. I was just getting ready to nail her again when her dad started up down the hall in his sick room, crying soft and sad like he'd been doing ever since his stroke. That pretty much drained the sap out of me, and Sandy groaned and rolled away to the other side of the bed, covered her blonde head with a lumpy pillow that was crusty with dried sex and slobbers.

I stared at the ceiling and listened as Mary, Sandy's mom, trudged past the door on her way to check on Albert. The cold floorboards cracked and creaked like ice under her fat legs. Everything in the house seemed old and used up, and that included Sandy. It was just like what my old man always claimed about my mother after she took off—"If she had all of 'em stickin' out of her that's been stuck in her, she'd look like a fuckin' porcupine." That was Sandy all right; damn near every boy in Twin Township had tapped her one time or another.

Through the thin walls, I heard Mary tell her bed-ridden husband, "No, he ain't up yet." Ever since Sandy brought me home with her one night last fall, I'd been helping take care of Albert. Each morning, before Mary would crack his first fifth of wine, I'd go in and shave the old man, scrub him off, change his diaper. It all came down to a matter of timing. If Albert didn't get his breakfast by ten o'clock, he'd start seeing dead soldiers hanging from parachutes in the apple tree outside his window. This meant getting up early, but I kept thinking that if I did right by the old man, maybe somebody would return the favor someday. I rose up and looked at the clock on the dresser.

Pulling on my jeans, I glanced down at some of Sandy's pencil drawings scattered on the floor. She was always working on a picture of the Ideal Boyfriend. Sometimes she'd fire up some ice and lock herself in the room, stay revved up for two or three nights practicing different body parts. Reams of her fantasy were slid under the bed. Not a damn one of those pictures looked like me, and I suppose I should have been grateful for that. Every one of them had the same tiny head, the same cannonball shoulders.

Eventually, she'd crawl out of the room with blisters on her fingers from squeezing the pencil, scabs around her mouth from smoking the shit.

Albert started smacking his flaky white lips as soon as I entered the room. Except for a constant tremor in his left hand, he was dead as Jesus from the chest down. Mary had already retreated back to the living room, but she'd put out a dishpan of warm water and a thin towel on the stand next to the hospital bed. A can of Gillette and a straight razor sat on top of the dresser. I lathered him up and lit a cigarette to steady my nerves. I studied the map of veins on his purple nose while he grinned up at me through the foam.

Just as I began scraping his neck, Mary rushed through the door with a fifth of Wild Irish Rose. Albert's head started trembling as soon as his yellow eyes zoomed in on the wine. "It's nearly ten, Tom," Mary panted. "You about done?"

"Almost," I answered, flicking some ashes on the floor. "Maybe you oughta go ahead and give him a hit. He gets to bouncin' around, I might cut him."

Mary shook her head. "Not 'til ten o'clock," she said adamantly. "We start that, it'll just get earlier and earlier. He runs me ragged as it is."

"I still gotta change him, though," I said, pressing my palm against his sweaty forehead to keep him still. "What about his medication? Maybe you ought to try it sometime."

"This *is* his medication," Mary said, waving the bottle around. "Lord, he wouldn't last a day without it." There was a drawer full of pills in the nightstand, but in all the months I'd been staying there, I was the only one who took anything his doctor had prescribed.

I finished the shave job, then wiped Albert's face off with a damp wash cloth, ran a comb through his brittle gray hair. Pulling down the scratchy blankets, I said, "You ready, pardner?" His face twisted as he tried to spit out a few garbled words, and then he gave up and nodded his head. The old man hated me changing him, but it was better than lying in his squirts all day. I unfastened the paper diaper and took a deep breath, then raised his bony legs up with one hand and pulled it out from under him. It was soaked with brown goo. I dropped it in the wastebasket, wiped his ass with the wash cloth. Then I taped a new diaper on him from the box of Adult Pampers lying on the floor. By the time I had him fixed up, he was bawling again.

As soon as I tucked the blankets back up around him, Mary broke the seal on the bottle and handed it to me. I jabbed one end of a straw down the neck of the jug, slipped the other end in Albert's mouth. The clock on the wall said 9:56. Four more minutes and he would have been back in Korea. I held the fifth and smoked another cigarette while the old man sucked down his morning oats. Sandy's high, whiny voice traveled down the hallway into the sick room. She was singing her song about a blue bird that wanted to be a red bird. "Where'd you two go last night?" Mary asked.

"Hap's," I said, dabbing at a trickle of wine running off Albert's chin.