

CHAPTER 10

raine told you, he stopped drinking, but I didn't. I don't think I know exactly what year I noticed it, but then all of a sudden Bore and the Old Lady got old. They didn't fight anymore. They didn't do much of anything anymore, which is why I guess I nicknamed them the way I did. They just seemed tired, and I seemed out of place in the house. I had become a disturbing influence, as they say. If I light up a cigarette, all my mother's really worried about is that I'm going to burn a hole in the rug. If I want a beer, she's worried I'm not going to rinse the glass out.

"John, turn your radio down."

"John, you're disturbing your father."

"John, you're disturbing your mother."

"John, you're disturbing the cat."

"John, don't slam the door when you go out; don't make so much noise on the porch; don't bang your feet when you walk up the stairs; don't walk on the kitchen floor—don't, don't, don't."

"John, please do whatever you like. Make yourself comfortable. If you want something out of the refrigerator, help yourself. I want you to feel at home."

And always with a big smile so you knew he meant it.

That was the Pigman, and I knew I'd kill Norton if he tried to hurt the old man.

It got so that every day John and I would go over to the Pigman's after school and have a glass of wine and conversation. It was routine by the time the Christmas holidays came around, and it was nice to have some place to go besides the cemetery when it was cold out. Masterson's tomb is an escapist's dream in the summer, but it's a realist's nightmare in December.

"Where have you been?"

"I told you the Latin Club was meeting today—and then I missed the bus coming home."

I went right into the bedroom and took off my coat.

"Did I see you in a car today?" my mother asked, coming to the doorway to watch my reaction. "I was waiting for you to go to the store. When you didn't come home, I walked down myself, and I saw a girl in a car that looked just like you." She was holding the large coffee cup and stirring nervously.

"It wasn't me."

"I didn't think it was. You know very well what I'd do if I ever caught you in a car."

"Yes, Mother."

"Be a good girl and iron my uniform, will you? I came home late last night," she went on, following me into the kitchen, "and the girl down the street was in a car, necking like a slut."

"Maybe she's engaged to that boy."

"I don't care. Just don't let me catch you in a car if you know what's good for you. I got some shrimp chop suey from the Chinese restaurant. I saved yours, but get the uniform done first."

She always warns me about getting into cars and things like that. When she goes to work on a night shift, she constantly reminds me to lock the doors and windows, and sometimes she calls on the phone if she gets a chance and tells me again. Beware of men is what she's really saying. They have dirty minds, and they're only after one thing. Rapists are roaming the earth.

But now I understand her a little. I think the only man she really hates is my father—even though he's dead. I don't think she'll ever be able to forgive what he did to her. She used to put me through the story at least twice a year—how when she was pregnant with me her doctor called and

told her my father had some kind of disease, and she shouldn't let him touch her until he got rid of it. It turned out that he had a girl friend on the side, and that's when she fled for a legal separation. Everyone was surprised, because they had been childhood sweethearts, as the expression goes. It must have been awful for her when she found out about him. She never talks about him now—just how awful men are in general. She's what the psychologists call fixated on the subject.

There's one picture of my mother and father in an album, which is how I like to remember them. He's wearing a football uniform—a handsome young man—with his arm around her. She's wearing one of those funny racoon coats. They're smiling at each other in a grass field somewhere in Stapleton.

"I got a run in one of the new stockings last night. I didn't notice it until I washed them this morning." I could tell from the way she spoke that it was her way of thanking me for giving them to her. "Where did you get the money for them?"

"I told you."

"Tell me again."

"I walked to school a few days instead of taking the bus."

"You said you skipped lunch."

"And I skipped lunch a couple of times."

She mulled that over a few seconds, but she had to get to work on time and couldn't devote her full energies to interrogating. She always makes me tell the same story over a week or so later to see if I slip up on any details.

"When I give you money for the bus, you ride the bus. It doesn't look right for a girl to be walking along the streets."

"Yes, Mother."

"It looks like you're trying to get picked up."

So, all things considered, it was wonderful getting over to Mr. Pignati's for a little dash of wine every day.

"Please don't bring anything," the Pigman always pleaded. "Just let me know what you want, and I'll get it for you."

I was surprised to see John break down and start buying his own six-packs of beer. I really was. I had been bringing things like potato chips and pretzels all along simply because I felt funny mooching off Mr. Pignati.

"We want to bring our own stuff from now on."

"Whenever we can," John added quickly.

So things were really going along fine until one Sunday night in January when there was a snowstorm—and the Pigman had been to the zoo. John

and I got over to the house around eight o'clock and were all set to watch a television show when we noticed Mr. Pignati was sad as all get out. I don't even want to tell you about this part, but one of us has to. It's very depressing; it really is.

The minute we walked into the house I knew there was something wrong with him. He looked sick. Just worn out and sick, even though he was trying to smile, and you could tell he was feeling low. I told him to stay in his chair and I'd get the refreshments, and he looked rather grateful for my offer.

"Bobo wouldn't eat today," he said, forcing a weak smile. "I offered him a chocolate bar, and he just let it drop outside the cage."

I went out to the kitchen and left John and the Pigman watching some kind of TV spectacular, the theme of which was *Hurrah for Hollywood*. Everybody was in it, so I knew it was going to be a strenuous bore.

"Bobo's getting old. . . ." I heard Mr. Pignati say as I served him a glass of wine. John had a can of beer, and I just didn't feel like anything at that moment.

"Who?" John asked, not moving his eyes from the TV screen.

"Bobo. . . ."

I sat in a creaky wooden chair near the window, and I could feel a terrible draft. Outside, the snow was falling, and it looked very pretty. There were a lot of pine trees, and the snow was sticking to them. It dawned on me then what a strain it must have been on Mr. Pignati to have trudged all the way down to see the baboon. He had even shoveled the walk outside, which I knew was for us. And just at that moment, for no reason at all, I remembered the old lady at Chambers Street saying "Death is coming."

"Anybody hungry?" I asked, going out to the kitchen again without waiting for an answer. I came back with some candy on a plate. All I wanted was to cheer everybody up. The TV was certainly doing the best it could, with a blond starlet singing "Hurrah for Hollywood . . . La-La-La-De-Dum" as two hundred chorus boys lifted her up into the air.

"Have a piece of candy?" I asked, offering the plate to John. He was so hypnotized by that starlet he simply reached over and grabbed a piece and stuck it in his mouth without looking. Then a comedian finally told a joke we laughed at.

"John," I whispered, "I think right now is a good time." I got up and turned the TV down and waited for John to start. He looked very nervous over what we had decided to tell the Pigman.

"Mr. Pignati—"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Pignati, there's something Lorraine and I think we should tell you."

Mr. Pignati looked very serious and worried.

"Just tell him, John."

"Well, Mr. Pignati," he started, taking a big puff on his cigarette, "Lorraine and I have something on our consciences that you ought to know about."

"Will you just tell him?"

He took another puff on his cigarette.

"You've been so nice to us that we want to be honest with you—"

"Yes?" Mr. Pignati said, sitting forward in his chair.

"You see, Mr. Pignati, we're not charity workers."

He just stared at us.

"We're high-school kids," John added a little nervously. "We're sorry we lied to you."

The Pigman looked so sad, and it didn't seem like it was just because of our confession. It looked like there was so much more going on in his mind.

I couldn't keep from speaking. "It was a game,"

I offered, and I felt myself talking on and on, trying to put things on a lighter level. "We didn't do it to be mean," I said at last.

"No," John spoke up. "Honest."

"We just had to be honest with you because we like you more than anyone we know."

Finally we had to stop talking and wait for some response from him. He had turned his head away and seemed to be looking out the window. Perhaps John had been right when he said we should've forgotten the whole thing—never mentioned it. Maybe there are some lies you should never admit to. I had told him we had to be truthful, and now I was sorry because I think I knew before the Pigman opened his mouth what he would have to tell us in return.

"She used to keep the house so clean," Mr. Pignati muttered, lowering his head.

I squirmed slightly.

"Who?"

"Conchetta. . . ."

John looked at me and I looked at him. It was the first time the Pigman had mentioned her in months.

"I had them make a cake—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Pignati," I said softly, "a cake?"

"I had them make a cake . . . the bakery . . . for our anniversary." He wiped his eyes with a wrinkled handkerchief he took from one of his pockets. "Something like our wedding cake was,

with a girl in white on top . . . and a boy."

I held my breath.

"She loved me . . ." he said. He looked so tired.

"We loved each other. We didn't need anyone else. She did everything for me. We were each other's life," he managed to say and then broke into sobs. He tried to cover his eyes and turn his head so we wouldn't have to see him like that.

I couldn't help thinking about my mother and father—that maybe as simple as Mr. Pignati was, he knew something about love and having fun that other people didn't. I guess Conchetta had known the secret too.

Mr. Pignati raised his head slowly and looked at us, tears pouring down his face. John pretended not to notice by watching the television, but I knew he really wasn't. He might have been thinking about his parents too.

I went over and put my hand on Mr. Pignati's. There was nothing else I could think of doing. *Tell us*, I wanted to say to him, tell us if it'll make you feel better.

"She's dead," he said, wiping his tears with the large white handkerchief.

There was a pause, and then John turned to the Pigman. "We're sorry," he said, in such a gentle

way I wanted to kiss him for it. There was no need to say anything more.

Hurrah for Hollywood was still blasting away, but now there were two thousand chorus boys swinging the blond into the air. I tried to think of something to say.

"Have another piece of candy, John?"

Without looking at the Pigman or me, he reached over and took it.

"What kind of candy is this?"

"Chocolate-covered ants."

You never saw anybody run faster for the kitchen sink in your life, and at last there was a laugh out of Mr. Pignati. I was so relieved he had laughed that I'd have eaten snails and scungilli or anything else. Ants were nothing. Even the Pigman and I tried one of the chocolates, which tasted a little like candy with crispy rice.

"You louse!" I heard a call from the kitchen as I stuffed another little square of ants into my mouth. They really were rather tasty.

John took extra long coming back, and I could hear him getting his roller skates out of the closet in the back room where all the pigs were. I knew he'd have to do something to try to top my little ant joke. So when he came flying into the living room on skates, I laughed it up so he'd feel a little better

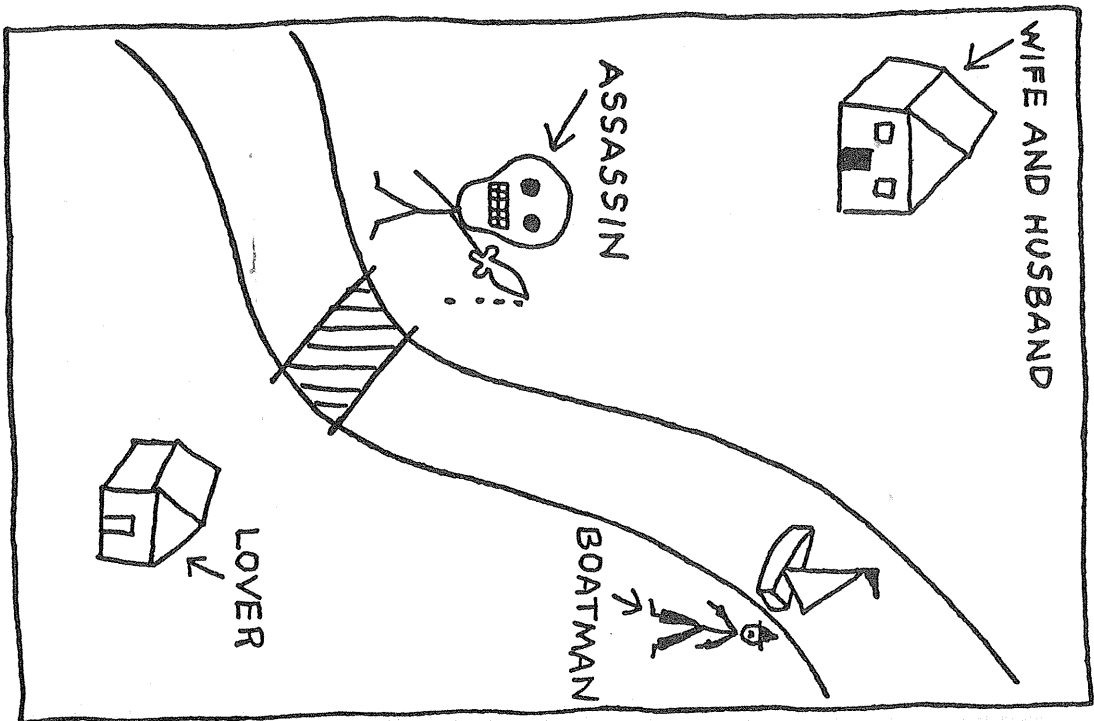
about my slipping him the insects. Then the Pigman wanted to get in on the act. That's how the three of us were. If one of us did something that was funny, the other two had to come up with something too. Three copycats. It wasn't exactly that we had to show off so much as that we wanted to entertain each other. We wanted to show equally how much we were thankful for each other's company.

Well, the Pigman passed out pencils and paper, so I knew it was going to be one of those games like how to memorize ten items.

"Number from one to five." The Pigman started getting a little bit of the old gleam back. "This is going to tell you what kind of a person you are." He drew a diagram on a piece of paper and laid it in front of us. I thought he had completely flipped.

"I'm going to tell you a murder story, and your job is just to listen." When he drew the skull and wrote "ASSASSIN," John perked up a little.

"There is a river with a bridge over it, and a WIFE and her HUSBAND live in a house on one side. The WIFE has a LOVER who lives on the other side of the river, and the only way to get from one side of the river to the other is to walk across the bridge or to ask the BOATMAN to take you.



“One day the HUSBAND tells his WIFE that he has to be gone all night to handle some business in a faraway town. The WIFE pleads with him to take her with him because she knows if he doesn’t she will be unfaithful to him. The HUSBAND absolutely refuses to take her because she will only be in the way of his important business.

“So the HUSBAND goes alone. When he is gone, the WIFE goes over the bridge and stays with her LOVER. The night passes, and dawn is almost up when the WIFE leaves because she must get back to her own house before her HUSBAND gets home. She starts to cross the bridge but sees an ASSASSIN waiting for her on the other side, and she knows if she tries to cross, he will murder her. In terror, she runs up the side of the river and asks the BOATMAN to take her across the river, but he wants fifty cents. She has no money, so he refuses to take her.

“The wife runs back to the LOVER’s house and explains to him what her predicament is and asks him for fifty cents to pay the BOATMAN. The LOVER refuses, telling her it’s her own fault for getting into the situation. As dawn comes up the WIFE is nearly out of her mind and decides to dash across the bridge. When she comes face to face with the ASSASSIN, he takes out a large knife and stabs her until she is dead.”

"So what?" John asked.

"Now I want you to write down on the paper I gave you the names of the characters in the order in which you think they were most responsible for the WIFE's death. Just list WIFE, HUSBAND, LOVER, ASSASSIN, and BOATMAN in the order you think they are most guilty."

Mr. Pignati had to explain the whole story over to me again because it was too complicated to get the first time, but I ended up listing the guilty in this order: 1. BOATMAN, 2. HUSBAND, 3. WIFE, 4. LOVER, 5. ASSASSIN.

John listed them in this order: 1. BOATMAN, 2. LOVER, 3. ASSASSIN, 4. WIFE, 5. HUSBAND.

"So what?" John repeated.

Mr. Pignati started laughing when he looked at our lists. "You both picked the BOATMAN as the one who is most guilty in the death of the woman. Each of the characters is a symbol for something, and you have betrayed what is most important to you in life."

Then he wrote down what the different characters represented.

"Because you picked the BOATMAN as being most guilty, that means you're both most interested in MAGIC," he said.

wife = fun

husband = love

lover = sex

assassin = money

boatman = magic

"I'm glad I picked the boatman," I said, blushing a little. The order in which John liked things in the world was supposed to be magic, sex, money, fun, and love. The order in which I was supposed to prefer these qualities was magic, love, fun, sex, and money. I thought that was sort of accurate, if you ask me.

So John and I laughed a lot for the Pigman, making him think we thought the game was two tons of fun. It wasn't bad, but it certainly wasn't two tons of fun. But he always had to do something to try to top us. The longer he knew us, the more of a kid he became. It was cute in a way.

After Mr. Pignati finished playing the psychological game with us, John started skating. First he skated just in that hall leading from the dining room to the doorway with the curtains where all the pigs were. But then after a few minutes, he started skating right through the living room while Mr. Pignati and I watched television. Finally he opened the door to the porch so that now he had about fifty feet of nice wooden floor to race on. That looked so attractive I went and put my skates on. Mr. Pignati laughed like anything as we went flying by, and before we knew it he had his skates on and the three of us were zooming right from the porch through the living room and dining room down the hall into the room with the pigs. It was

really a scream, particularly when we started playing tag. We were having so much fun I just never thought anyone would hurt himself. I mean, I had forgotten about Mr. Pignati going way down to the zoo in all that snow. I forgot he had shoveled the walk, and I guess for a few minutes I forgot he was so old.

John got particularly wild at one point when Mr. Pignati was *It* and there weren't many obstacles you could skate around on the ground floor except the kitchen table, and that got mundane after awhile. So John was off, running up the stairs to the bedroom with his skates on, and we were all howling with laughter. *Clomp! Clomp!* What a racket those skates made. And Mr. Pignati started right up after him, puffing like crazy, his face redder than a beet. *Clomp! Clomp! Clomp!* right up the stairs.

Suddenly, just a few steps up, Mr. Pignati stopped. He started to gasp for air and turned around to face me at the bottom of the stairs . . . trying to speak. Only a horrible moan came out.

"Bet you can't get me!" John giggled, still clomping up the stairs, not realizing what was going on behind him.

"Mr. Pignati—" I started, the words catching in my throat.

"Bet you can't catch me!"

The Pigman reached his left hand out to me. "What's the matter?" I yelled. He started to double over—his eyes fastened on me—gaping like a fish out of water. Then he pressed his right hand to his chest and fell to the bottom of the stairs.

CHAPTER 11

I knew it was a heart attack right away. Lorraine almost passed out, but I knew enough to call the police. They got there about ten minutes later with an ambulance from St. Ambrose Hospital, and we almost didn't have enough time to get the skates off.

Two attendants came in with an old lady doctor, and we told them how he had been shoveling snow and had been out all day, and they just whisked him away on a stretcher like an old sack of potatoes. He was breathing just fine. Maybe a little fast, but it certainly didn't look like he was going to die or anything like that.

"Who are you?" this one snotty cop asked.

"His children," I said, and I thought Lorraine was going to collapse with fear. We both knew what her mother would do if she found out.

I answered all the questions he asked, and when I didn't know the answers, I made them up.