

from Juked #4
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Hydrocodone

HE WOKE BECAUSE of the phone. He'd been lying on his side, his cheek pressed to the couch, forcing the sore side to bear the weight of his head. He stood up stiffly and lumbered into the kitchen to answer.

It was Amy. "Feeling any better?" she asked.

"Been asleep all day," he said. His tongue kept trying to creep back to the hole in his jaw where he'd had a wisdom tooth removed the day before. The stitches tasted like mint.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. You sound pretty bad. Have you been taking your pills?"

"Like clockwork."

"Good. Well do me a favor and take some stew meat out of the freezer so I can make some soup when I get home," she said.

In the background he could hear someone in her office saying, "Amy, Jen's looking for you."

Outside he could hear voices. There was some kind of noise coming from the front of the house.

"Dan?" Amy was saying.

"Yeah?"

"I've got to go. Don't forget to take the meat out, I hope you feel better."

He hung up the phone and went back into the living room. The clock on the DVD player said 3:32. Another half hour and he could take a pill.

The voices were louder in the living room and they were moving. For a second he felt as though he were under water, the waves carrying the sound away from him. The shades on the windows were down. He couldn't remember if he'd done that or not. He went to the door and looked out through the peephole. Kids were walking by outside. Some were in groups of twos and threes, some were alone. He watched them pass for several seconds before he realized that a school bus must've dropped them off nearby. They'd lived in this house for six months and he'd never noticed the bus stop. He realized this was the first time he'd been home at this time of day on a weekday since they'd lived here.

He kept his eye pressed to the door. A girl walked by—he wasn't sure how old she was, maybe thirteen, fourteen. Her hair was black. He couldn't see her face. She was wearing a short black skirt revealing pale legs. A couple of boys were walking with her.

One of the boys said something and she turned, revealing a shock of red hair, and slugged him in the arm. Dan thought he recognized her vaguely. He watched her pass on the sidewalk, then moved to the window and peeked between the slats of the blinds. They left the sidewalk at the edge of his yard and went in the house next door.

He couldn't see any more of them. He moved away from the window, wandered through the house and finally decided to make something to eat in the kitchen. He opened a can of soup and sat at the table, swallowing. Some noise started outside, this time coming from the rear side of the house. He slid open the glass door and stepped out onto the deck in the back. Steps led down to the yard which dropped away from the house. There was a wall around the back yard next door, but on the deck he could see above some of it. The girl and the two boys were on the other

side of the fence. He'd forgotten that the neighbors had a trampoline. When they jumped, their torsos and most of their legs cleared the height of the fence. Then they fell back down and he could only see their heads. He stood in the doorway watching them. She was holding her skirt down while she jumped, giving her an awkward, stiff look. The boys were teasing her, he couldn't quite make out all of what they were saying, but she was laughing. They were urging her on, and while he watched, she jumped high, throwing her hands up so that her skirt rode up, revealing the white of her panties. She dropped back down and he remembered the freezer and went and pulled the stew meat out, then took another pill and sat in the living room again.

During dinner, Dan's eyes kept going back to the glass door, but he couldn't see anything but the deck. After dinner, he and Amy watched another movie and waited for it to be late before allowing themselves to go to bed. Dan slept awhile longer and woke later, hurting. He spent some time in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet, his cheek pressed to the cool surface of the wall beside him.

It was quiet inside the house. He wandered out into the living room, then the kitchen, dug a towel out of a drawer and filled it with ice and pressed it softly to his cheek. He was hungry, or at least knew that he should be, but he wasn't up to the idea of eating. He caught himself staring at the glass door again, and realized that he'd been staring at a lot of things. He was trudging around the house like a ghost. He went back to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. His cheek was puffy, definitely swollen. It made his face look lopsided. He touched his cheek softly, felt the tenderness and the prickle of hairs. His eyes were a little puffy, too. He didn't look too bad, though, he decided. He held the ice pack against his cheek and sat on the toilet again until he was tired, and then he went back to bed.

The next morning, Dan lay in bed listening to Amy's frantic ministrations, opening his eyes for the peck on the cheek before

she left. The pain in his jaw seemed somehow worse. The muscles in his cheeks and neck were sore, as though he was about to have a charley horse. He lay in bed, trying to ignore it, but the pain killers were only taking the edge off. He drifted in and out of sleep and found himself somewhere in between, thinking about the girl from next door. He remembered her walking by the front of the house, her skirt barely covering anything. Her hair had to be dyed. Seemed a little young to be dying her hair. He remembered her on the trampoline, popping into the air, holding her skirt down, then not holding it—and rolled out of bed, went to the bathroom, and then went into the kitchen and made himself another bowl of cereal. He watched the flakes dissolve into the milk.

He couldn't stop fidgeting. He found a DVD and about halfway through he turned it off. He tried to find a project to keep himself busy, and settled on cleaning, something they neglected during the week. He cleaned the toilet in the bathroom, gathered the clothes and started a load in the washer. There weren't enough dishes in the dishwasher to run it, so he did them in the sink, finishing just in time to switch the clothes over to the dryer and start a second load. He went into the living room, feeling lightheaded and satisfied with himself. He flipped through channels on TV and glanced out the window every few seconds while he waited for the dryer to be done. Then he moved the wet clothes over and folded the dry ones, and seriously considered vacuuming before giving up and calling it enough.

He had made a point of not looking at the time but now he glanced at a clock and saw that it was a quarter after three. They didn't have a lot of books and the only magazines around were Amy's, mostly having to do with home decoration, weddings, fashion. He picked one up and flipped through it. Skinny girls in ugly dresses smiled at him from the pages. He threw the magazine back on the table and stood in the middle of the room, swaying quietly, and finally went over to the door, peered out

through the hole and tried to think of something to do to keep himself busy.

Outside, the street was empty. His car was in the driveway. He could go to the store. He wasn't sure if he should drive on pain killers.

Across the street they'd planted a bush he had always liked. There was a cherry tree in their front yard, as well, and he liked the way the peep hole made them look small and distant, yet compressed and rounded. He studied both of these for quite a while until the yellow mass of the school bus passing interrupted his contemplation. It stopped farther down the street where he couldn't see it. He watched as the kids walked by in ones and twos, some walking slow, some running back and forth, full of energy. She was near the end. This time she was wearing jeans and a low cut top. Her head was down and she walked slowly. He wondered if something was wrong, why she was alone. He moved to the window and watched her until she was out of sight, then he went back to the couch and stared at the TV that he'd turned off earlier.

He thought about her all weekend. He could hear them outside on the trampoline, something he'd heard plenty of times before, but never thought about, but Amy was around and he felt strange about watching them again. On Saturday night he and Amy went to a movie. There were some kids talking a couple rows down, and a few minutes into it, Amy nudged him and nodded towards them. He shrugged back at her and spent the rest of the film watching the backs of their heads, trying to listen to what they were saying.

Sunday they went out to a park Amy liked on the other side of town and walked around, watching dogs play in the grass. She took his arm and leaned on his shoulder.

"How's your tooth?" she asked.

"Better," he said.

"We should get a dog," she said.

"You're allergic."

She shrugged.

"They have those hypo-allergenic dogs, now, don't they?"
he said.

"I think so," she said.

"Or a cat. We could get one of those bald cats."

"Hairless," she said and laughed.

"We should've brought a blanket," he said. They sat in the grass under an old gray oak tree and watched the squirrels. Dan leaned back against the tree and drifted into a doze, until Amy nudged him awake.

"Look," she said, pointing. A terrier was chasing the squirrels, barking up at the trees. They watched it until a girl called it away, and then they rose stiffly and walked back to their car.

That night, they sat on the couch watching reruns on TV and she lay in his lap during a commercial. He thought about the girl, and the last few days. In the morning, he staggered out of bed.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah, got to get back to it," he said through stiff teeth.

"Why don't you take one more day?"

"No," he said. "I'm going loopy in the house." And headed for the shower.

Half past three, Dan was in his cubicle, staring at the clock on his computer screen. His jaw ached but he was afraid to take a pill. He was running low on them anyway, and had survived the day on ibuprofen. He'd been very productive; by noon he was already caught up with the work he'd missed Thursday and Friday, and now he was nearly where he should be for the day. He hadn't so much as glanced at a clock, until just a moment ago, and now he couldn't concentrate on anything but the time. It ticked over 3:32. He fiddled with his computer. He had a bid for a headboard on an auction that was nearly over. Amy really wanted that headboard.

He went back and forth between that and the clock. The selling period ended at 3:35. Now it was 3:33. Someone had outbid him and Dan snapped back to attention and upped his bid by a few dollars. He kept going back to the girl. Back and forth between her and the headboard. Black hair with red streak. Another five dollars. Short skirt, thin, pale legs. Another ten dollars. Then it was 3:35 and he'd won the bidding. He called Amy and broke the news. The girl dropped from his thoughts and the rest of the day went easily. On the way out, he dropped the nearly empty bottle of pills in the trash. They celebrated that night with pizza, and the next day at 3:32, he hardly noticed the clock, and the day after, he didn't think of it at all.