



TILT

ALAN
CUMYNN

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Alan Cumyn

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For Suzanne

1

The new girl came upon him unexpectedly. He was alone in the dark parking lot behind the auto-glass shop where nobody went at night except for him. It was hard to explain what he was doing. He was developing a twisting kick that involved heaving himself into the air with a broom handle. The kick part was coming along, but the landing needed work.

He was picking little asphalt bits out of his knee when she happened by.

“Hey,” she said, not the least bit startled. Perhaps she hadn’t seen the kick. Still, he was a male in a shadowy back alley developing his own secret martial art, and many girls would have been frightened out of their boots.

She wasn’t wearing boots. She was wearing flip-flops that went *thwack thwack* with every step, and a pair of ordinary jeans and a light windbreaker. She was taller than him and big-shouldered. Her hair stood up at odd angles as if she hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours and had then been electrocuted. It was red tonight, as far as he could see.

Janine. Janine Igwash.

Janine Igwash walked straight past him, then climbed the fence, which was eight feet high and topped with rusted barbed wire. No hesitation, gone so fast he wondered if he hadn’t simply imagined her. Yet another absurdity of being sixteen. New girls bigger than him with weird hair appeared in the darkness and slithered up fences like feral ghosts.

He liked the sound of that: *feral ghosts*. What did it mean? He took out his notebook and wrote in the darkness, *she grazed my spine like a feral ghost*.

Maybe the beginning of a poem? He flipped back a page to *the perfect jump shot begins in the soul/sole*. He could just read it by the dull light from the back wall of the auto-glass.

He imagined Janine Igwash walking past him again, only this time he was reading from his notebook. And instead of saying, “Hey,” she said, “What’s that?” Then he looked up at her coolly and said, “I keep track of my thoughts from time to time.” Then she sat cross-legged beside him and he read to her snippets of his thoughts such as the one about the jump shot. And she said, “Really?” As if she’d never thought of it that way. And why would she have?

“My name is Stan,” he said to her in this revised version happening in his head. “Most of the kids in school, they call me Stanley, but really it’s Stan. I was the final man cut from the JV squad last year, but this year I’m going to be a starter.”

He got up then, picked up the basketball he had left in the shadows, bounced it twice then launched a beautiful arcing shot at the hoop he’d personally nailed, with backboard, to the old pine tree leaning up against the fence. *Swish*.

Out loud, to no one, to the feral ghost of Janine Igwash, he said, “With shots like that, I am going to be a starter.”

Then he limped over to the spot on the fence where the girl had disappeared just minutes before.

He pulled himself up the chain link. There was even a space in the rusty barbed wire that he could slip through. He peered into the darkness through the leaves.

She had just arrived late last year. It must have been hard for her coming into the school knowing nobody. Especially with a name like Igwash.

He was gazing across a backyard. Janine's? A light snapped on in an upstairs bedroom. Someone's shadow against the curtains. Spiky hair. Maybe she was about to undress, her silhouette black against the white screen. It was hard to see through the leaves, but it sure looked like she was tugging at her shirt.

He climbed down. His knee felt better. He snapped a few high kicks without the broom handle, then punched the air six times rapid-fire, a quick exhalation with each strike. Then he retrieved the basketball again and let loose a turnaround jumper without looking, entirely by feel. The ball hit the back of the rim, then the front, then the back, then spun out and bounced, the sound echoing down the dark alley.

The perfect jump shot begins in the soles of the feet. It moves like a wave through the calves and the thighs up to the hips and along the spine to the shoulder, elbow, wrist, hand and out the fingertips in a natural stroke as at ease in the universe as an ocean wave that curls and falls. Easier than breathing. Truer than thought.

Stan liked that. *Truer than thought*. He bounced the ball seven more times, pounding a single word into his brain — *starter, starter, starter* — then glanced again through the darkness at what he thought might be Janine Igwash's bedroom window.

—

Home in darkness. Stan turned on the porch light as he slid past the squeaky screen door.

"Mom?" He kicked off his sneakers, left them with his basketball and broomstick in the hall closet. The kitchen was dark, too. "Mom?"

She was sitting in the den with three remotes on her lap and a glass of wine on the telephone table. The TV was dark. As soon as he entered, she thrust the remotes aside and picked up her wine glass. A binder lay open at her feet and the room smelled like work — like the worry of it.

She snapped it shut, as if she didn't want him to see something.

Budget Contingencies, the binder said.

"These two," Stan said, picking up the gray remote and the fat black one, "you never need to touch. Just leave them in the cabinet. Maybe I should label them?"

"How was your day, sweetie?" The red wine left a small line on top of her lipstick that he wished she would wipe off.

"The only one you need to use is this one." He held the skinny gray remote in front of her eyes at a reasonable focal distance. "And the only button you need to press is this one." He showed her the AU button. Then he pressed it. Nothing. "Unless somebody has been hitting buttons randomly. Then you have to press the Satellite button."

She pretended to be watching. "Did you get something to eat?"

"I had the chicken salad, and I fed Lily, too. This button here. It says 'satellite.' We only have to

press that once in our lives, then never again. The remote remembers.”

His mother picked up the binder and began to flip through densely printed pages.

“The remote remembers,” he said again, in case it might make a difference. He pressed the Auxiliary button and the TV sprang to life. A couple danced frantically in feathered spandex.

“There’s nothing on anyway,” she said. “I was just waiting for Gary.”

Gary, Gary, Gary. Stan turned off the dancers. He picked up the two extra remotes and put them in the back of the TV cabinet.

“Is he coming over or something?” It was hard to keep the curdle from his voice.

“He said he was going to call. I’m not going out. I have an eight o’clock tomorrow morning.” Stan’s mother finished her wine and sat in her very still way, as if inviting the mossy green of the sofa to slowly take her over. Her hand remained on the binder, but her eyes were glassy with fatigue.

Stan walked into the kitchen and performed his own meditation in front of the open fridge. The carton of organic grapefruit juice stared back. He pulled it out and looked for a date: *26 Sep.* No wonder it had tasted fuzzy that morning.

Water at the tap. Stan twisted to drink. When he straightened up, his mother’s phone rang.

“Oh, it’s you,” Stan heard her say from the other room in that girly voice she only used when talking to Gary.

Up the stairs. Stan practiced walking with his weight channeled to the outside of each foot to transfer the force of every step smoothly, like a soundless wave. Step number five was impossibly squeaky. But if the footfall were in the exact resonance of the loose board . . .

“Well, you always have the same idea,” his mother said downstairs.

Into Lily’s room. The floor too had a resonance he tried to feel with his feet. Little girl sleeping with her wild hair everywhere on the pillow. She was clutching Mr. Strawberry by the neck and already clenching her jaw.

Stan turned out her light and she opened her eyes.

“Is Mommy going out?”

“No. Did you have a pee?”

“Did she tell you she wasn’t going out?”

“I want you to have a pee.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Yes, you do. Get up.” Stan pulled at her wrist. She hit him feebly on the arm with Mr. Strawberry.

He marched her into their mother’s bathroom. It still reeked of Chanel from some days before when Lily had run amok. A gift from Gary.

“I hate going in here,” she said.

“Just plug your nose and go.” Stan waited outside the door and tried not to look at the unmade bed and the scattered clothes. Gary’s toothbrush for some reason lay on the bedside table.

“Nothing is coming!” Lily announced.

“Concentrate!”

The thin layer of dust on the dresser, on the closet mirror, on the abstract male nude hanging tilted over the bed.

“It’s not coming!”

His mother's footfalls shuddered the stairs. How could such a skinny woman make so much noise? When she thudded into the bedroom, her blouse was already half off.

"Oh, you're here," she said. But the blouse came all the way off anyway. Black lace bra.

Stan studied his toes. She slid open the closet door and flipped through her dresses as if they were files in a cabinet.

"Lily is peeing," he said.

"It's not coming!"

Stan's mother stepped out of her slacks, which stayed squatted on the floor in front of the closet.

Stan escaped to his bedroom. Even with the door closed and the pillow over his head he still heard Lily say, "But you said you weren't going out!" He plugged in his music. Gain/Loss sang, *Whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna gonna gonna gonna do?* straight into his ears in the darkness over and over until the house was still.

Music off. Lily made little unasleep huffing-chuffing breathing noises in the next bedroom. He hadn't heard the door close, but his mother was gone. All still and dark.

With his eyes shut he imagined himself on the tryout court, all last year's returning JV stars there, Coach Lapman watching, everyone watching. He caught the ball and leaned left, went right then *bing*. On the spot, straight up like a human spring . . . the wave moving through him, the spin of the ball, the arc in the air. *Swish*. Nothing but net. Nothing but window. Silhouette. Dark against light. The twisting shot . . . and the twist of Janine's arms as she tugged up the T-shirt . . . he hadn't looked and yet the black and white danced in his mind . . . her dark bra, the points of her hair, the fall of her breasts . . . despite it all the show went on as soon as he closed his eyes.

On and on it went.

2

The alarm. Seven a.m. Stan was somewhere in the mountains fighting off a band of terrorists intent on stealing all the mountain goats. They were falling to his broom handle, to his furious feet.

Then he was awake and stiff. Stiff as a guy wire.

It made no sense at all. He stared up at the gloomy ceiling waiting to unstiffen.

He lifted his knees so that the sheets would touch nothing. Emptied his mind. Filled it with dishes. Dust mops. Digging in the garden. Foot on shovel. Shovel in dirt. Worms wriggling in black earth. Limp, cold, squishy earthworms.

Ridgepole.

Stan got up. Ridgepole in his pajamas. Why?

He pulled on a sweatshirt, snuck to the door and glanced out. Silence, all clear. He eased down the stairs, keeping his weight on the outside of each foot.

“Stanley?” His mother was at the front door. Just coming in.

Stan sat on the stairs, pulled his legs together and the sweatshirt down.

“How’s Gary?” he asked.

His mother fiddled with her shoes in the front hall. She never wore heels except when she saw Gary. And her dress barely made it halfway down her thighs.

“I thought you have an eight o’clock?” Stan said.

“I do. I do!” Now she wanted to get by him on the stairs. “Are you all right, honey?”

Stiff as a poker. Erect as the Washington Monument.

“I just have a little stitch in my side,” he said.

“Oh, honey.”

“I’m going to sit here like this until it goes away.”

“Maybe you should walk around a bit.”

“I’m just going to stay exactly like this.” Stan squished over to the side of the step so that his mother could get by.

“Do you want some orange juice?”

“No.”

“Sometimes drinking something —”

“I’ll be fine. You need to get going.”

She squeezed past finally. Stan went into the bathroom and stood over the toilet. From the upstairs he heard his mother say, “Oh, Lily!” again and again. He heard sheets being pulled off the bed, his mother’s heavy footfalls, Lily’s crying. His mother’s voice became operatic. “I just don’t understand. If you need to get up in the night, get up! I know you peed before — ”

“I just didn’t feel it! I just didn’t . . .”

Now his mother was calling down the stairs.

“Stanley, could you please handle your sister’s sheets? I have an eight o’clock!”

Life was better down in the basement. It was dark and cool and the ceiling was low enough that Stan could almost bump his head. Maybe by Christmas he would bump his head. And quiet. No amount of opera from upstairs could leak all the way down into the basement, especially when the washing machine was running.

It only took a minute to dump in the sheets and soap and set everything going, but Stan stayed for the pure peace of it. He liked the smell of the detergent. House in order. He leaned against the machine.

Janine Igwash walked out of the darkness again right past him. She lingered near him in silence by the laundry table where the old spent sheets of fabric softener congregated along with little bits of tissue left in pockets from laundries past.

The temperature went up inexplicably. It was a cold-water wash but the heat was on. She was just by the laundry table, breathing. He leaned a little harder against the washing machine. She was bigger than him but not by much. She started to tug at her T-shirt. Arms crossed at the bottom the way women do. Breathing and . . .

Stan stepped back. Leaning up against the washing machine! He opened the lid and watched the cold soapy gray water churn, churn, churn until it was safe to head upstairs again.

—

Janine Igwash sat four rows away from him in biology. She was wearing a red shirt that his eyes had trouble keeping buttoned, especially once he noticed a small tattoo at the base of her neck near her shoulder. He wasn’t close enough to see what it was. She didn’t look at him at all.

They were dissecting cows’ eyes but there weren’t enough eyes to go around, thank God, so they were in groups of four. Jason Biggs was handling the scalpel. Taking notes were the identical sisters Melinda and Isabelle Lafontaine who were each wearing jeans and pearls and running shoes. One of them was pierced in the left eyebrow, the other in the right. Stan could never keep them straight. They both had big watery eyes like this sorry specimen Jason Biggs was slicing apart.

“Stop now, Jason!” Left Eyebrow said. “I think we’re supposed to sketch that.”

Janine Igwash turned and pulled her red shirt off her shoulder. Stan’s mind could make her do that. But he still couldn’t quite see the tattoo.

“Lapman canceled junior varsity for this year,” Jason Biggs said then.

Janine unbuttoned a bit more and pulled her shirt farther off her milky white shoulder and stepped toward him, parting the desks . . .

“What?”

Her tattoo was something sinewy, coiled but not a snake, prettier and . . .

Biggs snapped his fingers. “Canceled!”

Gray desiccated flesh hung off the pitiful eyeball.

“How can he do that?”

“He just did. They couldn’t find another coach. Lapman is doing girls’ JV this year. You’ll have to

try out for Burgess.”

Burgess, the varsity coach, ate juniors for breakfast.

“You can keep going, Jason,” Right Eyebrow said. “Let’s get the cross-section.”

“*Lapman’s coaching girls’ JV?*” Stan said. He felt his gut contract into a hard rubber ball. *No JV*

After he had trained on his own, night after night, month after month . . .

“Weren’t you the final guy cut last year?” Biggs said. “You should have made it, man.”

This felt like one of those bits of news that was going to take a long time to comprehend. Like when his father left five years ago to live with the twenty-three-year-old he had impregnated. That could not be understood all at once. Stan didn’t feel like he understood most of it even now. It took time to soak down through the layers, like water working its way through clay.

He hadn’t seen his father since.

“No way you should have been cut. Towers is a pretty good guard but he can’t shoot. I’ve seen you shoot, man.” Biggs looked up like a doctor in the middle of some surgery and said to the twins, “That guy never misses. I’ve never seen him miss.”

“It’s about time we had a junior varsity for the girls,” Left Eyebrow said.

Stan’s hands flexed as if holding the pebbled grain of an imaginary basketball. Now what was he supposed to do? Varsity only had two spots open. Everyone else was coming back. Now there would be twelve from last year’s JV competing for those two spots — all right, eleven. Collins broke his leg skateboarding. But what about all the seniors who didn’t make varsity last year?

Suddenly Janine Igwash loomed above him. Completely clothed. Her tattoo was just a little red and black blob near the creamy white corner of her collar.

“What are you doing about the retina?” she asked him. Even though Jason Biggs was the one with the scalpel in his hand mucking about with the retina and who knew what else.

“We sketched it before we sliced it,” Right Eyebrow said.

“I didn’t think we were supposed to slice it,” Janine Igwash said to him directly again. Her eyes were dark green with little brown blobs that flashed with light.

She looked down at the hatchet job Jason Biggs was doing, and back to Stan, and down and back again.

“There’s this dance that my parents’ youth group has forced me to help organize,” she said to Stan. “And I’m supposed to go and it’s like there’s no possible way out of it in any way and, there’s this stipulation.” She shoved her hands in her pockets.

Was she really saying this? Stan went through a mental checklist. Everyone else was listening; she was wearing all her clothes. Probably it was real.

“Stipulation?” he said.

“I need to bring, like, a guy.” She stood very still and looked at him, her green and brown eyes scanning his face. Jason Biggs was most of the way through the eye now.

Someone kicked Stan’s ankle. It was Left Eyebrow.

“A guy?” Stan said.

Janine Igwash couldn’t seem to say anything more. Left Eyebrow kicked him again.

“Ten minutes, people, before you need to clean up,” Mr. Stillwater announced. He was sitting at the front in the same blue shirt he wore every day, or maybe he had a whole closet full of blue shirts.

When Stan glanced at Janine Igwash again she was back at her station cleaning up. Her face was redder than her hair.

“You sure blew that one,” the twins said together.

—

The rest of the day slid by in jagged fragments, during which Stan heard again and again the unbelievable news about JV. Everyone seemed to know, maybe through Biggs, what the disaster meant to Stan personally. He thought he'd been secret about his obsessive practice.

But this was a complete crash and burn.

Once he caught sight of Janine Igwash at her locker on the second floor reaching for something on the top shelf amidst a bird's nest of squashed papers and other items. She certainly didn't need his help reaching the top shelf. But if she turned in the next second and a half he was sure he would stop and accept her invitation to the dance, if in fact it had been an invitation. When she did turn he was already almost past her.

Then later at lunchtime in the cafeteria lineup he pretended to be extremely interested in the new student mural of various androgynous figures playing sports such as hockey, soccer, volleyball and even basketball, although the basketball player had one arm longer than the other and his or her elbow was definitely out of alignment given the shoulder angle of the jump shot if in fact it was a jump shot that the artist was trying to depict, and what did it matter anyway now that JV was canceled?

Then there she was again at the end of second period in the afternoon, tying her shoe right in front of him as he was trying to make it to English and nearly tripped over her but fortunately his reactions were swift and he managed to miss her completely although she did look up at the last moment to see who was bearing down on her with such speed.

“Hey,” he said as he flashed by.

It occurred to him that if he stopped he might say even more than that, but what?

In the hallway Coach Lapman didn't meet Stan's eye, probably didn't even remember who he was.

At home after dinner he was reading the same assigned passage of *The Catcher in the Rye* over and over when his mother approached. She sat quite close to him on the sofa so that he had to pull out his earbuds and turn off his music.

“Aren't you training tonight?” she asked.

“They canceled JV basketball,” he said. Under questioning he explained the hopelessness of the situation.

“Well, you could try out for the varsity team anyway, couldn't you?” she said.

Stan knew that if he just stayed quiet she would eventually drift away and he could get back to reading his novel. Anyway, Gary would be calling soon.

She squeezed his knee in a motherly way.

“How are things on the other side?” she asked.

“What other side?”

“The social side of things. Any . . .” His mother hesitated so he knew she had probably been planning this segment of the conversation all along. “. . . cute girls, you know, you're interested in?”

“Cute girls?”

“You know what I’m saying, Stanley.” She stretched flat her brow furrows with her fingertips.

“I guess,” Stan said.

“What do you guess?”

She was almost finished her wine. Gary was going to call any minute. Or Lily was going to need help with her homework. If he could just stall a bit longer . . .

“We haven’t had any good conversations about all this,” his mother said. She waved her hand vaguely. “I’d like to think that you feel free enough to ask me anything. You’re entering such a rich and . . . confusing time of life. And your father isn’t here to help. It’s just me. You know I grew up with sisters, so I really don’t know the male perspective . . . I know men, of course . . . I know I’m terrible with them. I’m really not much of a role model for you. But if there is anything you want to talk about . . . you know, the mechanics of . . . how it all works.” The words were sputtering now. Not even the wine was helping. “You do know the mechanics?”

He couldn’t avoid the direct question.

“We had a . . . mechanics section as part of health,” he said.

“But you haven’t . . .” She squeezed his knee again. Her hair was falling all in front of her face.

Where was Gary when you needed the guy?

“Haven’t what?” Stan said finally.

“You know . . . you haven’t actually . . . I mean, you do go out at night sometimes. And I know I’m away more than I should be. I mean —”

She was asking if he’d —!

“No!” he blurted.

She looked startled. Surprised and relieved and perhaps disbelieving.

“It’s all right if you do. I mean, eventually, when you love someone. I mean, not now, but in the next few years you’re going to be entering an age when the feelings are overpowering and . . . there’s the whole thing about the adolescent brain.”

“What?”

“I was reading about this. The center for consequences is underdeveloped . . . I mean, in the adolescent brain . . .”

At last, the phone! Stan felt his shoulders ungrasp. But it wasn’t his mother’s phone, it was the home line.

Lily picked it up then screamed, “Stanley!”

Nobody ever called him.

“It’s for you!”

It was Janine Igwash. Stan didn’t recognize her voice at first and was convinced someone was calling from across the continent to try to sell him something — tickets to a dance. But she wasn’t selling, she was asking.

“I know I sounded like a stammering clownface this morning in biology but what I was trying to get out was it’s Saturday night. This Saturday. It starts at eight o’clock and I don’t think I would stay past ten or so and we don’t even have to dance if you don’t want to. I mean, there will be music and such. But if you don’t like to dance then we could just, I don’t know, hang out.” She paused. “Feel free

to jump in and say something any time about now.”

Stan considered his words. His mother poured herself another glass of wine not ten feet away and pretended she wasn't listening.

“We don't have to worry about transportation because my parents will be driving. I think maybe I mentioned this is their thing. Are you still there? You do talk, don't you?”

“Sure,” Stan said.

“Well?”

“I just, uh, I'm not sure why you're asking *me*?”

Stan's mother chopped something hard on the counter so that he dropped the phone. When he picked it up he said, “Sorry about that,” but it was into a dial tone.

3

At 2:17 a.m., after precisely no sleep, Stan snuck downstairs, bypassed squeaky stair number five and, sitting in the den on the couch near the window by the light of the streetlamp outside, composed the following letter to Janine Igwash:

I know you think I'm an idiot. But I have never been asked out before by any girl so I guess it's not surprising I didn't know how to act. I've been training for something . . . different and now that's been canceled and sometimes it's hard to change gears.

Also, I'm not a usual sort of guy. I feel like I'm older than that in some ways. Maybe when I am older I'll go completely off the road and behave just like a teenager but right now I don't want any part of the stupidity that is happening.

Maybe it's a drag your parents make you help organize things like youth dances but at least that means they have their own lives together. My parents are a complete mess. My father specifically doesn't live here anymore.

So I guess what I'm saying is that I'm trying really hard not to be 16. Does that make any sense?

One thing maybe it would be stupid to tell you but here I am writing it anyway is that I do think of you from time to time, and not just because you tried to ask me out. I do think of you.

But I don't want to be physical until I know how to be. Sexual I mean. I'm sorry for saying it.

I know you just asked me to a dance and even then you said I didn't have to dance. So maybe instead we'd go for a walk and I would tell you a lot of things. Maybe you have things on your mind too. It doesn't mean at all we would end up being physical but the problem would be afterward and mostly in my head but also in my body which is doing weird things. I may look like something on the surface but underneath a lot of the time I'm just barely clinging.

So going to the dance with you would be a lot bigger event than maybe you're thinking about.

Now it's almost 4 o'clock in the morning and I'm going to be a zombie if I don't go to bed. I'm sorry for my handwriting. I'm sorry if I actually give you this letter. I'm having one of those moments when I seem to be standing outside looking at myself wondering what I'm going to do and not having the slightest idea.

Yours sincerely,

Stan (Stanley) Dart

Stan folded the letter — six sheets of his miserable handwriting — three times, shoved it in the kitchen garbage, got halfway up the stairs, then turned around and pulled the letter out of the garbage. He took it upstairs to his room and stuck it under some papers at the bottom of his own wastebasket.

which only got emptied once a month at most. Then he pulled himself between the sheets.

Janine Igwash was instantly in his head, standing quite close to him though turned slightly away looking down. She had dropped a button and was just about to bend over to look for it. Her black silk shirt was almost falling open, and the little tattoo at the base of her neck nearly peeked at him.

She was in his head like she was living there. The black shirt falling so softly off her shoulder undone. Shirt tails. Off the rails. Light blue underwear the color of the sky. His heart hammering and all he was doing was lying there, still as a board. Stiff as a post.

 Holding up the sky.

Stan spied the tiny notice on the bulletin board outside the gym. *Tryouts for the boys varsity basketball team begin Monday at 6:30 a.m.*

How could information of such vital importance be so sparse in detail? Thin blue ink, easy to miss. Maybe Coach Burgess was hoping no one new would show up. He only had two spots to fill anyway.

Six-thirty in the morning!

But instead of driving people off, the awkward start time only seemed to pique more interest. Marty Wilkens, who could barely tie his own shoes, said he was going to come out. He'd grown six inches over the summer and so maybe he might be able to play basketball. Leonard Palin, a hockey player, announced he'd been working on a left-handed hook shot. "It's unstoppable," he said in the hallway outside geography.

But really that hallway was owned by the enormous Karl Brolin, six feet six, 220 pounds of senior orangutan who flicked illegal bounce passes to Ty Blake and Jamie Hartleman, the core of the varsity team. No teachers told them to take it outside. They ran, jumped, pivoted, ricocheted off the lockers while Stan and others let them pass.

That's the way it was with those guys. Once last year at lunchtime Stan tried to guard Karl Brolin when Brolin decided to play at the junior basket outside just because he could. Brolin got the ball and backed in — backed in with his big rump and his huge shoulders until he was underneath the basket. Then, as now, all Stan could do was give way.

Stan carried his Janine Igwash letter — he'd retrieved it from the wastebasket — in an outer pocket of his backpack where it was zipped and sealed secure. He didn't want her to see it and so he kept it with him at all times.

Janine walked past him talking with Katherine Loney. Janine was a head taller than Katherine though she didn't slouch like some tall girls did. He held the fire door but Janine did not glance at him. She simply kept listening as Katherine said, ". . . pieces of it everywhere, even in her hair!" Janine had glanced over, Stan was prepared to say, "I'm sorry, I dropped the phone." His jaw was relaxed, the words were lining up, then she was by. Coldly, Stan thought. Determined not to look. "But why in her hair?" Janine asked. Stan didn't hear the reply. He was headed in the other direction. Nearly running.

To hell with her.

In the break after first period he sat underneath the stairwell at the south end of the building and wrote in tiny script at the bottom of page six of his letter to Janine: *what we cannot know/in the chaos of control*. He looked at those two lines — minutes were draining away, he was going to have to head to biology soon — and finally he scratched out the lines and added, *Why is everything so difficult?*

He didn't have a good sense in his head of how he was ever going to make the varsity team. There were too many good players. The players were too big, too strong, too experienced. All year he'd been

imagining making his shots against the JV guys. But most of them were not going to make the varsity team, either.

In biology Jason Biggs said, "Tryouts for varsity start Monday at 6:30 in the morning!" They were supposed to be finishing their diagrams of the components of the eye. Janine Igwash did not look around once in the first ten minutes of the class.

"Six-thirty in the morning!" Jason Biggs said.

She was working on her diagram. If Stan's letter wasn't safely back in his locker he would have just walked up to her and handed it over. Simple as that. He felt like a man of action.

"Monday morning!" Jason Biggs said. "You gotta go, man. I've seen your jump shot. You never miss."

Then he looked to where Stan was looking.

"Not Janine Igwash," he said.

"What?"

"Everyone knows she's tilted."

Mr. Stillwater stopped talking and looked directly at the two of them.

"What does everyone know, Stanley?" he said.

Stan's ears were burning. They always gave him away. Biggs looked innocent as grass.

"What does everyone know?" Mr. Stillwater repeated. All eyes were on Stan.

"Nothing," Stan muttered.

"Everyone knows nothing?" Mr. Stillwater said.

Stan stayed silent. He sneaked a glance at Janine Igwash. Her face was pale, pale white, but her neck was red. Her hair was so wild he wanted to get lost in it.

What did Biggs mean by tilted?

"Stand up." Mr. Stillwater's eyes never left Stan. Maybe this wasn't going to pass after all. Stan rose uneasily. "What does everyone know?" Stillwater pressed.

"That I'm an idiot," Stan said. Janine laughed. She was the only one.

"Are you?" A little less heft in Stillwater's voice. The moment seemed suddenly open to comic possibilities.

"I'm talking with my idiot friend when I should be listening," Stan said. Some giggles now. "That makes me an idiot, too. I'm sorry, Mr. Stillwater."

Stillwater nodded slightly, his eyes narrowed.

"And sometimes I drop the phone when someone wonderful is on the other end," Stan continued. He looked directly at Janine, whose eyes were dark now — how did that happen? Black jewels. "And I fail to apologize because of just how awkward everything is at this age." Gales of laughter. Jason Biggs' desk nearly tipped over, Stan was leaning so hard against it. But Janine kept looking.

"That's enough. Sit down, Stanley!"

Stan sat down. Janine kept looking. He would not look away first. His heart was hammering. He was breathing like he was carrying a load of bricks up a tree for some reason.

Just because it had to be done.

Trumpets were blowing in the back of his head. He wanted to be at the dance right now.

To hell with varsity.

But biology wasn't over. Stan was in his seat. Janine Igwash was still across the room.

He had to wait while Mr. Stillwater filled the board with the definitions of the ciliary muscle, the optic chiasm, the lens, the iris, the fiber radiations.

Stan poked Jason Biggs on the shoulder.

"What do you mean she's tilted?" he whispered.

Stan borrowed some colored pencils from the twins. Pink for muscle. Yellow for ligaments. Blue for the iris, gray for the lens.

"She's a gwog," Biggs whispered harshly. Stan wasn't sure he had heard properly.

"A what?"

Janine's neck was white now, her face red.

"Tilted," Jason Biggs said again. "She's a tilted gwog."

Mr. Stillwater stood beside both their desks, looking with too much interest at their diagrams.

"Mr. Dart," he muttered eventually. "Did you never learn to color inside the lines?"

—

"So you're an idiot?" she said an eternity later, when they were outside biology.

"Total."

She smiled. God. How had he ever stood up in class like that?

"The dance is at eight o'clock. My parents are driving. You're going to have to meet them. They're, like, organizing the whole thing. Unless you have your license?" Her voice held a hopeful note.

Stan had his learner's permit. That was all. Why didn't he have his license yet? He'd been sixteen for almost three months. Every couple of weeks his mother took him out in the back lot and ground her teeth while he wrestled with the gearshift. He had a lot of trouble balancing between the clutch and the gas. He'd be a snap with an automatic, but they didn't own an automatic. Why didn't they own an automatic? They owned a rusting old stick shift because they were poor, poor because of the divorce.

Because of the weirdness of his family he didn't have his license yet, and so he was embarrassed in front of Janine Igwash.

"I don't have mine, either," she said. "But we have to go early because of my parents. Why don't you come by at a quarter after seven?"

Stan nodded. Why couldn't he speak around her? He tried to smile but it felt as if his face was cracking. He was holding his jaw in the wooden way of everyone in his family.

All the others were gone from biology now. Stan needed to go somewhere else, too. Where? He hadn't the slightest idea.

Why didn't he have his license?

"You know where my house is?" Janine Igwash said.

Stan nodded. Then she was gone and he was standing on his own with the whole world swirling around him. What day was it? Nothing was in his head, so he had to look it up. This was Day Five and he had just finished biology — he was doing the hell out of biology — and so the next period was . . .

A note fell out of his grasp.

Why was he grasping a note?

The ringers rang. The hallway was empty. He was alone with his empty head, reading a note that said in Jason Biggs' stupid handwriting: *tilted=GWOG=goes with other girls=Janine Igwash=everybody else knows, ok?*

5

Tilted. Janine Igwash liked girls. Nothing wrong with that. Stan liked girls, too. He liked Janine. Girls with soft secret flesh, half-hidden tattoos. Visions of them roaming around his head.

Tilted.

She wanted him to go to the dance with her. As a front. An untilted front for her parents. That's as much as he could make out.

Tilted tilted tilted. All the way home.

Where he met Gary lying in the dirt of the driveway scratching something on the underside of his silver Audi with his fingernail. His beige jacket had fallen open, as had his light blue shirt — it looked like Mr. Stillwater's shirt. Buttons were open where his pink belly peeked out like mushroom flesh starved for the sun. *Shroomis gigantis.*

In private his mother pressed herself against this man's skin.

Gary twisted on his back, rubbed his elbow into the dusty asphalt.

"Hey, Gary." Stan stepped around his mother's boyfriend.

"I caught something on that speed bump near the auto wash," Gary said.

The car was gleaming even more than usual. Another stick shift. Stan wouldn't be able to drive very well, either.

"I think my strut got bent," Gary said.

"Tilted?" Stan kneeled down but he couldn't see anything.

"It might affect the alignment," Gary said. He brushed himself off and for a moment the two were uncomfortably close.

Did Stan's mother really like that aftershave?

"How's school going?" Gary asked.

"Just great," Stan said.

—

Stan was helping Lily with her homework before dinner. She was adding columns of numbers:

$$\begin{array}{r} 28 \\ +17 \\ \hline 3051 \end{array}$$

"I don't know how you're getting that," Stan said.

"I'm just following," Lily said.

"Following what?"

“Two plus one is three,” Lily began. “Carry the zero —”

“Wait, wait, wait! First of all, you start on the right, not the left. Eight plus seven is what?”

“That’s not what Ms. Hennigan said!”

“You probably weren’t listening. The column on the right is the ones column.”

“Eight plus seven isn’t *ones* at all!” Lily said.

Gary and his mother were downstairs in the kitchen getting dinner together. Stan heard Gary say, “I’ve never seen anybody slice tomatoes that way.” Stan’s mother said, “What way?” and Gary said, “Like you’d rather be squashing grapes.”

It was a Gary joke. Stan didn’t hear his mother laughing.

“On the right is the ones column, and on the left is the tens column. What’s eight plus seven?” Stan asked.

“Fifteen! But then you carry the one to the other side of the five.” She traced over the 51 she had written on the page.

Stan took the pencil from her. “Don’t make stuff up. You carry the one up to the tens column, not here.” He made a mark by the two. He was trying to stay calm.

“Ms. Hennigan has a different way. Just leave me alone!” She grabbed back the pencil and started an elaborate doodle on the edge of her page.

“You’re going to burn the garlic!” Gary said down in the kitchen.

“No, I’m not,” Stan’s mother snapped. Something smelled like it was burning.

“You are, you are!” A pan clanged and hissed.

“I wonder how old he is now?” Lily murmured, almost to herself.

“Who?”

“Feldon!”

Stan’s palm hit the desk. Lily jumped in her seat.

“*Don’t mention his name!*”

“Feldon Feldon Feldon Feldon!” Lily said. “The *baby!*”

Quiet down below. Not even cupboards banging. Stan remembered when his mother and father fought. The silence was the worst. His father had a volcanic temper.

“Feldon is five years old by now,” Stan said. “He’s not a baby. Don’t even think about him, or Dad, or anybody. All right?” Stan took his sister’s head in his hands and turned it back to the figures in the notebook. “You start on the right, carry the one up here to the tens column, add one plus two plus one. What’s it come out to?”

As soon as he let her go, Lily’s doodle turned into a swirly *F* on the side of her paper. Her elbow nudged the textbook and a folded letter stuck out.

“What’s this?” Stan said. He grabbed the paper and held it high so Lily could not reach it.

Dear parents/guardian. It was from the school. It has recently come to our attention that your son’s/daughter’s academic standing has slipped below the acceptable school board standard . . .

“What have you done now?” Stan asked.

“Nothing,” Lily said.

Stan scanned the rest of the letter. The principal was asking for a meeting.

“Is this about marks or something else?”

Lily laid her face on the open book now, clasped her hands over her head as if expecting bombs.

Still not another sound from the kitchen. Stan got up and listened by the bedroom door.

Silence was the very worst. He remembered his father with his fists doubled . . .

“*Mmm*,” his mother sighed.

Great. Stan clomped down the stairs with the letter in his hand.

The air was thick with the smell of something burnt. Garlic? A stove element glowed red with nothing on it. Smoke curled up from the blackened pan that was resting in the sink.

His mother and Gary stood guilty, clenched in the middle of the kitchen, his upper lip and part of his chin smudged with her lipstick.

“Did you see this?” Stan handed the letter to his mother, whose face blanched. From upstairs he could just hear a tiny muffled voice, Lily singing, “*And little baby Feldon was his name.*”

“Shit for crackers,” his mother said.

—

At dinner Stan pushed creamy linguine, only some of the garlic blackened, around with his fork. Gary wiped his plate with the white Italian bread Stan’s mother never bought unless Gary was coming. Lily slurped the noodles until creamy sauce caked the wispy edges of her dangling hair.

“Well, it’s not the end of the world,” Stan’s mother said. “We’ve met with the principal before.”

“It’s a different one,” Lily said. “It’s a *she*.”

“Stanley will come with me,” his mother said. She didn’t have to say, *Stanley keeps me from weeping on principals’ desks*. She didn’t have to say, *Stanley makes the family appear reasonable*.

Stan’s mother lunged across the table and wiped Lily with her napkin. Lily squirmed — Stan knew she would — and got even more of her hair in the sauce. Water splashed from two or three glasses but Gary managed to catch the wine bottle before it tipped.

“I just want to keep your hair out of dinner,” Stan’s mother said. She smiled at Gary — a frantic sort of near-mad gesture — and Gary reached across and touched her hand. That was all. Somehow because Gary touched Stan’s mother’s hand, Lily stayed still long enough to be wiped.

“You should wear your barrettes,” Stan’s mother said to Lily.

“Rachel Edmundson has them,” Lily said.

Stan’s mother didn’t take the bait.

“Then just tie your hair back.” She slid her glass over a few inches and Gary topped it up.

Stan had a memory of his father pouring wine, and then he and Stan’s mother got up and danced slowly in the middle of the living room still holding their long-stemmed glasses. His mother’s face fit perfectly into his father’s shoulder.

They were happy sometimes. It wasn’t all scream and sulk.

“She’s a girl principal,” Lily said.

“That doesn’t mean you can just go along making up answers to all your assignment questions,” Stan said, unable to hold himself back. “At some point you have to deal with reality.” Stan looked to his mother for support, but she seemed to be at the end of her energy for coping with Lily.

“Sometimes reality is overestimated,” she sighed. She could go that way, become limp and

unparental in the flick of a moment.

Stan studied his plate and decided to stay quiet. They ate in unbearable silence until finally Gary made a point of asking Stan what was happening at school. So Stan told him, in as few words possible, about the cancellation of JV.

“So you’re a basketball player,” Gary said.

Stan’s mother chimed in. “Stanley used to play hockey but then suddenly that was all over. Now it’s basketball.”

She said it as if she’d really forgotten why he gave up hockey.

“I used to play basketball,” Gary said improbably. “I did, I did! We should play horse sometime. I’ve got a wicked jump shot.” Gary stroked the air with his meaty hand. His belly rubbed against the table, and Stan grabbed two of the water glasses before they could spill again.

“You two should play!” Stan’s mother said. She pressed Stan with her eyes, the way that she did now a hundred times a day over everything from wiping up the kitchen to taking out the garbage to helping Lily wrestle with the world.

Stan and his father used to play hockey. After school in the winters, out on the frozen rink in the park in the next neighborhood over.

Stan had not played hockey, had not skated, in five years.

But now Stan allowed that he would play Gary at horse any time. Gary said that he would like that, and Stan’s mother’s eyes said that she would like that, too.

Then Lily said, “Feldon is coming next week!”

Silence. Lily’s eyes gleamed the way they did when she’d just scored big at crazy eights.

“Lily,” Stan’s mother said. Her eyebrows flattened. “Lily.”

“It’s true! Daddy told me!”

His mother twirled her fork, wound nothing on her plate.

“He called me and he told me!”

“Feldon is not coming. Your father is not coming,” his mother said icily.

“He talked just to me and he said how would you like to meet your younger brother, sweetie? And he said he could stay in my room and Daddy said that would be fine!”

Silence, like after the ship has sunk and water is rushing in and you are going down and down to the bottom.

Gary got up suddenly and started stacking plates. Stan’s mother hated anyone stacking plates at the table. Stan got up then too and carried away a serving dish. Soon Gary had the water running in the kitchen sink so it was hard to hear. But not impossible.

“Lily, darling,” his mother said. “I want you to listen carefully. I know people in your head tell you things. That’s fine. It happens to all of us.” Stan went back into the dining room to pick up glasses. His mother had taken Lily onto her lap, was holding her gently.

“But he calls me!” Lily said.

She stroked Lily’s hair. “I’m here, or your brother’s here. We would know if your father —”

“But he gave me my own phone!”

Lily was crying, the way she always cried about her most ridiculous tales.

“I’ve been too indulgent with you, and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry, Lily. You can’t keep —”

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