

## When Calvin Didn't Come Home

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1956

When Calvin didn't come home, no one noticed. It was not unusual for him to stay over at a friend's house without letting his family know, so his absence that first night wasn't cause for concern. There were some, his brothers and two of their friends, who could have said where Calvin had been for some of the time after school that day, but it was their habit to stay quiet about such things. Later, when they began to think that talking might have changed things, it didn't matter anymore.

The house where Calvin lived was a careless one. His father was seldom home, working the day shift at the factory across the road and playing cards and drinking beer most evenings at Link's down on Lexington. His mother worked nights and was not given to checking on the boys before leaving for work or after coming home. The girl, Sister, was never a worry to her parents, working three days a week at the Rexall and the rest of the time listening to the radio or reading magazines and putting together whatever meals were eaten in their house. The three boys, Calvin the youngest, and Freddie and Darryl, just a year's difference between them but three and four years older than Calvin, fretted their parents more when they were home than when they were not, and most days were dependably absent from morning until dark. Rough and red-headed, the boys had accustomed their parents early to their independent ways. Pat and Lyn, worn down by their own lives of being rough and red-headed, did not object, and, because they had grown away from their own parents just as their boys were growing away from them, did not think to be watchful.

That first day Calvin didn't come home, Donnie Kittrick's mother called to say the boys were eating supper with them. They did this often, eating supper with the Kittricks, other nights staying over at Ralph Bergman's house and sleeping on air mattresses in the new paneled rec room in their basement. The Kittricks and the Bergmans lived on the other side of the factory in neat houses away from the docks and dumpsters and the crumbling silo that loomed over Pat and Lyn's house. Alarmed at their sons' friendship with the Callahan boys, but helpless to discourage it, both families tried hard to keep all of the boys accounted for as much as possible, managing at best to assemble them now and then for a meal or sleeping over. If someone had asked Sister, she would have said that Calvin was eating supper that evening with the Kittricks, even though Mrs. Kittrick had not said so.

The day after Calvin didn't come home was a Saturday. Home late from her job at Tug's Bar and Grill down by the tracks, Lyn slept until nine, then walked sleepily to the kitchen, her slippers scuffling along the uncarpeted hallway. Sister was at the stove turning bacon slices with a spatula, her free hand resting on one outthrust hip. Freddie and Darryl sat at the table, slices of bread in front of them, jabbing each other with forks and yelling at Sister to get the lead out. "Shut up or I'll throw it in the garbage," she said impassively, scooping up still-limp slices and dropping them on a

plate. "Assholes," she added, thumping the plate onto the table. "Sis!" Lyn said, swiping at her daughter halfheartedly. "No one's ever gonna ask you out with that mean mouth of yours."

Sister was accustomed to hearing this and did not bother to reply. Placidly, she spread Miracle Whip on her bread and added bacon. Nothing ever changed, she thought. Calvin always had to be looked for, Darryl and Freddie always stuck forks in each other's arms, she always called them names, and her mother always told her she would scare boys away. But if Calvin stayed away so much because he hated being home, and if Freddie and Darryl never broke skin with all their violent posturing, and if Sister's bulk, expanding daily under the weight of bacon sandwiches and fried wieners, put potential boyfriends off long before they had a chance to hear her vocabulary, well, it was nothing to talk about. None of them felt a need to know why things were the way they were.

"Where's your dad?" The question was for Sister. Lyn didn't expect the boys to know things or to talk about them if they did.

"Still in bed. He was drunk as a skunk when he come home this morning. See what he did to the lilac?"

Lyn had in fact noticed the car rammed up against the lilac bush, some of the gnarled branches under the bumper, others hanging, shattered, in front of it, but she didn't like Sis calling her father drunk, and swatted at her again. When they had first moved into this house, Lyn, remembering the fragrant purple and white and pink profusion that had ringed her grandmother's house each spring, had gone to a nursery and brought back a small twiggy bush in a burlap-wrapped ball and had Pat plant it close to the front door. She imagined smelling the flowers warming in the sun, and planned to add more bushes until a wall of greenery softened the front of the house and screened the view of the loading docks and metal dumpsters of the pharmaceutical factory across the road.

Lyn had liked her house in those days. She had accepted the factory as the reason why they were able to afford a house at all, but as the years passed, she had come to hate the noisy, smelly closeness of it. A chain link fence, rusting and swaybacked, separated the factory from the road, but it did not contain the noise of trucks unloading night and day or the smell from the plastic bags that overflowed and piled up against the bins, where Lyn had been told reposed among more common things the bodies of dead lab animals. Stretching high above the factory, the disused brick silo cast a long shadow that each day moved inexorably, marking the hours against houses and garages and a single lilac bush.

They had planted the bush in the morning, when the sun was hot against the front door, and it hadn't occurred to Lyn that it would lie in the shadow of the silo for the sunniest part of each day. The meager blooms that appeared late that spring never resembled the ones Lyn remembered from her childhood. She had thought of transplanting the bush but soon lost interest and could now see the broken branches without being upset. She did not spend much time remembering. No point to it, just makes you think too much about bad things, she had told her neighbor Antoinette, who had once remarked – not meanly, just wonderingly – how many common things that other people could remember in a snap, like their kids' birthdays, or when they had gotten married, or even what they ate for supper the night before, Lyn couldn't remember at all.

"Shut up, you two," she snapped at the boys. They ignored her, fingers glistening with Miracle Whip and bacon grease they were trying to wipe on each other's shirts. "Calvin already eat?" she

asked, noticing belatedly that someone was missing. “Missing” was a word without much meaning in their house, as people came and went with so little notice, but the boys tended to be there when food was on the table. Lyn, strict about very little, was adamant in not letting them eat between meals. She cared nothing about their eating habits, but had learned early that the refrigerator and cupboards emptied quickly when the boys were allowed to visit them at will. When the children were small, and until they learned that she meant business, Lyn had secured all the cabinets with locks to which she carried the keys day and night. It wasn’t unheard of for one of the boys to miss a meal, especially Calvin, who of all the boys was the most easily distracted from such services to the flesh as food or sleep or baths, but it was just unusual enough to prompt her question.

“Haven’t seen ‘im,” offered Sister.

“Darryl? Darryl!” When he didn’t answer, concentrating on giving Freddie an Indian burn, Lyn leaned over and slapped his arm so that the remains of his sandwich flew onto the floor. “Shit,” he said, stooping to retrieve the scattered pieces.

“Where’s Calvin?”

“How the hell would I know?”

“Freddie?”

“Dunno.” Freddie, slower mentally than his brothers, and more timid, turned slightly, protecting himself and his sandwich from his mother’s casual wrath. Mildly annoyed but not surprised – it was Calvin’s way to be away from the house more often and longer than his brothers, and to be secretive about it when he finally turned up – Lyn finished eating, stood up and stretched, and told them all to keep their mouths shut so she could get some more sleep.

So, what with Lyn going back to bed, and Pat, when he finally woke up, just grateful that the house was quiet, Calvin no different from Freddie or Darryl in being gone from it, by that evening no one had yet noticed that Calvin hadn’t been home for more than twenty-four hours. Lyn, on her night off from Tug’s, stood out back talking to Antoinette over the fence until darkness drove them inside. Sister clattered dishes noisily in the kitchen. Pat shaved and patted on cologne before leaving to play cards and, later, meet Celia, the cashier from the car wash, in the parking lot. Pat always left his car parked in front of Link’s, where anyone who cared – meaning Lyn, in case she took it into her head to check up on him – could see it all evening and into the early morning, and most nights disappeared out the back door and into Celia’s car for an hour or so before returning for more cards and beer. Everyone at Link’s thought it a good trick and hoped they would have reason to use it themselves one day.

Lyn fell asleep on the couch watching TV, waking at midnight when the Star Spangled Banner started playing. Turning the TV off, she trudged down the hall to her bedroom, glancing in at Sister, still awake and reading in bed. “Nite, Sis,” she said. “Sweet dreams.”

“Ma?” Lyn turned, walked back to the open door. “Cal’s still not home.”

“Whaddya mean? Is he stayin’ over with someone?”

“Dunno. Ask Darryl.” Sis put down her magazine and snapped off the bedside lamp. “Shut the door,” she said, sliding under the covers.

Standing in the hall, Lyn was indecisive. After a moment, she walked to the room the boys shared and opened the door. The light from a small black and white TV shone dimly on the two

boys sitting up in their beds. "Darryl, where's Calvin?" Reaching inside the door, she turned on the overhead light. Both boys looked at her, their eyes squinting in the bright light. Beneath the window Calvin's bed, unmade, was empty. Walking over to Darryl, she shook him roughly. "Where's Calvin?" she asked again, her voice rising.

When Pat came home, Lyn was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of cold coffee in front of her. He listened to her impatiently. "Did you call his friends?" he asked. "Darryl called 'em. They said he ain't there," Lyn answered. And the two – Lyn in her old chenille robe with roses on the pockets, Pat in his good sport coat, a rosy stain on the collar that Lyn didn't appear to notice – looked at each other, not knowing what they were supposed to do next.

"Hey, wait a minute," Pat said suddenly, a look of muzzy intelligence dawning as he remembered what he had gotten up to when he was Calvin's age. "I bet he does this all the time, sneaks out, and we just don' know it!"

"No. Darryl says he doesn't, says he sleeps all night like he's dead." She stopped, her mouth working on the words that had caught in her throat. Swallowing, she went on, suddenly furious, spitting the words at Pat. "He ain't been home at all, goin' on two days now!" Lyn was not an imaginative woman. Discovering that Calvin was missing, may have been missing for a day or more, had made her angry. After leaving the boys' room, she had poured a cup of coffee and waited for Pat to come home so he could go find Calvin and give him what for. Now, with him home and knowing no more than she what to do, something she didn't immediately recognize as fear began to coil tightly in her stomach. In Lyn's world, fear didn't reside in the mind, but in the pit of the stomach; it wasn't associated with loss, but with physical threat. She had been afraid when her Pa used to come at her with a belt, and she remembered being scared when her drunken uncle Larry started waving a Luger around when family conversation after her cousin's funeral heated up, but since she'd settled in with Pat, who annoyed her greatly but never struck her, she hadn't been afraid, and she didn't immediately recognize the old sensation. What she did know was that she was still angry, even if she wasn't so certain now who she was angry at. She decided on Pat, and turned on him venomously. "If you was at home instead a out tartin' around every night . . .," she began.

The unexpectedness of her attack, the mix of irrelevance and truth that a smarter man might have understood and ignored, drove Pat to fury. "What about you, you lazy cow! Sittin' 'round the house all day and you still don't know what the hell's goin' on with yer kids!" Lyn, no better than Pat at avoiding traps baited with both accuracy and irrationality, launched into a tirade of such volume that Sis and Freddie and Darryl lay wakeful in their beds. Their parents were consistently rude to each other, swearing frequently if uninventively, but with so little passion that their children barely noticed. Heated exchanges such as this were unusual.

Overcome with a rare violence, Lyn picked up her cup and flung it toward the sink, where it shattered noisily, exploding ceramic shards over the countertop and floor. Suddenly, she burst into noisy sobs. Pat watched helplessly, befuddled from alcohol and backseat sex with Celia, still not entirely clear about why Lyn was so upset. Calvin wasn't home, he understood that much, but the boys were always causing trouble. How was this different?

At Darryl's hesitant words from the doorway, Pat's head cleared and Lyn's tears subsided. "Mebbe you should call the cops?" Behind him, Freddie hovered in the doorway, his face pale.

Darryl's voice cracked a little at making the suggestion, but he was driven to it by something that had been working in him ever since his mother had come to their room, something he, unlike Lyn, had no difficulty at all identifying as fear.

1985

“It won’t hurt you to show up, Ralph. We don’t have to stay. We’ll just pay our respects, then stop for lunch at that place in Bristow on the way back.” Sonia Bergman watched her husband’s reflection in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. He sat on the edge of the bed, not moving.

“It could even be fun,” she went on hopefully, turning to face him, toothbrush suspended, foamed toothpaste on her lips making her look a little like a rabid terrier. “You can see some of the guys you used to know, do a little reminiscing . . .” She trailed off, stranded finally on the silence he had maintained since dinner two nights earlier when she had told him that Darryl Callahan had died. It had not occurred to her that Ralph would not want to attend the funeral of a friend from the old days, nor did she notice exactly when her chatter about the trip had turned into an attempt at persuasion.

“None of us likes funerals, hon, I know that,” she spoke again, quietly, as though she were dealing with an ordinary reluctance, yet knowing that her husband had attended other funerals and had not needed to be talked into any of them. What was different about this one? Rinsing her mouth out, she looked in the mirror again, dampening and lifting her hair until it stood out in short spiky curls that increased the terrier look.

She turned to look at her husband. He hadn’t moved. His large hands hung down between his knees; his shoulders were hunched. Almost as though he expects someone to hit him, she thought, then shook her head at such fancifulness. “Ralph,” she said quietly, “talk to me. What’s going on?” She sat down on the bed and began rubbing his back, as though she could make the bunched shoulders relax. Unaccustomed to making such overtures, she was inspired now only by the similarly untypical behavior of her husband, a man who was almost blindly assured, not given to sitting silently on the edge of a bed, staring unseeingly at the floor.

Sonia was not by nature a sympathetic woman – which was only fair, she told herself on the few occasions she had been made to feel lacking, as she required none for herself – and she understood that her reservoir of understanding was nearing its end. Soon she would grow impatient and say something like, “Get a grip, it’s just a funeral,” that might pull Ralph out of his funk, but might just as easily lead to an argument that would end with neither of them making the four-hour trip to Eggleston. She wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to make this trip. Maybe it was because they had never been there together, and it seemed to her there should have been some reason in the past thirty years why Ralph would have wanted to go back to the town where he had been born and had lived until his family moved to Chicago, where he had met and married her.

In the early days, she would mention that Eggleston was on the way to somewhere or other and why didn’t they stop there? He never actually said no, but in the end they never stopped, either. After a while, Sonia stopped suggesting it. Her own childhood on Milwaukee Avenue was an open book, and the numerous Polish relatives still in the old neighborhood and the west suburbs constituted more than enough of a family to keep them busy at holidays. Who cared where Ralph had been born or who his friends had been, especially if he didn’t?

Standing up, she walked to the closet and began moving hangers along the rod, continuing to act as though she were considering what to pack for tomorrow, when they would, of course, wake early, carry their bags to the car, and begin the trip to Eggleston. With Ralph, sometimes just assuming he would follow her lead was all that was necessary. It had gotten them out of their first small apartment in Humboldt Park into a lakeside condo and from there to a four-bedroom pillar-fronted stucco in tony Wilmette on the north shore. From a sales job with a neighborhood Pontiac dealer who had been a friend of her father's, Sonia had led Ralph into selling BMWs, and then to taking out loans for a dealership that over the years had expanded to glass and chrome locations in four northern suburbs.

Ralph had never seemed to know he was being led, but he was good at what he did, so maybe he would have found his niche anyway. Sonia, not one to underestimate her importance, doubted it. Ralph's mother had always bragged about Ralph being a self-made man, and Sonia knew the older woman looked at her slantingly when she said it, as though daring her to say something. She hadn't liked Ralph's mother, but Ralph's mother hadn't liked her either. Sonia smiled slightly. She could almost like the old bag now, remembering all the smart remarks she had gotten away with, all of them so sweet that no one else knew what she was up to. Oh, my dear, it must really be hard for you, never having finished college, she said once, after Sonia had told her she was going to apply for a management job at the loan company where she was working, then taking Sonia's hand to make it look like she was just showing concern. But Sonia knew what she meant, knew that the woman was saying what she would continue to say in a thousand different ways for as long as she lived, that Sonia was a stupid Polack who was lucky to catch someone as smart and as handsome as her son.

Pulling out a beige pants suit, good for the trip there, and a black dress for the funeral, she sat down and began smoothing cream onto her face. "Ralph." He didn't look up. "Ralph, sweetie, why don't we call Don?"

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Lyn Callahan sat at her kitchen table, a half-full cup forgotten in one hand. The table was the same one where she had sat and cried for Calvin all those years ago, even before she knew that she had reason to cry. Lyn was not a crier – even now, with Darryl lying down at Whitaker's, even when she had come home two days ago and found him, she had not cried, nor had she cried when Pat had come home one day, a few months after Calvin went missing, and left wordlessly with two packed suitcases. But on that other night so many years ago, when an unaccustomed terror had leapt in her suddenly, she had wept hopelessly, head atop her folded arms, tears puddling on the sticky formica.

It was nearly a year later that she had yelled at Freddie, tired of him complaining that he had nothing to wear to Darryl's graduation, to get one of Calvin's jackets – the two boys, three years apart in age, had nonetheless worn the same size clothes – and to shut up already. "Ma," Freddie started, then stopped, watching her nervously. "Ma, Calvin's clothes don't fit me no more." He spoke haltingly, fearful there would be some reprisal for his words, then turned and left the room. Of course, Lyn remembered thinking, of course. Calvin's clothes stayed the same size, while Freddie had kept growing, and Calvin . . . An appalling certainty had come to her then, and the tears streamed down her cheeks. Why was that, she wondered now. Why had she cried twice for Calvin and not shed a single tear at losing Darryl or Freddie or even Pat?

From where she sat, Lyn could see the window that faced the factory across the road. This had been her world for most of her life, she realized – that factory, her house, Antoinette's house next door. It had been a small world, not many people in it, and most of them gone. She could just see the corner of the fence, now paint-peeling and gap-toothed, that separated her house from Antoinette's. How many hours, added up through the years, she wondered, had she stood at that fence talking with her neighbor. Antoinette had died more than fifteen years ago, but it had taken Lyn, whose meager need for female companionship had been fulfilled perfectly by their several-times-a-week fence chats, a long time to realize that she had lost her only friend. After Calvin disappeared, it was only to Antoinette, in brief fragments of conversation over the fence, that Lyn had expressed her inchoate feelings of anger and bewilderment and, eventually, when she had at last to believe that Calvin was never coming home, grief. After Antoinette's death, her house had stood empty for two years before it was bought by a young couple with a loud car and raucous parties on the weekends. Lyn had not spoken even once to the newcomers, but they made her uneasy, and she was happy when they left after only a year. The house had stood empty since, shingles from the roof drifting into the yard with each rain and snowfall, a drainpipe loosening from its clamp to chatter in the wind, the drawn shades behind the dusty windows curling and beginning to split.

Lyn lifted her cup absently to her lips, draining the last of the coffee. She was remembering how nicely Antoinette had kept her house, how smooth and weedless the grass in her back yard, how whitely painted the fence they had talked over. In cherishing her house, Lyn thought, it was almost as though Antoinette had shown a kind of love for her neighbors. Lyn missed that love. She had never been inside the other woman's house – had been invited many times, but had always declined, knowing she could never invite Antoinette into her own kitchen that smelled of fried meat and unwashed dishes – but remembered her back window framed by frilly white curtains between which, cradled in a macramé holder, a green plant leafed bountifully out of a round blue bowl. Odd how vivid that picture still was. She wished she had gone inside, just once, when Antoinette had asked her.

"Whatcha doin', Ma?" Lyn jumped slightly. Sister made no effort to walk quietly, yet in the near-empty house Lyn was frequently surprised by her.

"Nothin'. Just waitin'." Lyn rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Waitin' for what?" Sister asked, annoyance welling up at her mother's vagueness, a response she felt more often as her mother seemed increasingly to fall into reveries that excluded her, seemed to go somewhere Sis couldn't follow. She had always loved her mother, and she felt guilty at this new impatience with her. Lyn had not been an affectionate mother, for the most part treating her children like small planets that needed to be controlled just enough to keep them from straying into her own orbit. But she hadn't been cruel, had never hit them hard or talked mean like some kids' mothers did. Even now, when she could easily give Sister a hard time for being fat, for having only one stupid job her whole life, for being unmarried, for still living at home, she didn't. Pick up some bread on your way home, Sis, she would say, or, do up those dishes, Sis, and she felt as though she had never changed from being a kid to being forty-six, which is what her last birthday had told her was so.

Darryl had kept to himself so much over the years that he had caused not the smallest ripple in the slow currents of the two women's lives. It had been different when Freddie was still at home,

Darryl and him fighting more than ever, not going around with their friends any more, mean to each other in ways they had never been before. After Freddie left, Darryl stopped talking except to respond to an occasional question from Lyn or Sis, and there were fewer and fewer reasons to do even that. Darryl had started working at the factory the day after he graduated from high school and in the years since had spent all of his time – except for supper with Lyn and Sister, when he sat silently at the old table, eating what he was given and then rising wordlessly – there or in his room. All that he did at work and all he thought of night after night alone in his room were unknown to Lyn. Even on the afternoon when Lyn had gradually become aware of a low rumbling from the garage, had walked along the gravel drive and pulled at the heavy door until it sprang open and the gray exhaust flowed over her – even then, Darryl had managed to keep things to himself. Lyn's first thought had been, my God, this is the first time he's driven in years, and she had stepped back instinctively to allow him to back the car out. Then she saw the length of garden hose attached to the tailpipe, spewing grayness and writhing on the garage floor where it had fallen from the car window, and she was overcome sickeningly with the terrible wrongness of what she had just thought. Staggering, holding onto the door frame for support, it seemed to her a very long time before she could walk over to the old Ford and what she knew she would see there.

This morning, when Lyn had gone into Darryl's room to find a suit for him to be laid out in, she had sat for a long while on his neatly made bed, looking at the two beds foot to foot against the opposite wall, and at the window above them. The room was little changed from when all three boys had shared it. No one had thought to remove the extra beds, their worn spreads growing more dusty over the years, their pillows subsiding to flatness. Blue flowered curtains moved fitfully at the window that had been stuck open for as long as Lyn could remember. The curtains had been given to her by Antoinette when she changed the color scheme of her living room. They were good material, strong and whole, still sharply pleated, framing a dingy shade that was never closed. There was no need for drawn shades; no one else came down this road anymore. Darryl had continued to walk to his job through the building's rear entrance, but truck traffic in and out of the factory had been rerouted years ago to a new loading dock on the other side of the building, leaving their road, until recently, quiet and dustless. Lyn still worked at Tug's and in the darkness would drive home to leave her car at the curb and walk tiredly to the house, passing but no longer noticing the ruined brown stump of the lilac bush and the darkened window of Darryl's room, its glass reflecting smearily the glow of the road's only light, a small grill-protected bulb above the rear door of the factory.

Darryl's two worlds, she had thought in an intuitive moment unusual for her, were separated hardly at all. This window, like that in the kitchen, framed a dirty expanse of factory wall and abandoned dock and empty silo rearing darkly skyward. She remembered the boys' fascination with the soaring brick tower. A narrow metal ladder clung to one side of it, its top curved over the lip of the silo, the cap of which had been missing for as long as she could remember, ragged shards of it, she had imagined, fallen inside to the floor of the silo far below. She had caught Calvin once clinging to the ladder, high above the ground, with Freddie and Darryl and Donnie and Ralph yelling at him, daring him to go to the top, but he had seemed to be frozen to the ladder, moving finally only when Lyn screamed at him to come down. Lyn had read him the riot act, then turned



wrathfully on the other boys. "If I catch any of you near that damn thing again, I swear I'll kick your sorry butts 'til you won't be able to sit down!" Calvin's brothers had looked properly subdued. Donnie and Ralph, whose parents did not yell at them at all, were red-faced with embarrassment at Lyn's threat. She had been sure none of them would try such a stunt again.

"Waitin' for what?" Sister's voice was insistent.

"Oh, I don't know," Lyn answered finally. "Thinkin' it would be nice if Freddie could come home."

"Freddie don't even know about Darryl, Ma, let alone have enough sense to come home for his funeral."

"Yeah, I know. Just thinkin' about him, I guess." There would be no police search for Freddie, but he was as lost to her as were Calvin and Pat and, now, Darryl.

Bracing her hands on the table, Lyn pushed herself to her feet. Walking to the sink and the pot of coffee on the counter there, she gazed through the window at the gently swinging chain and hook of a large crane that had been moved inside the fence several days earlier. The silo was being torn down.

"Do you think the lilac might come back when that damned silo's down?" Sis did not respond, and Lyn realized she had not spoken the question aloud.

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"Oh, shit, no, I didn't hear about it." Don's voice was shocked, but aggrieved, too, as though he should have been told sooner. Someone, somehow, should have kept him in the loop. Sonia wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to be married to a man as sure of himself as Don Kittrick. Maybe exciting, but maybe a little tiresome, too. She thought she had just about enough energy to goad someone like Ralph who needed pushing from time to time. She wasn't sure she could keep up with someone like Don.

"Ralph's really busted up about it," she confided, lowering her voice a little. "Far as I know, he hasn't even talked to Darryl for years, but it's like he's lost his best friend." She waited for Don to say something. Ralph had really freaked her out, she thought, suddenly impatient with herself. Here she was hoping someone who had never demonstrated any more friendship than a yearly Christmas card with his and Cindy's names printed on it could explain her own husband's behavior to her just because he had known him thirty years ago. "Well, whatever," she went on quickly. "I just wondered if you and Cindy were going to drive down – maybe we could stop for dinner afterward?"

"I don't know." He didn't sound assured now, and Sonia suddenly felt uncertain herself. "Let me get back to you." Sonia held the phone until the dial tone commenced, wondering if she should tell Ed she had called Don even after he had said, with the only faint show of spirit he had shown in two days, not to.

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"But what difference does it make?" Cindy's voice was shrill, as it always was when Don said or did something that didn't make sense to her. She had no patience with unexpected things, resenting the damage they did to her scheduled life. "You haven't mentioned Eggleston for years, and I don't even remember someone named Darryl. Why do we have to go to his funeral?" Cindy would miss her volunteer stint at the hospital if they went to Eggleston tomorrow. She would have to call her

mom to see if she could keep Donny Junior overnight and get him to and from school, and then reschedule the man who was coming about the gutters. It was just too much.

She watched her husband as he pulled shirts from the closet. "I'll stay here," she said brightly. "I don't know anyone, anyway, and . . ." She stopped, startled at the noise of the closet door slamming. Her husband turned to her, his face contorted with anger. "I don't ask you to do a goddamn thing for me ever. You're going with me!" She opened her mouth to retort angrily, but thought better of it. Something was going on with him, and she had no wish to provoke the rage she knew he was sometimes capable of. He had showed it to her infrequently through the years – mostly he spoiled his pretty, much-younger wife – but when it happened, it was frightening. Silently, she began gathering her things from the dresser top.

Goddamn shitkickers, that's all I need, them thinking I can't control my own goddamn wife, Don thought furiously as he threw underwear and shaving gear into the open suitcase. He hadn't been back to Eggleston since his father died, quickly of a heart attack, brought on, neighbors said, by three long years of caretaking his cancer-riddled wife. Unspoken, but implicit in every condolence at his father's funeral, was an accusation that his father need not have died so soon if Don had helped him with his three-year ordeal. Don had once suggested his father move to Madison so that he could share the expense of his mother's care, but his father had refused flatly, not thanking him for the offer. Their years apart had not softened the old man's heart toward a son he had learned not to trust.

Don had gone to see Darryl once, thinking perhaps enough time had passed. He had seen Lyn and Sis at his father's funeral and they had begged him to stop by. "He don't go anywhere," Lyn had said plaintively. "Maybe you can cheer him up. You can talk about old times." Old times didn't bear talking about, Don knew, but he went anyway. Darryl didn't answer the door when he knocked, so he turned the knob – he hadn't expected it to be locked – the Callahans had never locked their doors or their cars, only their cupboards – and walked in. "Darryl," he called, looking into the kitchen and then heading to the bedroom. Darryl was sitting on the bed, back against the headboard, watching an old TV sitting on a battered wood chest.

"Just saw your mom and Sis and told them I'd stop by." He paused. Darryl had looked up at him when he entered, but was already watching the blurry images again. "What's new," Don asked, trying hard to sound casual. My god, the man looked awful. Unshaven, skinny as sin, and the room smelled of unwashed flesh and bedding. "What's Freddie up to these days," he went on, determined not to be silenced by Darryl's apathy. Then Darryl turned his face toward Don. His eyes were half-closed, his movements languid, and he looked at the other man for a long time before answering. Was he on drugs? Don wondered.

"Well, Don, old friend, Freddie's up to 'bout twenty-odd years up there at Oakwood." Don looked at him, puzzled. "Oakwood? You mean, he works there, or . . .," his voice trailed off. "Yeah, it's the 'or.' He went loony. Ain't that a laugh?" Seeming satisfied at Don's look of revulsion, he went on. "Lessee, what else's new." His voice was dull but his eyes moved toward the window. Unwillingly, Don felt his gaze following. He turned away violently. "Oh, Christ," he exploded. "I knew it was a mistake to come here."

“A mistake, yes, a mistake,” Darryl said softly, looking again at the television, his animation of moments before forgotten.

Don had not seen Darryl again. As the years passed, his memories grew less vivid, less trustworthy – he persuaded himself of that – and there were many days when he didn’t think of them at all. When he heard how Darryl had died, he knew the old memories had always been the right ones and he was sick at knowing it all over again.

\* \* \*

*Chicken, chicken, Cal’s a little chicken, little mama’s boy, little chicken shit. Red-faced, nearly in tears from this unexpected attack, the boy stood with his back to the soaring metal ladder. Fraid of his mommy, fraid she’ll spank, Ralph mocked, remembering Lyn’s threat. Don, feeling again the humiliation of Lyn’s words when she had yelled at them months earlier, laughed jeeringly and shoved Calvin roughly against the ladder. Calvin the little baby, Calvin the little favorite. Aw, forget him, Darryl said finally, and, let’s get outa here, said Freddie, and the boys ran off, leaving Calvin behind.*

\* \* \*

Lyn hadn’t missed Pat for a long time, but with Darryl gone, with all of the boys gone, she didn’t like being in the house. She felt alone here, unable to stop thinking about how there were more empty beds than full, about closed closet doors and rods that sagged under the weight of jackets and pants with dusted shoulders and moths busy at them, about unopened bureau drawers filled with shirts and shorts and socks long gone gray and limp. There was an old TV no one would watch again, three bicycles no one would ride again, and four chairs at the kitchen table where no one would sit ever again. It did not matter that she felt alone, she knew that; no one was ever coming back, not even Pat, who was the only one who could. Every day that Calvin hadn’t come home, she and Pat had gotten madder and madder, each trying to feel better by figuring out what the other one had done to let such a thing happen. When Pat left for good and moved in with Celia, she was glad of it. Darryl and Freddie kept fighting, but even that was easier without Pat around to join in. Then Freddie started setting fires, first in wastebaskets at school and then in their neighbors’ trash cans. The Bergmans and the Kittricks, both families relieved – never admitting it even to each other because it didn’t seem right to be glad about such a thing – to be rid of the Callahan boys, were especially alarmed and both called the police. An officer came to the house one summer night to find Darryl backed up against the kitchen sink with Freddie waving a butcher knife at him, and Lyn and Sis sitting at the table with their hands over their ears, not wanting to hear what Freddie was screaming.

“Oh, lordy, oh, lordy, I am so tired.” Lyn said the words aloud now in the empty kitchen. Everything was done that needed to be done. By this time tomorrow, Darryl’s funeral would be over and Sis had promised to go through the boys’ room afterward and start packing things up to take to Goodwill. Too many things had gone out of the house over the years, she thought; too many useless things had been left behind. How could it happen, she wondered, how could it happen that you had four babies and three of them were gone when you were still alive. It wasn’t right. She pulled a spoon from the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. “Sis shoulda done these,” she thought vaguely, but she didn’t really care. She poured more coffee from the pot on the counter, stirred in sugar, sipped slowly, warmed by the coffee and by the unaccustomed sunlight coming

through the kitchen window. Motes of dirt floated in it, kicked up by the wreckage across the street. The silo was nearly down. The pounding of the massive ball, the crash of bricks and mortar, had begun the day Darryl died, and had been a cacophonous counterpoint to Lyn's grief ever since.

It meant something, she thought, the silo coming down just when she was thinking about how much things had changed. It had cast its shadow over the house and the people in it for all of the years they had lived here. She thought she had ceased to care about it, but now, watching the rhythmic swing of the ball, the drop and ricochet of the bricks, she realized she was suddenly and surprisingly happy at the thought of it being gone. She closed her eyes just far enough for the ugliness to blur away and pictured sunlight bathing the yard, the lilac, the windows of the old house. She imagined the house cleansed and pristine, like Antoinette's, and she smiled. Then she thought of herself and Sis – like withered, untended plants – preening and growing whole in a new and purifying light.