

Cordoba

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MOM MOVED UP TO SANTA BARBARA, and Dad started having girlfriends over. Ladyfriends, he called them. When I stayed home sick from school, I saw the ladyfriends leave for work. "How cute. Is this yours?" they said, pointing at me on the couch, a blanket around my feet and a bottle of warm Sprite by my head. They had no idea that I knew how to talk like an adult just fine. They'd introduce themselves to me in breathy voices while Dad shuffled around the house, stepping into socks and tucking in his shirt.

There were three in a row: Christine, Joyce, and Mandy. Christine never learned my name, she just called me "hot stuff." Joyce brought me stuffed animals. She had a whole bunch in the back window of her car. I got the rejects—a beanbag hippo, a monkey with unstuffed arms and a plastic head, and a glow-in-the-dark velvet skunk with hearts all over it. Mandy knew my name but said it way too much. "You look better, Charles. Doesn't Charles look better? How is Charles today? Better?"

Dad decided he was going to let me live with Mom. He called it a Christmas present. Turns out she was living with someone for a while, and now that she wasn't anymore, it was Dad's turn to live with someone. Mom sent me a list of rules in the mail. It came in a big, pink greeting card envelope. The rules were numbered and began, *One, nobody sleeps naked*. There was a line at the bottom where I had to sign to promise I would obey the rules while I lived with her.

I was too little to remember when Mom moved out for the first time. Dad always said Mom left the menfolk so that we could see what it's like to clean piss stains off the floor around the toilet. But Dad got a maid for that. My brother Jansen and I got our own bedrooms when she left for good. "Part of the deal," Jansen said. "Part of the deal."

He understood the deal; I didn't. I don't even think Dad did, although he and Jansen talked about it a lot. The deal started when Dad found Jansen and Renae, his girlfriend, both with half their clothes off. Dad yelled at Renae to leave and then at Jansen to get that two-bit whore out of the house. Jansen called Dad a cradle-robbing son-of-a-bitch. After

that, Jansen got a lock on his door.

The deal was what kept Dad and Jansen from killing each other, that's what Jansen told me. Dad had his girlfriends and Jansen had Renae.

Jansen went to live with Renae in North Hollywood. That was originally our idea, mine and Jansen's, to move in together and be bachelors. We were going to order pizza, make sloppy Joes, and play Sega. Jansen was going to teach me how to smoke. I was going to go to a junior high where I could learn to fight like a man. Now it was him and Renae, and I was packing my pajamas that were still in their plastic wrapping.

Jansen called. Dad was out on a date with Mandy. They had gone putt-putt golfing. I told Jansen. "See, that's just what I'm talking about," he said.

I told him how I had to go to Mom's. "Come by and see us, comrade," he said. "We're on the way."

I wanted to ask him for the secret to the deal. He talked about his dumb-ass neighbors and how they always park over the lines in the parking space next to Jansen's. He said he'd gladly ding their car up for them.

Jansen told me this joke before he hung up: "If you need a place to stay, then you've got a place to stay. If you need a warm meal, you got a warm meal. If you need a woman, then you've still got a place to stay and a warm meal."

When I was still in fourth or fifth grade, Jansen told me things after school on the front porch. I'd lick all the ice off an Otter Pop while he smoked and pointed his cigarette around the neighborhood. He told me stories about each family in each house on our street. How that one's parents grew pot in their basement. How the girl that lived at the end of the block used to show guys her panties for a quarter in junior high. How the family across the street had a bomb shelter in their backyard. Because of Jansen I always knew a lot for my age.

Jansen made fun of my school friends, too. He said Adam Foster looked like a frog. He said Benji Wexler talked like a girl. He said Mike Brownsberger had a goofy haircut. But when they came over to play, he'd let me go. I'd look back over my shoulder as we biked away and there was Jansen, sitting on the porch step with his fist in the air, our comrade salute.

Mom called right after Jansen.

"Did you sign the rules?" she said

"Yes," I said.

"My baby," she said, "I can't wait to see you. Put your dad on the

phone."

"He's on a date," I said.

She kept talking. "Remind him about the Greyhound and tell him please not to drive you all the way up. I can pick you up at the depot, it's right by work."

Dad took me to the station in the morning. I asked myself what Jansen would do in my situation. Probably throw away the rules. Probably never even open the letter. I figured if I were Jansen, I'd get off at North Hollywood. I pressed my cheek against the cloudy bus window and counted stops.

I got off in North Hollywood with the skinny, crater-faced man that was sitting across from me the whole trip. I pulled out the half-gone roll of quarters Dad gave me and called Jansen. "On my way," he said. I bought a pack of Marlboro Lights and a Coke with the rest of my quarters. Jansen was there in ten minutes.

"Never sign anything," Jansen said, squinting through his dirty windshield.

I took up maybe half of the passenger seat in his new car, a 1977 charcoal-colored Cordoba. Jansen patted the dashboard. "Nice?" he said.

I nodded. I was actually there when Jansen decided he wanted a Cordoba more than anything. He liked how Cordoba sounded when he blew smoke. When it was cold out in the morning, I would pretend to blow smoke and say Cordoba. That's how I remembered.

There were lots of telephone poles where Jansen lived. The wires seemed to keep the apartments from falling over, especially Jansen's building. We parked on the street in front. The dumb-ass neighbors caught Jansen this morning bouncing his big Cordoba door on the side of their car. "Must be poised for a quick escape, comrade."

We sat in the parked Cordoba. Jansen had the radio on to Z93, the Zoo. He sang along, "Today's Tom Sawyer he gets high on you/And the space he invades he gets by on you." There was a little round, green clock Velcroed to the glove compartment that said 8:43. I waited for Jansen to make a move. He drummed the steering wheel with his thumbs. "Is that your only bag?" he said. I pulled the duffel bag off the floor and onto my lap. "When's Mom supposed to get you?" "9:10 at the depot in Santa Barbara." "You want to stay here?" I nodded. "Go in and say hi to Renae."

Inside, Renae sat at the kitchen table. She had permed her hair frizzy since the last time I saw her. It was still orange. She pinched the stems of the clear plastic-framed glasses she was wearing and looked up at me. "Notice anything different?" she said.

She smelled like coffee instead of gum like she used to.

"Your hair," I said.

"Guess again," she said, looking down again.

She was wearing a long t-shirt and wool socks.

"I'm pregnant."

Jansen came in, snapping the screen door shut behind him. He whistled the song that was on in the car. I stared at Renae's stomach. She had pulled her t-shirt up to show me. Her swollen belly button looked like it hurt. Jansen tapped me on the head with his pack of Marlboro Lights. "Thanks for the smokes, comrade."

"Where's he going to stay?" Renae said, looking over the top of my head.

"That's what we need to figure out," Jansen said. "He doesn't want to go to Mom's."

Jansen and Renae's was the kind of apartment that doesn't have a room with a couch where I could sleep no problem. There was the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, and, in two months, the baby—Baby Conrad, they called it, because they knew it was a boy. Jansen and Renae made me a bed in the tub with trash bags underneath so the blankets didn't get wet. I fell asleep to the drip of the faucet and the dumb-ass neighbor's snoring.

The phone rang. I opened my eyes and it was still dark everywhere. I could hear Jansen in the kitchen.

"No."

"No, he can stay with us."

"I don't think he wants to."

"Who?"

"That's between you and Dad."

"Bye."

"Good bye."

I lay in the tub and listened to Jansen get back in bed. I felt the cold sleeping bag zipper against my cheek. Jansen was batting for me.

Mom called again the next day. She was not as mad as I thought she would be. She said she had wanted to calm down before she came by to get me. Now she was ready. Jansen had a plan for this. We'd go eat.

We went to a place that served waffles and barbecued chicken. I ordered from the kids' menu so I could get a hot dog and fries. The waiter didn't care. Jansen and Renae shared a stack of pancakes with gravy on them. We went to a movie, just in case. They were having a marathon at the theater next door. We saw the last part of *The Empire Strikes Back* and all of *Return of the Jedi*.

When we got back, there was a note on the door like Jansen had guessed. It said, *Jansen, have Charlie on my doorstep tomorrow morning before work or I'll call the cops.*

"It was fun while it lasted," Renae said.

"You understand, comrade," Jansen said.

I guess I knew better.

We played hearts until Renae went to sleep. Jansen and I went outside. We sat on the hood of the Cordoba with our feet on the bumper. Jansen lit up, sucked, and blew. "Cordooh-ba," he said.

He handed me the cigarette backwards so the right part would go in my mouth. I sucked, coughed, and tried again. I squeezed my jaw tight. "Cor-do-ba."

"Next time, we'll be smoking cigars."

I didn't want to wait for Baby Conrad to be born to see Jansen and Renae again. I wanted to make a deal with Mom, but things were probably different with her. I could have her find my *Playboy* that Jansen gave me when he moved out. But she would just throw it away and make Dad have a talk with me. I could ditch school but I didn't know what I'd do instead. If I took the bus to see Jansen, I would just get Jansen in trouble. I wished I'd made a deal with Dad so that he couldn't kick me out. I wanted to tell Jansen these things but he had other things to worry about.

Jansen put his hand on my knee. "I can't stay with Renae forever. Someday we'll live it large."

"Like comrades?"

"Like comrades."