

BIG CATS

Stories



HOLIDAY REINHORN

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“Each of these pieces is distinguished by Reinhorn’s acute ear for the vernacular and fresh take on the human condition. Raucous and full of bristling energy.”

—Kirkus Review

“The world of Holiday Reinhorn’s fiction is tough and sometimes violent, but her characters are always equal to it, even when they are very young. She is a first-rate writer: original, surprising, and wonderfully honest about America in the troubled twenty-first century.”

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—Dean Bakopoulos, author of *Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon*

“Alcoholics, prima donnas, sinners, and a courier of horse semen—the narrators in *Big Cats* whisper to us from the edges of smoldering hysteria. *Big Cats* is startling, hilarious, and exhausting.”

—Anthony Doerr, author of *About Grace* and *The Shell Collector*



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The lion is the only animal that
allows its captives to return home.

—*Book of Beasts*, 11th century

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CHARLOTTE

The day Mrs. Linkabaugh moved in next door, I cracked my pubic bone in two places. It was 97 degrees, according to the giant thermometer Karl Bongaard had hanging on the side of his house. I was swinging at the time, watching the men from the moving company slide pieces of a fuzzy red water bed out of their truck, when my ourgrown swing set pitched like a mechanical bull. A fire hydrant loomed, and I touched down somewhere along the curb. Through a small patch of consciousness, I looked up into the faces of four Mayflower movers as the sky ripped open and all of the clouds dropped to earth like wet rags.

At The Veterans Administration Training Hospital, I was in Room 503 with air-conditioning and a man named Victor Samuels, who pulled open the separating curtain every chance he got and started talking. He said he was originally from St. Louis and that last year his prostate had started hardening up into a little missile. My mother, Bobbie, said we had to be polite to Victor Samuels no matter what because he was probably tortured by the Vietnamese.

Dr. Maryland, the orthopedist, liked Bobbie right away. When he pinned up the X rays and she asked whether smoking was all right if she held it out the window, he said, "Why don't the both of you call me Kevin, okay?"

This kind of thing happens all the time. My father used to say it was because Bobbie could never repulse a man no matter how hard she tried. From the time she was seven to nineteen and a half, my mother, Roberta Marie Peek, was Miss Glendora Heights Southern Division, Miss Teen Hideaway Cove, Miss Young Zuma Beach, Miss Autumn for Sunkist, and third runner up to Miss La Jolla because she was skinnier then, and nobody could tell she was pregnant.

Even now that she's almost twenty-nine, all the men still like her, and it doesn't matter whether they find out first about the trophies and the train trips and the foot modeling. Jim Juergens, the softball coach from the community center, even came into the girls' locker room when I was changing once and said he had special dreams about making love to Bobbie and getting to be my father. That was the same week Coach Juergens got arrested for walking around the dugout without pants.

Kevin sat in a chair at the foot of my bed and took a long time showing us the X rays.

"As you can see," he said, smiling over at Bobbie, "the fractures are on the left side of the bone. To prevent a limp, I had to actually rebreak the pelvis in the center, just to set the whole thing back in balance."

"This is unbelievable," Bobbie said, leaning over to hand me her last piece of spearmint gum. "I thought this kind of thing only happened to Denny."

Kevin looked at the tan line where Bobbie's wedding ring used to be.

"Who's Denny?" he asked, staring at her like she was the first woman he'd ever seen in his whole life.

Usually, we don't mention Denny to new people right away, because he has concentration problems and can't keep his hands off things. The last medical bill we had from Denny was when Bobbie took him to the Rub-a-Dub Automatic Car Wash and let him ride through it in the driver's seat all alone. He got into the glove compartment, where Bobbie left her purse, and swallowed three sleeping pills and a half-pack of wintergreen Certs and had to be rushed straight to the Poison Center.

"Denny's my little brother," I said, and Kevin looked relieved. He turned back to the X rays.

"Actually, this was a really easy one," he said to Bobbie, pointing to the problem area in the center of the screen. "Once I had a clean break, I used stainless steel to stitch up the bone."

Bobbie held out her hand and I put the gum wrapper in it.

"Metal stitches," she said, shaking her head at the ceiling. "Holy Christ."

"It's better than a broken leg, though, isn't it?" Kevin said. "At her age, the bones are so soft, it's like sewing tissue. She doesn't even have to wear a cast."

Bobbie sighed into her hands, and Kevin looked like he might cry.

"Please don't worry," he said to her. "The incision will barely leave a scar."

I asked Kevin if he was married.

"Of course he is," Bobbie said, sliding the window shut and brushing her cigarette ashes off the sill. "And whoever guesses how much money Kevin makes in a year gets a free Jell-O."

I guessed a million dollars and Kevin smiled.

"I'm afraid we're only a government hospital around here," he said. "I guess I get the Jell-O."

Later, after Victor Samuels came back from his radiation and went to sleep, Bobbie scooted her chair up next to the bed and told me two things: I had to call my father collect right away to tell him I almost died, and that yesterday she had entered me in a preteen beauty contest. I reminded her that my pubic bone was broken, but she said she had already tracked down a sponsor who assured her I would not have to appear in the swimsuit section with any of the other eleven-year-olds or be required to go up or down the auditorium stairs on my crutches.

"They said they'd even put in a ramp if we want," she said, handing me the telephone before she went off with a nurse to sign more papers. "Isn't that terrific?"

My father was supposed to be living in Coos Bay by the water, and most of the time I was the one in charge of calling him. He wasn't usually at his house very much, but since we were in a hospital, I had the operator ring for as long a time as she could, just in case he picked up.

"How did his voice sound?" Bobbie asked when she got back from her errands.

"Okay." I said. "It sounded all right."

On my last day at the Veteran's, Peggy, the physical therapist, taught me how to use the crutches. My job was to practice limping up and down the hallway on alternating legs while she and Bobbie kept the rhythm going with loud claps. In the pharmacy on the first floor, I chose purple armrests for the crutches, and Bobbie bought me flower stickers to paste on the wood. Then, when it was time to go, Kevin walked us over to our car and gave Bobbie his telephone number.

"There are a few choices on here," he said, ripping her off an extra page from his prescription pad, "so give me a buzz anytime."

On the drive home, Bobbie told me everything she knew about our new neighbor. Her name was Mrs. Linkabaugh; her ex-husband, Bill Linkabaugh, was not allowed within 1,000 feet of her house by order of the Oregon State police; and on the day she finally moved in, Mrs. Linkabaugh handed out at least fifty flyers with Bill Linkabaugh's picture on them just to warn everybody.

"And I want you and your brother to be very careful of characters like these," Bobbie said, cutting off a delivery truck on her way into the carpool lane, "because North Willamette is going downhill."

North Willamette is our street. When we were with my father, we lived on North Amherst, North Lombard, and North McCrum. Now Bobbie says she'll never move again, not even if North Willamette becomes a slum.

Mrs. Linkabaugh's new house used to belong to Oliver Grevitch, who died trying to put up his storm windows. One Saturday he got out his ladder and climbed all the way up the side of his house and had a thrombosis. Bobbie's boyfriend Dale was in the driveway when it happened, and he says Mr. Grevitch hung on to his ladder the whole time and the two of them fell together, just like a chopped-down tree.

"Light me a cigarette, will you?" said Bobbie. "This bitch in the Gold Duster won't get off my ass."

When I got it lit, I tapped her, and she held out her hand so I could stick it between the right fingers. The woman in the Gold Duster leaned on the horn, but Bobbie ignored her and smoked with her tip out the window. When the honking got louder, she stuck her middle finger in the rearview mirror.

"This woman can eat me," she said, punching down the automatic lock button and pulling us back into the exit lane. "Now, roll up your window and hold on, we're taking Killingsworth."

I turned down the radio and kept my eyes on the floor mats, because Killingsworth and Alberta were bad avenues. The summer lifeguard at Peninsula Park used to tell everybody in the free swim that carloads of men from Killingsworth kidnapped girls like us all the time and did it to them over and over in the double-doggy style.

When we got to Lombard Street and into downtown St. John's, Bobbie drove past the Coronet store, where Dale was the assistant manager.

“Honk and wave!” she said, but I left my hands at my sides. The last time we visited Dale at work, he was refusing to give somebody a refund on a stuffed animal. The man asked for store credit but Dale pulled a pencil out of his red apron and pointed it at the man’s chest.

“That’s not our policy at Coronet, buddy,” he said. “No refunds. No exchanges.”

Bobbie leaned across the gear shift, trying to see in through the big double doors. “Wave!” she said. “Why aren’t you waving?” “Because nobody will see me.”

“Well, that is a really nice thing,” she said, jamming down the gas and pulling us back out into the road, “considering Dale paid for your pubic bone.”

“He did not.”

“Oh yes he did.”

I told her he didn’t. My fractures were covered by our family health insurance, or paid for by my grandmother Peek.

“Oh, really?” said Bobbie, turning from the wheel and grabbing for another cigarette. “You better have a word with your father about that.”

I didn’t know what this meant, but there wasn’t time to figure it out, because she was digging through her purse, and something large made of poured concrete seemed to be racing toward the car at a dangerous speed, and I said to watch out, watch out, but it was too late, because by then we were driving onto a parking island.

As the tow truck pulled us into our driveway, I saw Mrs. Linkabaugh for the first time. She was on her front porch in a velour mini-robe, sweeping the Astroturf doormat that used to belong to Olive Grevitch. I stared at her thigh muscles flexing and her big chest swinging around in a nice sort of rhythm.

“Don’t look at her!” Bobbie said. “God.”

But everybody stared as Mrs. Linkabaugh bent over and shook out her mat, because she was a lot bigger than Bobbie. Everywhere.

“Jesus Christ,” the tow-truck driver said. “Get a load of that shit.”

“Well, she doesn’t seem too concerned about Psycho Bill today,” Bobbie said, waving and smiling at Mrs. Linkabaugh through the tow-truck window. I waved at Mrs. Linkabaugh, too, and she blew me a kiss, shrugging her apologies as the chained Doberman in her yard lunged toward us over and over.

After he got the car unhooked, the tow-truck driver, whose pocket said *I’m Eddie—May I help you?*, didn’t even talk to Bobbie. He walked right by the Bill Linkabaugh poster staple-gunned to the telephone pole and straight up onto Mrs. Linkabaugh’s parking strip to introduce himself. While they were talking, Mrs. Linkabaugh retied her bathrobe two times, and Eddie kept teasing her Doberman with his elbow, making the dog jump up and down like a seal.

Pretty soon, they went into Mrs. Linkabaugh's house, and I imagined her putting on tea to boil and *I'm Eddie—May I help you?* coming up behind her like my father used to do with Bobbie when he lived with us, and while the kettle was screaming, the kitchen table would be bumping and scooting itself all the way across the floor and into another room. But Mrs. Linkabaugh's windows stayed just as dark as Oliver Grevitch's used to be in the old days, and there was nothing to see except the empty tow truck and the Doberman that kept on whining and throwing itself up against her front door.

Bobbie hung our picture of Bill Linkabaugh on the center of the refrigerator. She told Denny and me to watch for him at all times, and if we saw anybody that looked even a bit like him, we were to dial 911. Denny sat with his cap gun aimed out the window until it was time for dinner, and everybody looked at the Bill Linkabaugh poster while we ate. A refrigerator magnet was between his eyes, which made him seem even more threatening.

"I can't look and I can't look away," Bobbie said, staring at the poster. "He's got Son of Sam written all over him."

Denny dipped the tip of his gun in and out of his milk. "Son of who?"

"Sam," said Bobbie. "Son of Sam. And don't make people repeat themselves."

When we were done eating, Bobbie propped me on the couch with all six of her pillows and opened the windows and doors as wide as they would go. She paid Denny five dollars to go to bed early, and while she was watching him get ready, to make sure he didn't brush his teeth with just water or put his pajamas on over his regular clothes, I listened to the crickets and the swishing of the automatic sprinklers that Mrs. Linkabaugh had inherited from Oliver Grevitch. There were eight sprinkler heads in all, installed in two perfect rows of four on the front and back lawns and set to a special timing system that watered each section of the grass in wide, revolving fountains every night at nine-thirty. The night was so quiet, I could even hear stray drops of sprinkler splatter against the side of Mrs. Linkabaugh's house if I listened close enough, and I concentrated on the bright yellow light seeping out through her curtains, wishing they would open up and let me see if she and Eddie were inside listening to the sprinklers, too.

Even when I didn't have a fractured pubic bone, our living room couch was my favorite place to be. From our living room we had a view of the whole street, and especially of our left-side neighbor, because Bobbie had the couch placed right in the nook between two big picture windows at the front corner of our house. And since every house on North Willamette and North Amherst between McCru and North Woolsey had the exact same floor plan, all the windows of our houses matched up perfectly with only about eight feet in between. When Oliver Grevitch was alive, he had kept his curtains closed twenty-four hours a day, not like the Bongaards on the other side of us, who never close theirs, ever. The Bongaards were the reason Bobbie had Dale put our satellite dish up in front of her bedroom window, because she said she wanted to be able to let in some light once in a while and not have disgusting Karl Bongaard leering in at her constantly with his moon face.

By the time Denny was tucked in, my pelvis hurt so bad it felt like it might crack in half all over again, so Bobbie gave me an extra pain pill like Kevin told her to, and sat with me for a while on the couch. She held my hand, and we looked through some of her beauty-contest picture albums together. Most of them were of her winning, and not expecting to, and screaming, and having her eye makeup streak down, but tonight there was one I'd never seen before stuck in with all the rest. Instead of being up on a stage with a bunch of other girls, in this one she was totally alone, standing on a stepladder

up on a stage with a bunch of other girls, in this one she was totally alone, standing on a stepladder under an orange tree and reaching up to pick one. There wasn't any makeup on her face, and her bangs fell straight down into her eyes without curls. She had on a dirty white tank top with cutoff jeans, and the mosquito bites on her legs were scabbed over from too much scratching.

"What's that one?" I asked.

"Just me on a picnic," she said, turning the page, but I turned it back.

"With who? You look messy and nice."

"I don't even know with who," she said, smoothing down the plastic page where it was bubbling a little around the edges. "Let's check what's on TV."

After Mrs. Linkabaugh let in her Doberman, Bobbie went next door to get the bill from *I'm Eddy*—*May I help you?*, but nobody answered her knock. She came back after a while, and I lit her three cigarettes before she threw up her hands.

"What should I do?" she asked. "Call a tow truck to tow a fucking tow truck?"

Then Denny came back out wearing only his pajama bottoms, so Bobbie got her five dollars back and said we could both watch *Rat Patrol* reruns until midnight. She didn't go out with Dale, either, and we got to eat as many bowls of Honeycomb as we wanted, until my stomach pressed way out like a fist. Halfway through the second episode, Bobbie went into the kitchen and had a phone fight with Dale because he wouldn't come over. She told him to kiss her ass and then sat on the receiver.

"Go ahead, you prick! Come on," she said.

But when she put her ear back to the phone, we could tell from the look on her face that he'd already hung up.

Most of the time Dale doesn't spend the night over here because he has to be at the Coronet putting prices on things by nine A.M. He says he likes it better when Bobbie spends the night at his apartment over on Germantown Road so he can know exactly where all his stuff is and use his own shower and towels. Denny and I have never been over to Germantown Road, but Bobbie says the only thing Dale's got over there that we don't is a WaterPik, and that his shower is probably where she got her ringworm.

I was allowed to stay on the couch for the whole night and take one more half of a pain pill just in case. After I'd swallowed it with orange juice, Bobbie emptied the whole bottle onto the coffee table, chopped the rest of the pills in half with a butter knife, and locked all of them in the same drawer of her dresser where she keeps the pills Denny takes for his attention span.

Our old babysitter Crystal was the one who figured out he was hyperactive. One night when Bobbie was gone, she was talking to her daughter Crissy long-distance in California, and while she wasn't looking, Denny climbed up on the couch and started jumping so high he flew up and cracked his head open on the ceiling. Crystal hung right up on Crissy, and we screamed and screamed at him to stop, but Denny kept bouncing up and down, up and down, with the blood running into his ears until we pinned him to the carpet. Then, when Bobbie got to the emergency room, Crystal explained to her

we pinned him to the carpet. Then, when Bobbie got to the emergency room, Crystal explained to me that Denny was at least as hyper as her son Ray used to be, and that we had better give him Ritalin. I know for a fact my father was the one who paid for all of that.

It was late by the time Eddie left Mrs. Linkabaugh's. By then everybody was asleep but me, because I like to watch the raccoons come up from Mock's Crest Marsh and go through the garbage cans in the back alley. Sometimes whole families come. I've seen them eat cake mix and raw eggs and Tender Vittles cat food. Usually, I get to put out a bowl of water for them, too, because we heard they like to wash their food. But tonight the alley was empty except for Eddie, who spit on Mrs. Linkabaugh's grass before he got inside his truck and peeled out, on his way to another accident.

On regular nights, I wake up two or three times, but because of Kevin's pill, I slept the whole night on the couch without waking up once. When I opened my eyes, Bobbie was sitting in the La-Z-Boy with Denny on her lap. She was smoking and staring out the window with the tow-truck bill still in her hand.

"There's living proof that the *Penthouse* letters are true," she said, pointing the burning end of her cigarette at Mrs. Linkabaugh's driveway. "Bad timing for *you-know-who*."

"You-know-who doesn't want to live with us," said Denny, swinging his legs back and forth and making the chair bounce. "You-know-who wants to live in Coos Bay."

Bobbie reached up in the air and grabbed one of his ankles. "What did I tell you, Denny," she asked, "about sitting still?"

"You told me to try it."

"That's exactly right," said Bobbie, dropping his leg and looking back out the window. "So practice what I preach."

When my father moved to Coos Bay, Bobbie put all his *Penthouses* in a Hefty bag down in the basement next to the pup tent Denny and I got from saving Green Stamps. She said he only read them to torture her because of her small chest. Besides the *Penthouses*, my father also read *Hustler*, *Roadie* and *Big on Top*, so I'm sure Bobbie was right about him liking Mrs. Linkabaugh.

After breakfast Bobbie gave me her July *Cosmopolitan* to read for the rest of the morning, and in the afternoon she taught me how to do the wave. She said the wave is the most important part of the beauty contest, twice as important as what a person says.

"The judges absolutely loved my wave," she said, cupping her hand and fluttering the fingers up and down in her famous way. "So you've got to do it, because everybody always waves flat-handed now."

I'd seen Bobbie doing her wave in pictures and to my father a hundred times because when he first saw Bobbie, she was riding a giant float shaped like a Sunkist navel orange in a parade through Rosemont, California. She had waved and waved at him and the big group of people he was standing with, not even knowing that he was going to follow her orange through the crowd, all the way back to the football field where the parade started, and that right after graduation, she was going to wind up in Oregon with him and me and Denny.

Because of how slow I was on the crutches, it took us a long time to get my wave right. We decided to add a wrist swing to my wave that made it more complicated than Bobbie's, and after an hour of waving at each other into the bathroom mirror, switching rooms, and alternating arms, Bobbie decided I ought to try it out on Mrs. Linkabaugh, who was outside in purple short shorts, hosing down her camper.

"Pick a point above her head to focus on," Bobbie said, standing beside me at the window and holding on to my extra crutch. "Then go through the whole thing one step at a time."

We tried all kinds of combinations to get her attention, but Mrs. Linkabaugh was too busy cleaning the inside of the wheel wells to notice.

"Those waves are looking totally perfect," Bobbie said, staring out at Mrs. Linkabaugh, who was bending down to spray underneath the cab. "She's just not the type to appreciate them."

After Mrs. Linkabaugh went inside, I thought Bobbie and I would keep working on my waves until dinner, but Denny came home from day camp, and Dale called to convince Bobbie to go out, so she took the phone into her bedroom. I figured they were talking about my pelvis money, too, because the phone cord was pulled as tight as it would go and I couldn't hear anything they were saying through the door.

Denny took off his socks and shoes and sat down next to me on the couch to wait for Bobbie, and we watched Mrs. Linkabaugh's camper drip-drying in the sun together. It was covered with hunting stickers, and a pair of mossy-green antlers were bolted to the top of the cab that made it look weird and alive. It was easy to imagine Bill Linkabaugh dragging the dead owner of those antlers through the dark woods, home to wherever he and Mrs. Linkabaugh had lived.

"Check out the gun rack," Denny said, pointing at the window right behind the driver's seat. "It was his truck for sure."

He took off the house key on a string that Bobbie made him wear to day camp, and swung it around like a lasso. "Bill Linkabaugh is coming back to get it with a gun."

I stared at Denny and the horned half-animal camper, suddenly remembering the possible danger we could all be in, picturing Bobbie and Dale out playing pool while Bill Linkabaugh ripped down our screen door with the butt end of a hunting rifle.

"You better go get Bobbie off the phone," I said, keeping my eyes glued to the camper. "Now."

Denny threw down his house key and hit the floor at a dead run.

"*Bobbbbie!*" he called, slapping her bedroom door over and over again with a flat hand. "Bill Linkabaugh is coming over here tonight with a gun."

Bobbie's door cracked open slowly, just enough to let out her head. She covered the receiver and bent down to Denny's level, putting a hand on his shoulder and talking to him very slowly, right into the face like he was deaf too, and not just hyperactive. "Denny," she said, nodding while she talked

the face like he was dead, too, and not just hyperactive. Denny, she said, holding while she talked and looking him straight in the eye, "it only says that on a poster."

"Well, it's a police poster, Bobbie," said Denny, crossing his arms. "You better tell Dale that poster was made by the Oregon State Police."

Bobbie stood up and looked at the ceiling. She took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "Dale is very aware of that, Denny, thank you," she said, pulling her head back into the bedroom. "Thank you very much."

Denny came over to the couch and shoved the crutches into my hands. "It's a police poster," he said.

I stood in front of Bobbie's door for a long time and stared down at my feet. They were barely even touching the carpet at all, dangling like lead weights between the two fat rubber traction cups on the bottom of my crutches. Kevin had told us I was supposed to feel normal after the second day, but as my fist knocked on Bobbie's door, the whole top half of my body seemed way too loose and light all of a sudden, like everything on me from the waist up was rising, shooting up into the air with a rush, like a helium balloon.

"Bobbie," I said, in my calmest voice. "Open the door."

I heard the receiver click, and Bobbie was standing over me immediately. She was smiling, but everything on her face said that if Bill Linkabaugh or the blurry ache in my pelvis didn't kill me, then she definitely would.

"What?" she asked.

Karl Bongaard's lawn mower started up outside, and I closed my eyes, listening to the horrible chopping sound it made, preparing for death.

"Bobbie!" I yelled over all the noise. "Bobbie?"

Bobbie looked over at Denny for a minute and then back at me as if we were crazy. "What?" she screamed back. "What?"

Through the window behind her, I could see parts of Karl Bongaard's body jerking by as he followed his lawn mower from one end of his grass to the other.

"Well," I said, focusing hard on her kneecaps. "My wave is not ready for the contest. And Denny and I think you ought to stay home tonight."

Bobbie leaned back against the doorjamb and crossed her arms, listening to the lawn mower roar practically up to the edge of our house, then move away.

"Really?" she asked, looking me up and down and straight in the eye. "That's what the two of you think, huh?"

"Yep," said Denny, before I could stop him. "That's what we think. Her wave sucks, and Bill Linkabaugh is on the loose, and you better stay home and get us dinner."

“Well, Denny,” said Bobbie, walking past me into the kitchen, “you can tell your sister I’m not staying home tonight. For her information, this kind of behavior is called pressure, and I get enough of that from Dale.”

“Then what are we supposed to eat?” I yelled after her. “If you’re always going out and leaving us here?”

A cupboard door slammed, and another one opened.

“Tell your sister she’s having Potato Buds and a green vegetable, Denny,” she called from inside the refrigerator. “And that she had better stop rattling my cage.”

Dale honked when the Potato Buds were still lumpy, and by that time, we had made Bobbie feel bad. She turned up the burners, dumped in the rest of the milk, and gave Denny a bigger spatula to stir with.

“Whip them, precious. Whip them!” she said, digging through her purse for the number of the pay phone at the Billiard Club. She leaned out the screen door and held up three fingers to Dale, which meant to wait three minutes before honking again.

“What you can do is call information for the number after I go,” she said. “You know what to ask for—it’s in St. John’s.”

She handed me each of our pill halves and twelve dollars for a cab fare in case of an emergency, but I didn’t even look at her.

“Doors and windows are to be locked by ten,” she said, reaching back to zip up the rest of her dress. “But I’ll probably be home long before then. Okay?”

I stared out the window and whispered that I didn’t care. I might be calling Coos Bay.

“Excuse me, madame,” Bobbie said, cupping her hand around her ear like she was hard of hearing. “Is that a threat?”

But I only shook my head and concentrated on the dirt patch in the front yard where my swing set used to be.

Dale leaned on the horn.

“Don’t test me, either of you,” Bobbie said. “Because Coos Bay is a fucking joke.”

Denny stirred the potatoes without looking up, and I peeled a flower sticker off one of my crutches.

“Well, this is just great, isn’t it?” Bobbie said, slamming a new stick of butter down in the center of the table. “I guess the sooner I go, the sooner he can bring me home.”

“Yep,” said Denny, continuing to stir. “And then Bill Linkabaugh can come over and kill us.”

Bobbie marched over and grabbed her open nurse off the coffee table. “I can promise you Bill

Bobbie marched over and grabbed her open purse on the coffee table. "I can promise you Bill Linkabaugh isn't going to be killing anybody, Denny," she said, checking the contents before she snapped it shut. "The swamp thing next door only wishes he was that desperate."

Denny brought dinner over to the couch, and we ate without mentioning Bill Linkabaugh or even looking at his poster. After dinner he got us water for our pills, rinsed the dishes, and made sure all the burners were off. I had him put some leftover Potato Buds out for the raccoons and was about ready to have him lock up early and turn on all our stand-up fans when we heard Otis Redding coming from next door. It was one of Bobbie's favorite songs, "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," and it floated in through Mrs. Linkabaugh's wide-open bedroom curtains, where she was sitting on the edge of her furry red water bed with a man.

Both of us could see that she was listening very carefully to him, nodding at whatever he said, understanding him perfectly. In fact, the strength of all her yesses was even rocking the water bed a little, making it seem like the two of them were riding in a boat.

Denny ran to lock the doors and brought the Bill Linkabaugh poster in from the refrigerator, but from the back of the head, we couldn't tell a thing about the man on the bed at all except that he slicked back his hair.

I slid down on the couch as far as I could go, and Denny crouched next to me with his chin on the sill. "Screw Coos Bay," he whispered, "we're calling the cops as soon as he turns around."

I nodded. "As soon as he turns around."

I stared down at the poster until my eyes started to swim, trying to memorize everything about Bill Linkabaugh's face and ignore the red words printed beside his left cheek: *MAY BE ARMED*. There was a buzz inside my ear, as if someone had turned on a tiny blow dryer. And I remembered Kevin's pill that was probably going to make me fall asleep long before the police could even get their squad cars to our house.

Denny closed one eye and aimed at the man's head with an imaginary gun. "If that's Bill," he said, "he's gonna be sorry he was ever born."

I covered Denny's mouth with my hand. "Stop talking," I said, "or I'll kill you."

Mrs. Linkabaugh was wearing the same short shorts she'd had on earlier, but with a new halter top made out of yellow bandannas. Right near the end of the song, when Otis was sighing and breathing and humming, she grabbed the man's head, pushing it against her chest, and the two of them stood up and started dancing, swaying back and forth on each other like they'd had too much to drink.

"How tall does it say he is?" Denny asked, grabbing the poster out of my hands. "I think he's too short to be Bill."

"Bill is five-eleven, one-eighty," I said, grabbing the poster back and giving Denny a charley horse. "We have to look at him from the front."

The man flipped Mrs. Linkabaugh around and started dancing with her from behind. He reached around and put a hand across her eyebrows and pulled her head back to rest on his shoulder, burying his whole face in her hair.

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