

Driving Lessons

Grant Byington

1966 Chrysler Imperial

I was too preoccupied with the monkeys to pay much attention to the shoes. We were Christmas shopping in Butte, in the only store that had shoes that fit my sister's feet. It was really snowy and cold outside, but inside the store the steam heat, the monkey pee and the new leather melded into a hot, sticky smell that made me think of barf. While my mom and sister argued about heels and toes, I split my attention between the monkeys and the Hush Puppy poster. I wanted Hush Puppies, but they were out of my size.

I would have liked to have seen penguins, but I didn't mind the monkeys. They lived in a cage that ran all around the top of the store, high above the stacks of boxes and racks inside Keene's Shoes. My mom said they got the monkeys—she called them recess monkeys—just to bring people into the store. My dad called the store a menagerie, and dropped us off before heading to the Ranch House Bar and Grill to talk about business.

My sister hated the monkeys. But I think that's because the only shoes that fit her feet were really ugly. She was always in a mood when we went shopping for shoes. I usually just said okay to anything put on my feet. This time, it was a pair of hard, patent leather Sunday shoes.

We were at the checkout stand paying when the monkeys started screaming. They huddled to the front window and stared out into the street. I glanced out the frosty window and there, on the sidewalk just beyond our parked Chrysler, was Santa Claus. My heart stopped.

I'd never seen Santa for real before. I'd only heard stories and seen pictures in books. But there he was, with a bag of gifts on his back, talking to some kids across the street. I tugged my sister's sleeve.

"What?" she asked. I pointed across the street, and she shouted "Mommy! Look! Santa Claus!" My sister, B.J., was clearly excited about Santa. I was terrified. I grabbed my mom's leg just in case B.J. was thinking of dragging me across the street to talk to him. She was a year older than me, and always dragging me into stuff I really didn't want to do, and places I didn't want to go.

"Don't be silly, honey," my mom said. "That's not the real Santa."

I was skeptical. He sure looked real to me. Besides, I didn't know of anyone else that even looked a little bit like Santa. Except Mrs. Claus. And this clearly wasn't her.

"But I want to go talk to him," my sister whined.

"Okay, go take your brother and meet Daddy and me at the car," my mom said.

The traffic on East Park Street whizzed by. B.J. and I had to stop at the crosswalk in the middle of the block. Butte was a half-hour drive from where we lived and twice the size of Anaconda.

"I'll wait in the car," I said as the light changed.

"No you won't," B.J. said.

She was right. She had been put in charge. I knew what that meant. I had to do everything she wanted to. So that was it. I was going to see Santa.

As we crossed the street, I started getting a stomach ache. My eyes started to burn. My tongue swelled up in my mouth. I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

We walked right past our car and joined the crowd of kids. When I got a closer look, I thought maybe my mom was right. The whole thing was fishy. Why would Santa be out of his house two weeks before Christmas? What was he doing in Butte, Montana? Where was the sleigh? The uncertainty of it made my knees weak. I looked really closely

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at Santa. His beard was real, his glasses were real. His suit looked like red velvet. Maybe my mom was wrong.

Suddenly, I was star struck. I started to pull my hand away from my sister's grasp, but she was steadfast. As the kids filed away with a new toy from Santa, I started to think up excuses for leaving the scene. Needing to pee was out. There weren't any bathrooms nearby. Needing my mother was out, too. She was off talking business at the Ranch House Bar and Grill. The only excuse I could think of as possibly working on both my sister and Santa, was that I needed to go feed the monkeys in the shoe store.

B.J. had an entire catalog of gifts she was expecting for Christmas. As she rattled off the names of toys and treats she had seen advertised between Saturday morning cartoons, I decided my shoes were way too tight. I was going to spend another year of Sunday School in shoes that were too small.

"How about you? Have you been a good little boy?" Santa asked.

I stared at my shoes.

"What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?"

I stared at my sister. Certainly she would think of something to say. The pit in my stomach grew deeper by the second.

What I wanted for Christmas was to climb into the backseat of our car.

"He's shy," my sister said. "And he used to be tongue-tied, so he doesn't talk much. The doctor clipped his tongue a couple of weeks ago, so he should be able to talk."

Right again. I really didn't have any good reason to not talk to Santa anymore. Up until a couple of weeks ago I would tell B.J. in secret what I wanted to say and she would interpret for me to my parents. I was going to start kindergarten after Christmas, and I was going to have to talk there. I was sure of it.

"Do you want to whisper in Santa's ear?" Santa leaned down and put his ear right up to my mouth.

"Monkeys," I whispered.

"What?" Santa asked.

"Monkeys," I whispered.

"Speak up, son. It sounds like you are saying car keys," Santa said.

"MONKEYS!" I screamed.

Santa stood up straight, narrowed his eyes and reached into his pack. He thrust a small, plastic fire engine into my mitten-covered hands without saying another word. Off the hook to continue our conversation, I turned abruptly and headed back to the car.

Nothing my family owned was more beautiful than the inside of our Chrysler Imperial. The front seat was for grown-ups only. But the backseat belonged completely to my sister and me. It was roomy and beautiful. My dad said the car smelled like a million bucks. In the back, we had our own Kleenex box, door locks, window cranks and ashtrays. The front seat had a huge pocket sewn into its back big enough to hide in.

My favorite part was the back window. I loved to climb up on the back of the seat and lay on the ledge and watch the cars behind us. The window was always cool on my face. Sometimes, on long trips I would fall asleep watching the world move away from us.

Climbing into the back of the car, my sister and I staked out our territory. I sat behind my dad, mostly because I wanted to look forward and see my mom. I felt special when she looked into the back seat and saw only me. Santa was still standing in the

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crosswalk, but the crowd of kids was pretty much gone by the time B.J. rubbed the fog off the window just in time to see my folks come out of the bar and cross the street.

My dad opened the car door for my mom, then walked around the front of the car and checked the tires and the headlights. As he pulled on the driver's side door handle he dropped the keys. I heard him say "Damn!" when he lost his footing and bumped into the car for support.

"Dad just said Damn," I said.

"Honey, just because adults use swear words doesn't mean it's okay for you," my mom said. Then she thought for a second. "If you are repeating something they said, you can use their words, though. I mean, don't use it as an excuse to not talk."

My dad swore again, once he settled into the driver's seat. My mom looked over her shoulder and winked at me after she lit a cigarette.

"Did you talk to Santa?" she asked.

"Yup," my sister said. "And he agreed to bring me everything I asked for."

"Oh he did, did he?" my dad asked. "I hope you didn't ask for a new bike, because I heard Santa was promising new bikes to kids all over town and the kids end up with each other's bike and not the one they wanted."

"Stop it, Bob," my mom said, taking a drag off her cigarette.

"I'm just saying if Bobbi Jean asked for a bike, she might get one, but not the one she thinks she wants."

"What did you ask for Grantsy?" my mom asked.

"Monkeys," my sister said.

"What?" my dad looked into the rear view mirror.

"He asked for monkeys," my sister said.

"Well, that's ... new," my mom said to my dad. She glanced back at me and smiled. I just shrugged and played with my fire engine.

As my dad started the car, I turned around and leaned up against the back seat. Santa was standing right behind the back of the car, waiting for the light to change at the crosswalk. For a second I thought he looked right at me, before turning around to look up the street for on-coming traffic.

"Sit back Jean, I need to see if there's any traffic coming," my dad said. My mom leaned as far back as she could and my dad looked out past her into the street. "Looks like we're good to go," he said.

"You're completely clear up front," my mom said. My dad hit the turn signal to pull forward out onto the street. "Grantsy, do you see any traffic coming up from behind?"

I looked up the street. Both lanes of traffic were stopped a block away.

"Nope!" I said. My dad looked straight ahead, put the car into reverse and gunned the engine.

The car lurched backward into the crosswalk. From my vantage point, I could see Santa fly sideways, landing all splayed out in the muddy snow bank on the side of the road. The car stalled.

"Jesus Christ!" my dad bellowed. "Who hit us?"

"You hit Santa!" I said. Santa was almost immediately up on his feet staggering around, brushing snow and mud off his suit.

"What?" my dad asked.

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“You just hit Santa with the car!” I said.

“Oh holy shit!” He threw open the door and trundled around to the back of the car.

I jumped up and looked out the back window. My dad had his arm around Santa who seemed to be pushing him away, holding him at arms length. I couldn't hear what my dad was saying, but he was clearly sorry for hitting Santa with the Chrysler. It didn't look like Santa wanted any part of it.

Through the window I did actually hear Santa shout something at my dad.

“What did he say?” my mom asked.

“Santa just called Dad a son of a bitch,” I said. My mom turned and stared out the front window.

“That's not the real Santa,” she said.

1972 Pontiac Catalina

It was butt-ass cold outside—colder than usual for the time of year. I hated the cold almost as much as I hated the months between Christmas and Valentine's Day. Sitting on the hassock in front of the big picture window I looked out at the hard, cold snow in our front yard. It was getting close to dinner time. The sun was long gone. I squinted and split the light from the streetlamp into a dozen multi-colored streaks. The hard-packed snow glistened, and little powdery wisps snaked their way down the front walk out to the street.

“Grantsy, call you father. Supper is almost ready and he has to pick up Honey at the groomer before 7:00,” my mom called from the kitchen.

“Mom,” I whined. “I don't know why you don't just let me go. I'm old enough to drive myself, you know.” I wasn't. I was 12.

“Stop it, honey. Just call your father,” she whined back. “He's probably in the bar at the Park Café, he had to drop off the payroll today.”

I hated the fact that, somehow, the duty of calling the bar and getting my dad to come home had fallen to me. Early-shift bartenders all over town knew my voice. They'd just hand the phone over to my dad without ceremony; all of them except Gussie Lankette at the Park Cafe. She would wait, come back to the phone and lie to me. Dad would usually show up at home a few minutes later.

I sighed, walk across the living room into the kitchen and dialed the Park Café.

“Park bar,” Gussie answered. I could hear the Virginia Slim dangling out the side of her mouth.

“Is Bob Byington there?” I asked.

“Just a minute,” she coughed.

She dropped the receiver hard onto the bar. “Robert!” I heard Gussie yell, “The kid's on the phone again.”

The most embarrassing part of this whole nightmare was listening to the muffled sound of my father telling Gussie to lie to me. Well, it was actually a tossup between that and the sounds of the ribbing my dad got from the other men at the bar. Maybe Gussie did this to shame me, somehow engaging me in a battle of wills. Either way, it stunk. It stunk out loud.

“Nope. Not here today,” Gussie lied and hung up.

“He's on his way,” I said to my mom.

“Does he know to pick up the dog?”

“No, Gussie wouldn't let me talk to him. You know how she is,” I said.

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“Well darn it. You’re going to have to go out there and wait for him then. Save him the walk up to the house.”

“Or you could go get the dog,” I said.

“I can’t, honey. My check will bounce,” my mom said.

A moment passed between us. My eyes traveled all over the kitchen before landing on hers. We’d come to this standoff before. I sighed again, turned and walked to the front closet to suit up.

“I can’t wait,” I told her. “I just can’t wait to grow up and get the hell out of this house.”

A few minutes later, as our big blue Catalina skidded around the corner of Tamarack and Ogden, I stood in the street and waved my arms like I worked at an airport.

My dad had a problem with acceleration. He was one of those drivers that tended to push the gas pedal to the floor, then coast, then push, then coast. I never asked why he drove like that, but given his conservative nature, I thought he was trying to avoid using the power brakes. A lumbering man by nature, his feet were particularly heavy on the gas pedal. His motor control was completely fouled up because of a mysterious WWII Jeep accident, so riding with him was always a thrill and a half—especially when he’d had a few. The Catalina coasted most of the way down the block, then slid to a stop in the middle of the icy street, only a few feet from my knees.

A burst of hot, sticky air hit my face when I slide into the passenger side of the front seat. It smelled like Ballantines and Pall Malls. The windows were mostly defrosted, but my dad didn’t know how to operate the heater, so hot air was being forced at my face, rather than my feet.

“What’s the problem?” he asked.

“We got to go get Honey Yvette at Dorothy Johnson’s house up on Haggin Road,” I said.

“Ah. The Killer get a hair cut?”

My dad called our toy poodle “Killer” because she was fierce to anyone who came to the front door. She barked when someone knocked, but she usually made friends right away. The only people she was absolutely ruthless with were mailmen, but I think that’s just because our mailman hated dogs. Dad had a habit of saying “Kill! Kill!” whenever the front door was open and the screen door was the only thing that separated the mailman from ferocious Honey Yvette.

Dad gunned the engine, and we slid down Ogden Street. The inside of the Catalina was roomy, but I could hear the studs in the snow tires trying hard to catch some traction. The streets were completely frozen and the tires easily spun out.

“I called the Park Café looking for you,” I said.

“Yeah?” my dad asked.

“Gussie said you weren’t there,” I said.

“Of course I was there ... earlier. Payroll today.” He hardly looked at me when he spoke. This conversation was no different. He just stared straight ahead. We coasted to the corner of Ogden and Balsam. He gunned the engine, cranked the steering wheel to the right and the car fishtailed onto Balsam Street. The second time, the car lurched toward the highway a block away. I glanced up to make sure we weren’t going to get t-boned if he didn’t get to the brake in time. A light snow began to fall.

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I flipped the heat from ‘defrost’ to ‘floor’ and wiggled my toes inside my shoes. I didn’t bother to put my boots on, because I was only going to be running from the house to the car. Even in that short time I’d lost all sensation in my toes.

“I’m going to need a twenty,” I said.

“Holy Oh God!” he said. As he reached into his hip pocket for his wallet, his foot slipped onto the gas pedal, causing the car to lurch unintentionally. Caught off guard, I slammed backward into the seat.

“Whoopsy daisy! Sorry about that chief,” he said. He flopped his wallet up onto the dashboard. I whipped off my mittens and pulled out a wad of bills.

My dad was tight as a tick with money, but you’d never know it to look at his wallet. All totaled, there was \$264 in cash and several checks written to his business. There was also tons of little slips of paper with miscellaneous facts and figures scrawled on them in pencil—people’s birthdays, social security numbers, lock combinations.

“You’re taking too long with my money,” he said. I quickly peeled a twenty out of the wad. Before I put the money back, I sorted it by value and faced all the heads of the presidents the same way, something no one would do if they wanted to avoid getting caught stealing.

“I think it’s fourteen dollars for the haircut and we usually tip,” I said.

My dad cranked the wheel to the left, floored the gas pedal, and the car made a complete 360, stopping in the middle of Haggin Road.

“Holy shit!” I shouted.

“Good God! It’s really icy up here,” my dad said. I could tell he was out of breath.

He had a point. Haggin Road is at the base of Mt. Baldy. When the weather hovers below and above freezing, the runoff stays on the street and freezes. Under about seven inches of rock-solid ice is a well-worn road, constantly in need of repair due to the extreme changes in temperature. Dad goosed the engine and the car turned left 90 degrees.

When we slid to a stop in front of the Johnson house, I was on the high side of the road. Because Haggin Road was tilted at a steep angle, I pushed the heavy car door uphill to open it.

“Ask for a five in change,” Dad said. I pulled myself out of the car and tested my footing. “And be careful out there. It’s slicker than snot!”

He was right about that. I should have worn boots. As I pawed my way along the car, I used everything I could to stay upright, including the passenger door handle, then the right front fender, then the front bumper. The snow fell through the beams of the headlights as I slid, more than walked, to the curb.

My family had Honey longer than I’d been alive. Although she wasn’t my dog, she and I got along better than anyone else in the house. I liked the way Dorothy cut her hair, because Honey didn’t look like a poodle, except for the bows braided into the coat above her ears. Fresh from grooming, you’d never guess Honey was a killer toy poodle. Her own dog, Honey pretty much did what she wanted to. She cuddled with me most of the time, and stood by my bed in the morning. I was the one who let her out, fed her dinner and gave her a daily dosage of heart medication.

“Hey there, Dorothy,” I said when she came to the door.

“Get in here,” she said. “Looks like it’s starting to come down a little heavier than before.”

Honey came over and sniffed my shoes. I reached down and patted her head.

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“She looks great,” I said to Dorothy. “You look great,” I said to Honey. Both seemed pleased to hear it.

“That’ll be fourteen,” Dorothy said. I gave her the twenty and she looked at me.

“Keep the change,” I said.

“Thank you, honey.”

“You talkin’ to me, or the dog?” I asked. “It’s an old family joke,” I said. Dorothy smiled and held open the door as I scooped up Honey.

“Be careful on your way back to the car now. That damn road is so icy this time of year.”

“I know! We already did a donut at the corner,” I said.

Outside on Dorothy’s porch, I tucked Honey under my arm and pulled a five out of my own wallet. Normally, I’d let Honey walk herself to the car, but it was too cold to put her down.

Climbing up hill on a solid sheet of ice with a dog tucked under your arm and a five dollar bill clenched in your fist isn’t easy. Especially in your school shoes. Dad watched me pick my way back through the snow drifts. At the edge of the street I decided my chances for traction were better if I went around the back of the car.

I steadied myself on the trunk of the Catalina and part pulled, part tip-toed up to the high side. A thick cloud of exhaust hung around the bottom of the car, making it look like the Catalina was floating on a misty, shining lake.

When I shifted the dog and the cash from my right hand to my left, something went terribly wrong. I slipped. I righted myself. I overcorrected. In desperation, I threw Honey up in the air, as my legs slid completely under the car. The last thing I saw before slamming my head on the ice was Honey Yvette’s legs spinning out of control, dog-paddling upwards through the falling snow.

Wham! I was down. As familiar as the feeling was, it’s always a surprise to hit solid ground. A kind of huff escaped from my lungs upon impact.

Honey landed just next to my right ear.

Immediately she started to squeal. Half-crying, half-barking, her toenails clicked and scratched at the ice. I tried to pull myself out from under the car, but the more I struggled the further under I managed to slide.

In my left ear, I heard the sound of the snow tires spinning out of control. My dad hadn’t taken the car out of gear. And it seemed he was mistaking the gas for the brake. The treads spun ferociously. For a split second, I thought about Batman. He was always in a similar predicament about 25 minutes into an episode. I thought to myself, Batman always gets out alive.

I pounded on the car and hooted, “I’m under the car! I’m under the car! *I’m under the fucking car!*”

The tires slowed to a normal spin, as the rear of the car slid ever-so-slightly downhill. I saw my dad’s feet land on the ice just a few inches from mine.

“Killer? Big G? Where is everybody?” He obviously had no idea what the hell was happening.

“Get back in the car and put it in park!” I yelled.

“Wha ... ?”

“I’m under the fucking car. And it’s still in gear!” I reasoned.

“Christ!” The feet disappeared back into the car.

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The tires stopped. The engine slowed. Honey started licking my cheeks.

Back in the car, I took a quick assessment of everything that could possibly be wrong with Honey. Aside from a light dusting of snow and a misplaced blue ribbon, everything seemed fine. She didn't have any tender spots or obvious broken bones. Although I felt bad about tossing her up in the air, I thought she got the better part of the bargain.

My butt hurt. It was the first thing to hit, and it definitely slid the most during the struggle. Other than that, I had cracked my elbow pretty hard. It smarted when I pulled the door closed.

Calm now, the three of us stared out into the snow falling through the headlights. My dad opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. My feet were frozen.

"Here's your change," I said. I smoothed the five dollar bill out on the dashboard. After a minute or two, my dad put the car in gear and gunned the engine.

"Coulda killed me," I said to no one in particular.

1962 Ford Falcon

Dad regarded the new bag of plasma hanging beside his bed. The day nurse hooked the bag into the shunt on his forearm. She started the drip, looked at her wristwatch and entered the time in the chart.

"Yum," my dad said.

"Yeah, well. Let's try to keep this blood inside your veins this time," the nurse said before leaving.

The night before, he had scratched his shin and nearly bled to death. It sounded like it was a hell of a mess when Mom called and told me I'd better come for a visit. I'd been working around the clock on opening a show I was choreographing, so I hadn't come to see him in quite a while. He'd had metastatic prostate cancer for almost four years. The latest round of painkillers had caused him to have hallucinations, so he landed in the hospital about a week before. I think he was on hospice care, but no one would actually confirm that was the case.

"I scratched myself on the shin last night and nearly killed myself," dad said.

"How'd you manage to do that?" I asked. My dad hadn't had any feeling in his lower legs since his first few rounds of radiation. His war injuries were the first places to show weakness, then deterioration, then cancer.

"Killer toe nails!" my dad said, and pulled the covers off his feet.

It wasn't a pretty sight. His feet were swollen almost to the point of looking bruised. The nails were atrocious. They looked like they hadn't been cut in years.

"Pop! What the hell?" I asked.

"I can't reach, and I know better than to ask strangers to do this," he said.

"I don't know what that means," I said.

"Nevermind, Big G," he said, glancing at the plasma. I pushed the call button.

"Let's see what we can do about that," I said.

My dad had taken to dividing his free time between watching the Home Shopping Network and the Christian Broadcasting Network. Both channels made him angry enough to provide plenty of conversation starters. Today he was studying Pat Robertson.

"Look at that jackass. Have you ever listened closely to what that man is saying?" he asked.

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“Not really,” I said. “I don’t let those guys get the better of me.”

“Well, he’s absolutely parasitic! He takes advantage of people when they are really down and out, you know? He’s always asking if people are lonely, or in a bad way. Then he spouts some crap about God loving them no matter how desperate they are. Then he hits them up for cash.”

“You know my friends Rob and John? They subscribe to the 700 Club under the assumed name of Percy Manlove. You should see the propaganda they send out,” I said.

“Rob and John are—,”

“Gay,” I say.

“Right,” dad says. “I think I’d like to meet them sometime.”

When the nurse showed up at the door, I asked her to bring me a toenail clipper. She opened the drawer in the nightstand and pulled one out, dropping it in my hand.

“Huh, what do you know,” dad said. “There was one there all the time.”

I sat on the foot of the bed and took up my father’s swollen right foot. Cool to the touch, the skin was pulled so tight it looked like it would burst if I accidentally nipped it with the clippers.

“Your toes are a mess,” I said.

“Yeah, well. I don’t get around much anymore,” my dad said.

Three toes in, he was sound asleep.

The late afternoon sun was starting to climb its way across the floor. The plasma bag was long gone. The toenails were clipped short and the feet tucked safely away under an extra blanket. While some woman blathered on about luxurious cotton robes—a Home Shopping Network exclusive—I sat next to my sleeping father and worked one of his empty Dell Expert Crossword puzzles. Lulled by the gentle rise and fall of his breathing, I hardly stirred when he said, “Where’d you get those?”

“From the nightstand,” I said. He was sound asleep.

“These cherries. Where’d they come from?”

“What?” I asked.

“This bag of cherries,” he said, plain as day. I checked once more. His eyes were closed and he was clearly asleep.

“I don’t know,” I said.

No one had prepared me for this. I didn’t know whether to wake him, or indulge him. Either way, my heart started pumping extra fast.

“Good. Damn good! Must be late-crop Bings,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Probably.” I watched as he picked a cherry from an imaginary bag he had balanced on his chest. Slowly pulling the stem up, flipping the cherry into his mouth, pulling the stem out and spitting the pit across the room. Had we not been in a hospital room with visiting hours drawing to a close, I would have thought we were laying in a hammock somewhere on the shores of Flathead Lake.

“It’s the damn column shift,” he said, spitting. “Confuses people, I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know. The Falcon. The shift is on the steering column and people just get totally confused.”

“Yeah?”

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“Well hell yes! Should have gotten the automatic ... what’s-it-called ... Ford-O-Matic transmission. But seeing as how I was the only one driving, I just didn’t see the point. We’re never going to sell that car,” he said.

I hadn’t thought about the Falcon station wagon for years. My dad bought it shortly before I was born. It used to sit in the field on the other side of the street before the Lussys built their house. Then I think my dad moved it into his storage garage with a bunch of stuff from his bachelor days. We used to drive it to the dump whenever we had a load big enough to fill the back.

“How much have we got there?” he asked.

“What?”

“On the meter. How much?” He was starting to get irritated.

“Oh! Uh ... three and a quarter?” I said, not completely sure I should be making stuff up.

“Well, slip out and pay the man, will you? My leg is killing me today,” he said. A split second later he added, “You’re taking too long with my money.”

Stunned, I turned and looked beyond his feet out the window at the foot of his bed. He was smirking when he drifted deeper into sleep.

The second announcement for the close of visiting hours had just finished when my dad woke up. His eyes darted around the room. For a second I thought he looked like a scared child, not sure where he was or what was going on. Finally he coughed a bit, yawned and looked at me.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

“Not much. I was just doing a crossword and watching the fabulous exclusive values I can order using a toll free number,” I said.

“Never thought I’d see the day when people would be buying diamonds from the television,” he said. “Then again, never thought I’d see the day when a scratch could make you bleed like a stuck pig.”

“Well, your nails are clipped,” I said. “You should ask the nurse to file them down for you.”

“Wouldn’t do any good,” my dad said. His eyes drifted around the room, away from me. Then he stared at his feet, propped up under the covers and said, “I’m rotting from the inside out.”

“Well that’s reassuring,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I came to see you,” I said.

“No. I mean it. What are you really doing here?” he asked again. I tilted my head a little and puffed out my cheeks. Then my mouth just sort of hung open for a second.

“What’s the show about?”

“What?” I asked.

“The show? What’s it about?” he said.

“Oh! Well, it’s about a whorehouse,” I say.

“You don’t dance in a whorehouse,” he said.

“You do when it’s the Best Little Whorehouse in Texas,” I said.

“Oh! That one,” he said. “I saw the movie on VHS.”

“The play is better.”

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“Lots of dancing cowboys and whores in that one,” he said.

“Well, they are football players dressed like cowboys and whores dressed like prom queens, but—yeah—I’ve got my hands full,” I said.

The sun had traveled to the other side of the hospital. The room was full of shadows, so I opened the blinds and turned on the reading light above the bed.

“You better get to it, then,” my dad said, smoothing the sheets on either side of his hips.

“Dad, I’m afraid I won’t. I mean I can’t. I mean ... I don’t know what I mean,” I say finally.

After a while, he said, “Listen, I think you have better things to do than come here and watch me sleep.”

“I can’t think of anything better right now,” I said.

“You lie like a rug, Big G.”

I stood up slowly and put the book of crossword puzzles back on the nightstand. Not knowing what else to do, I leaned over and gently kissed his forehead.

“I’ll see you later,” I said at the door.

“Drive safely,” he said. And that was it.

Later that night I was leading the cast through a series of warm-up stretches on the Wilma stage back in Missoula, when the phone on the Stage Manager’s station rang. It was my sister. My dad had fallen asleep after I’d left, and didn’t wake up when the nurse tried to rouse him for dinner.