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## THE HOUSE OF JENNY, JEN, AND MRS. G

You can't judge a man on the things he's done, only the things he's doing. Like the me I used to be—we don't share shit except a body. Maybe he rode around in this same thing I'm riding around in now, but the things he did, no way I'd do. You hand me a baseball bat, I'm gonna walk to the nearest ballpark. You hand him a baseball bat, he's gonna walk to the nearest mailbox. How's that the same man?

So if I talk about him, it's only with the understanding that you're not going to judge me if he, say, pawned his mother's class ring for gas money, or blew some snot out onto the half-eaten sandwich of some kid he didn't like. This isn't me saying I'm guilty of anything he did. It's gossip. And there's a lot of things I'm above, but I'm not above that.

So say he once broke into his own high school after hours. You going to judge him for that? Say his name was Mutt. Not his actual name, just what everyone called him. Say he had a best friend named The Big D, and say Mutt made D help him steal an \$8,000 deskchair from the vice principal's office.

Well so he did. Because when this V.P. sat in this \$8,000 deskchair, you could tell he thought it was his own personal throne. And here he was, getting ready to tell you whether you're playing ball this year or whether your jersey's going the way of your grades. When he's in this chair, you're his peasant. You're sitting in a plastic chair, can barely see over his desk, might as well be sitting at his feet. And him so proud of his chair that he's always making a point of telling you just how much it cost. And then he tells you: you don't have a chance at getting that jersey, even if you could bully each of your teachers

into tossing you that A.

And Mutt's had just about enough of getting fed that horseshit from someone sitting on a throne, so he tells Big D to borrow D's mother's van and together they haul the V.P.'s chair out of his office and through the gym and out the back door, which is about the point that Big D first hears that next they're driving it to Lubbock to sell it. But first they replace the V.P.'s throne with a portable toilet from Mutt's parents' RV.

But then they're only on 84 for about "Starman" through "Lady Stardust" before D's mother's piece-of-shit van starts hacking up smoke from under its hood like it's been a pack-a-day smoker since the day it was born. And now D's scared, because he does have that jersey, and if they get caught with the V.P.'s throne, then that's it for D, no jersey, maybe even no diploma. But Mutt tells D to take it easy, man, that this time of night, who the hell're they gonna run into?

And some headlights attached to an orange truck go buzzing past the van, and then another headlight attached to a motorcycle, and then they start feeling pretty good, and talking about how if they just let the engine cool down, maybe the van will be good enough to at least make it into Slaton. But then a towing truck with "Leroy's 24 Hour Wrecker" spraypainted onto its side in huge yellow letters goes clunking past, and business for Leroy must be bad, or at least it's bad enough that he hits the brakes instead of minding his own fucking business, and throws his wrecker into reverse, creeping back at them like some ugly monster that you know means well but's just about to send all of your plans scattering.

So out gets Leroy, with hair like Ziggy but three times the size of him, wearing a cutoff t-shirt that says he once played football for Post back when they were state champs, and shit, look at him now. Mutt tells The Big D to roll down the window, but D's losing his cool. No way, D says. He sees that chair, we're goners. D, roll down the window, Mutt says. Leroy's outside now, knocking on the window with a paw the size of a bear's, and D's just making everything worse.

D rolls it down. Ya'll need a tow? Leroy asks. D looks at Mutt. No, we're all right, Mutt says. You sure? Leroy says, and now he's looking at the hood, which is still smoking a little. Yeah, shit, we're fine, Mutt says, knowing he sounds like either an idiot or a liar. Leroy glances into the back of the van, probably thinking they've got a load of meth back there, or somebody tied up. We're fine, Mutt says again. Dunno, Leroy says, looking at Big D. It's pretty late—I'd feel bad leaving ya'll stranded. Jesus, Mutt says, I said we're fine. Fuck off.

All right, come on now, Leroy says, take it easy. Suit yourselves. And so Leroy goes toddling back to his wrecker, but as he's climbing in he pulls out a phone, and now he's calling somebody, maybe the police. He starts up his truck and clatters away, but that doesn't make them feel safer, just like something bad is leaving, and something worse is coming.

And when the next set of headlights pop up behind them, D's ready to forget the van and the chair and hike it to Oklahoma to start a new life. But that's when she pulls up, dark hair and hollow cheeks, a good twenty years older than the both of them, asking if they need help, and as soon as Mutt sees her, he knows he's moving out of his parents' house and straight into hers.

She's married, but the husband's long gone. She's got a kid, too, Carson Jr., and although her having a husband doesn't bother Mutt, her having a kid does maybe. Anytime they start getting friendly, Carson Jr. comes wandering in with a diaper full of shit, which means Gwenn's got to go spread him out on the changing table in the laundry room, leaving Mutt alone in the bedroom, tugging back on his underwear about the same time Carson Jr.'s diaper is coming off.

They live in her mother's house, which I remember as being about halfway between house-sized and mansion-sized, so I'm calling it a house—when in doubt, round down. Mutt lived by a different rule—when in doubt, round up—which is partly how I know we're different men. So Mutt thinks it's a mansion, even though it's a house, with a

swing on the front porch, and a fenced-in backyard that's more of an automobile graveyard, littered with the rusted husks of pickup trucks and VW campers, and copperheads nesting under the shells of them, and brown recluse stringing their webs in the cabs.

And the house may as well belong to him and Gwenn, as her mother's got dementia. Gwenn tries explaining dementia to Mutt, but he tells her not too bother. After a certain point in high school Mutt realized that he was just done learning. They kept introducing him to fact after fact until, shit, man, the party was full—go home, take your friends with you. And still they kept bringing facts to his door, math facts, Civil War facts, facts about the nesting habits of birds, and meanwhile the house in his head already so crowded that facts keep getting bumped into the pool, drowning on him, or trampled under the feet of the others.

All Mutt needs to know about dementia is that it means Gwenn's mother has no fucking clue what's going on, so they can do pretty much whatever they want. Sometimes he pretends to be her husband, the mother's. Jenny, he'll say, it's Earl. Sometimes she'll play along, sometimes not. Do you love me, Mutt'll say. Who're you? she'll say. Earl. Who? she'll say, feeling around on the table for the glasses she's already wearing. I'm Jenny, Mutt'll say, who are you?

As far as he can tell, she's all of the selves she used to be, sometimes Jen, sometimes Jenny, sometimes Mrs. G, and even Mrs. G is three or four different people. So Mutt doesn't feel bad for messing with her, because if you're six people at once, then you're nothing, nobody. Even if Mutt does something to her, by the time he's done doing it she's already somebody else.

This is all happening in Post, Texas, which you've never heard of, unless maybe you're from Lubbock, but even then, you've never heard of it. Post is at the bottom of that chimney coming off the roof of the state, at about the spot where Santa might stop to take a piss before coming out to dump all of his presents out onto Dallas and Austin.

Mutt's parents think he's still going to school, although he hasn't been once since moving into Gwenn's. They also think he's picked up a night shift on the oil rigs outside of town, and that he's renting a room up in Hackberry. Gwenn's house is on 14th, about twelve blocks from his parents', in a town only fifteen blocks long to begin with.

The problem if you're from Post is that you know you've got to get out before you die there, which'll be long before you're dead. But everything you've ever known is Post: canoes full of Shiner Bock down at Two Draw; free burgers from Holly's when Big D's working the front counter; your picture on the wall down at George's, a newspaper cutout of you catching a pass over two farmboys from Denver City. It's hard to get out when everything that's you is there. Who're you gonna be if you leave?

Gwenn's got six different types of pills she's supposed to be on, but instead Mutt helps her sell the lot. They also sell the pills Gwenn's supposed to be giving her mother, and between all of that, they've got enough cash to eat short loin and ribs seven days a week, and plenty leftover for Trojans, skunk, and Carson Jr.'s maraconi.

Sometimes Mutt doesn't mind Carson Jr., as Carson Jr. only knows how to say three words, yum, cat, and button, which means Mutt really isn't under any sort of obligation to actually talk to him, and as Carson Jr. does this weird little dance every time he gets out of the bathtub, wiggling his butt and waving his arms around before Gwenn can catch him and start toweling him off, which Mutt thinks is kind of funny. But most of the time Mutt minds Carson Jr. very much, for preferring cartoons to baseball, for waking up every couple of hours during the night, and for puking up meatloaf and fried okra onto the bedroom carpet, chunks of buttered toast onto the front porch, and creamed corn all over Mutt's only sweatshirt.

So Mutt drives to Close City and steals a dog off somebody's porch, half pit bull half boxer, which spends the entire drive home trying to bite off Mutt's arm, until Mutt finally stops at the Main Street McDonald's and buys it a couple of Big Macs, at which point

it finally chills the fuck out. He brings the dog back to Gwenn's, and Gwenn's sort of sold on the idea until they bring it inside and the dog starts snapping at Mrs. G, who loses it, screaming and crying and hobbling around the living room, trying to keep at least two pieces of furniture between her and the dog at all times. And of course Carson Jr. gets so upset that he throws up all over the umbrella stand. Then suddenly Gwenn's been against the idea from the start, and she calls Mutt a dumbshit and tells him to take the dog outside. So he does. He tosses it out into the automobile graveyard, and tells the dog, if you can survive a night with the copperheads, I'll give you a steak in the morning, and I'll have you living inside by tomorrow afternoon. Then he tells the dog, by the way, your new name is Carl.

So now they each have something in the house to spoil. When Gwenn's paying attention to Carson Jr., Mutt's paying attention to Carl the Dog, and they've each got someone more important to them than the other. And so everything's beautiful, and Mutt's set for life, as far as he's concerned. Except as far as Gwenn's husband is concerned, he's not.

Gwenn finally has to admit that Carl the Dog was a good idea, because the first night her husband comes snooping back around, Carl the Dog wakes everyone up, barking and snapping at the living room windows. When Mutt hits the porch lights, a huge motherfucker in a hooded sweatshirt bends back from the window he was peeking in and glances at the door, then hikes it back out to his truck, but taking his time though, making a point of that, okay, he's leaving, but only because he wants to. I can't even imagine what that guy'd been raised on—beef milkshakes instead of breast milk, Gerber's laced with chunks of bacon and bison. The husband's got legs the size of Mutt's chest, and a face that looks like it's been smashed against steel doors, telephone poles, the sides of dumpsters, and didn't feel a thing.

Gwenn says she's not scared, just pissed at the son of a bitch for coming back after running off with that slut from Pleasant Valley.

What do you think he wants? Mutt asks. Probably me, Gwenn says. Or you dead.

Mutt feels like he did when he first realized he might be losing his jersey, but hadn't quite lost it yet. In the morning Gwenn hauls Carson Jr. off to the pharmacy to help her pick up the latest shipment of meds she won't be taking. After they leave, a commercial on television gets Mrs. G all riled up, and now she's Jenny and she won't stop talking. She follows Mutt into the kitchen, telling him some story that doesn't make any sense, about someone named Twinnie carrying her into the cellar to get her out of a storm. But then there's no storm, and Twinnie's in bed, and she's telling Mutt about the medicine she has to remember to give Twinnie and the autobiographies she has to remember to order, but then Twinnie must not be in bed because now she says Twinnie's out working on a truck. Here, Mutt says, less Twinnie, more Twinkie, and he tosses a couple at Mrs. G, hoping some sugar will get her quiet again.

But it's impossible for Mutt to think about anything other than the husband. So he starts picking on Mrs. G to make himself feel better about maybe being dead soon. Hey, Jenny, he says, who're you rooting for, me or the ugly husband? She's working on the Twinkies, can't get one of them open, she's already forgotten him. Who're you? she says. I'm Earl, Mutt says, your husband. Who're you rooting for, Jenny, Earl or your son-of-a-bitch son-in-law? Sorry? Mrs. G says, looking like she means it. I don't understand. It's easy, Mutt says. You're rooting for me.

The husband shows back up later that night, and this time instead of creeping around like a runaway from the Garza County lockup, he knocks on the front door, making a sound like he's taking a baseball bat to it instead of just the knuckles on his hand. He's wearing a shirt with a collar, and Carl the Dog's snarling like he's ready to tear this well-dressed shithead to pieces.

Gwenn's dressed up too, wearing a shirt Mutt's never seen. Mutt thinks, what the hell, but doesn't say a thing. Mrs. G's got Carson Jr.

sitting on her lap in the television room, and they're watching a movie about cars, the both of them oblivious to just about everything.

So? Gwenn says when she opens the door. So, the husband says. You're not coming in, she says. I don't give a shit, he says. I'm not here for supper. So then? Gwenn says.

Mutt's leaning against the coat rack. He can't decide whether to look the husband in the eye or to just play it cool and pretend he's checking out some shit on the floor. He keeps trying to opt for the eye contact, but every time the husband sends it back his way Mutt ends up opting for the shit on the floor after all. Meanwhile Carl the Dog is sniffing the husband's hands. Then Carl the Dog starts licking him. The husband roughs up the fur on his head, then goes back to ignoring him. You gotta be kidding me, Mutt thinks. I should've stolen a smarter dog.

Just here for Carson Jr., the husband says. I've got a good place up in Lubbock. Some trees, a tire swing, Playstation 3.

This is the first Mutt's heard about a Playstation 3. Last he knew they were still on 1. That's the problem with Post. By the time you catch on to Ziggy, everyone up in Lubbock's listening to Biggie. Leaving town isn't just changing places—you're jumping decades.

Fuck no, Gwenn says. But now when Mutt looks at the husband, all he sees is no more cartoons, no more dirty diapers, and no more puddles of vomit—he's rounding all of this up to no more Carson Jr. So he says, hey, come on, maybe it'd be good for Jr. to be with his father for a while, you know? And Gwenn gives him a look that says, no, I don't know, and if you ask me again, I'll kill you.

I'll be back in the morning to pick him up, the husband says. Pack up a couple spare diapers, if you've got any. I said no, Gwenn says. Come back again and I'll sic Carl on you.

Now the husband's laughing, a deep thing, like bass thumping out of a six-foot speaker. Who the fuck's Carl? he says. Him? And he's pointing at Mutt. Carl's the dog, dickhead, Gwenn says. But the husband's still laughing, all the way down the driveway, and into

the road, and laughing still as he climbs back into his truck and shuts the door.

What the hell are you thinking? Gwenn says after he leaves. We can't give Carson Jr. to him. That man's out of his mind.

Well, Mutt says. But he's got a Playstation 3. Jr.'d love that.

What Carson Jr. wouldn't love, Gwenn says, is that slut from Pleasant Valley running a meth lab out of the basement, and Carson Sr. blowing Carson Jr.'s entire diaper budget on shitty poker hands. Not to mention Carson Sr.'s spending most weekends in Lubbock County for punching the wrong men in their faces, and occasionally probably that slut from Pleasant Valley.

Okay, Mutt says. So we keep Carson Jr.

Damn right, Gwenn says.

Then Gwenn goes into the kitchen and gets blitzed on skunk and rum. The movie about cars is over, so guess who's gotta put both Carson Jr. and Mrs. G to bed.

But Mrs. G doesn't want to, because now she's Jen, and all she wants to do is talk about overdue fines and how it's almost Twinnie's birthday, and how she's buying him something perfect, but that she can't tell Mutt what it is, because it's supposed to be a surprise. So Mutt says the hell with it, and just lets her be Jen and awake. Mutt takes over the television, and Carson Jr. falls asleep on the couch, and Mrs. G starts calling herself Jenny and talking about how they don't know what to name the baby, and then she wanders off to who knows where to do who knows what, which even she'll forget about sometime before morning.

The husband's back at dawn, wearing the same shirt but smelling like shit.

Morning, Carl, the husband says. Just here for Carson Jr.

Hold on, Mutt says, still rubbing his eyes, ignoring the bit about Carl. He goes upstairs to get Gwenn, but she won't wake up. He puts

his ear to her lips and listens for breathing. Still alive, just sleeping it off. Gwenn, he shouts, shaking her. But she's like something empty.

He goes back downstairs. Carson Jr.'s awake and off the couch and talking to the husband. The husband's got him saying a new word, truck.

Well, Carl, I think we're about ready to go, the husband says. Did you throw some diapers together?

Mutt's arms are a size S, which in his head he rounds up to M. But even then, Mutt knows both of his M's could fit inside one of the husband's XL's. Sorry, Mutt says, but you can't take him.

What do you mean, I can't take him? the husband says. I'm his father. Who the hell are you? Carson Jr.'s better off here, Mutt says. Where's Gwenn? the husband says. Mutt says, sleeping. Then that's that, the husband says. He's coming with me. Carl the Dog comes trotting in from the kitchen. The husband roughs up his fur, and then Carl goes slinking back off toward his water dish. I don't know, Mutt says.

Let me explain this to you, the husband says, since this might be a bit complicated for a kid still in high school. The husband palms the umbrella stand, shaking umbrellas out onto the floor. Either I take Carson Jr., the husband says, or I hit you with this, and then I take Carson Jr.

First of all, Mutt says, I don't go to high school. But second of all, I'd rather not take this up with the umbrella stand.

I ought to kill you anyway, the husband says, for sleeping with my wife.

When Gwenn finds out Mutt let the husband take Carson Jr., she spends a couple minutes hitting him, and then she takes off too. Where the hell're you going? Mutt shouts from the porch. Out, she shouts, not looking at him, and then driving away with their car.

This leaving Mutt alone with Mrs. G, about which he's none too thrilled.

He tugs on one of Carson Jr.'s diapers, hiking it up as far as it'll

go, then walks around the house for a while, trying to see if Mrs. G will notice anything different. But she doesn't—she's talking about Boris Karloff, Twinnie's heart problems, having to can some jam for a church drive that probably happened forty years ago. So Mutt gives up and calls up The Big D.

Hell yeah, Big D says. Where've you been?

They meet up at the empty bleachers and split a case of Shiner Bock at the field where Mutt's no longer allowed to play, not because he wasn't good enough, but because  $\sin(x)$  and  $\cos(x)$  were a language he didn't understand. Same for  $\text{HBr} + \text{KHCO}_3$ , for *I tried to match it, seam by seam, But could not make them fit.* We any good this year? Mutt asks. Nope, D says. And then: well, pretty good. Damn, Mutt says. I knew it. You ever coming back to school? D asks. Maybe, Mutt says. And then: well, probably not. Damn, D says, *I knew that.*

V.P. have a new chair yet? Mutt asks. No, D says, laughing. You should see him trying to talk down to you from a foldout. How're you gonna take him seriously when he's sitting on one of those? Almost wish I was still around, Mutt says, just to see it.

Then one of the Hollys calls up The Big D about driving over to Two Draw. You wanna come? D says. Yeah, Mutt says, but I can't. I better check in at home.

By home Mutt meant his parents', but instead he walks back to Gwenn's, and Gwenn's still gone. Mrs. G is carrying around a light-bulb, can't remember where she saw the one that needed replacing. Mutt tosses Carl the Dog some leftover ribs and then sits on the porch until it's dark and Gwenn is still somewhere else, and then he thinks, oh well, what the hell, and walks the twelve blocks across town to his parents' house.

Thought you had a car now? his dad says when he opens the door. I do, Mutt says. Then where is it? his dad says, looking up and down the empty street. Don't worry about it, Mutt says. I let someone borrow it. His dad's got his glasses on, a ballpoint and the newspaper bunched up in one hand, caught halfway through one of his crosswords.

Which, try having the one dad in town who does crosswords when the rest of the dads are watching high school football on television. See how far that gets you with the other dads, or their sons for that matter. Try having the one mom who posed for magazines that the other moms keep catching their sons with. See how many meals you'll make it through in the cafeteria without someone cracking a joke about that. Won't be many.

His dad's back at the kitchen table, filling in letters. His mom glances at him from the couch, says, well. Well, Mutt says. They called and said you haven't been going to school. Guess that's true, Mutt says. But only because they're letting me pick up extra shifts down at the rigs. You going to work out at the rigs forever? she says. It's good money, Mutt says. As long as your back holds, she says, and your knees. Your body gives out you, that's the end of that dream.

Which Mutt's used to hearing, her little speech she gives, like she's some sort of washed-up halfback whose knee blew out a week after she'd signed a deal with the NFL, instead of just a mom who left Post and drove to Houston to become a famous model and got a couple good gigs with a photographer from *Playboy* before they decided that her face wasn't quite what they were looking for after all. And who gave up after a couple more months of nothing in the way of modeling gigs and drove back to Post and hadn't left since. Which I've heard wasn't pretty—like watching a neighbor kid climb onto her roof with a homemade superhero cape, and jump, and get higher than you thought it was actually possible for anyone with legs that short to get, so high that at first you think maybe that's it, maybe she wasn't kidding, maybe she's about to just float off into the clouds—which is when you see the gravity kick in—first on the kid's face, then the rest of her body—and then as she snaps through the branches and bounces off the awning and faceplants into the driveway, you think, shit, kid, I could've told you that was going to happen.

Leave'm alone, his dad says. If he likes the rigs, let him work the rigs. Thanks, pops, Mutt says, feeling comfortable enough to take a

Coke from the fridge. But here's my question, his dad says, filling in more letters. I keep hearing you've been hanging out around the old librarian's house. Who? Mutt says. You mean Mrs. G? Exactly whom I mean, his dad says.

I don't like that woman, his mom shouts from the other room. The librarian? his dad shouts. No, her daughter, his mom shouts. Keep hearing things about that one.

Don't know anything about her, his dad says, crossing out one of his clues. But how do you have time to be hanging out around there if you're working overtime at the rigs? Well, I'm not down at Mrs. G's that much, Mutt says. And when I am, it's only because they hired me to help take care of Mrs. G, since sometimes she gets confused. So even when I am down there, at least I'm making money.

Mutt watches television for a while with his mom, then catches on that it's about bedtime for his parents, that they're getting ready to lock up the house and hit all the lights. Not wanting to get locked inside, Mutt says he ought to start heading back to his apartment. You have a ride? his dad asks. Yeah, Mutt says. I'm meeting them over at D's.

Then he walks the twelve blocks back to Mrs. G's and Gwenn's still gone, so he calls The Big D, but by now they've all left Two Draw and they're sleeping too, as they've got a game in the morning. And Mutt's sort of scared to be left alone with Mrs. G, because what if she wakes up thinking something weird, like maybe he needs a kidney transplant, and she's a surgeon, and all she's got to work with are those knives on the kitchen counter?

Gwenn comes back a week later, with blonde hair instead of brown, and a trunk full of stolen televisions, and Carson Jr. in tow. Carson Jr.'s learned a new word, slut, which Gwenn's in the middle of trying to unteach him. Mutt follows her around the house, kissing her on the neck and the shoulders every time she stops to unload another TV. Then once she's finished, she starts loving on him a little too, and then they make Carson Jr. some macaroni and then go upstairs and

everything's good again.

He wants to know how she got Carson Jr. back but Gwenn isn't saying. All she'll say is that Carson Sr. is a son of a bitch, and only wanted Carson Jr. to run some sort of scam. Then she says tomorrow they're selling the televisions. Then Mutt can't stop kissing her knees, because she's got everything figured out, and it doesn't matter if he's got a diploma or doesn't because they've got money and each other and he's starting to love her new hair.

But then later that night the husband calls and Mutt's dumb enough to be the one who picks up the phone.

"Have you got my boy?" the husband says. "Well, yeah," Mutt says. "Didn't you know?" The husband says, "I wasn't kidding when I said I ought to kill you. Let me talk to my wife."

Mutt hangs up the phone. Gwenn wants to know who it was. He tells her it was Big D. She wants to know who Big D is, so he tries to explain that D's the kid he was with when she met him. Gwenn tosses Carl the Dog into the backyard for trying to bite Carson Jr., and then they take Carson Jr. out on a walk. The phone's ringing as they step out the door, but Mutt says, leave it. It's ringing again when they walk back in later, but by the time Gwenn's got the door closed and Carson Jr. out of his muddy shoes, it's stopped, and that's the last they hear from it for the rest of the night.

Carson Jr.'s brought back a bunch of nasty habits from Pleasant Valley, including wearing his socks on his ears instead of his feet, making weird faces by shoving his fingers into his mouth and then pulling his lips apart as far as they'll go, and wanting maple syrup on his macaroni. He's also learned how to take the batteries out of the remote control.

When Gwenn's home, Mutt gives Carson Jr. his syrup. But when she's gone, hawking pills or buying diapers, Carson Jr. gets no syrup, and Carl the Dog gets Carson Jr.'s macaroni.

And Gwenn's getting weird, although Mutt doesn't really think

of it like that. When something starts going wrong, Mutt assumes it's him. It wasn't, that much I know. It never is—it's always the someone else. Mutt rounds up her getting weird to her just being in a funk. But the more he hangs from her, the more kisses he's dropping on her hipbones, the more rubbing he's giving to that spot on her neck where the skin turns to hair, the more she's needing to check on Mrs. G, or lie down for a nap, or see if Carson Jr.'s about done with his toast.

And then Gwenn catches him picking on Mrs. G. Mutt's got her on the porch, he's got on her dead husband's boots and her dead husband's Stetson. Jenny, Mutt's saying, you remember when we first met? I can't, Mrs. G says, sitting on her swing but not swinging. Mutt's leaning against the railing, arms folded. You remember me, don't you? Mutt says. I'm Earl, remember?

Then Gwenn comes around the side of the house carrying a couple jars of peaches from the cellar. Who the hell's Earl? she says. What do you mean, who's Earl? Mutt says. You said your dad's name was Earl.

It was, Gwenn says, but not once in fifty years did she call him that. As long as I was alive, she just called him Twin.

Oh, Mutt says. And Jesus, she says, what're you doing wearing his clothes? You're acting like you're about twelve. Which hits Mutt where he's sore, so he says, we probably all seem twelve to the middle-aged. Which hits Gwenn where she's sore, so she says, since when am I middle-aged? But she is, so she tells Mutt to go back to school and then bangs through the front door with the jam, leaving Mutt just sitting there with nothing to do except play his new game, the game he'd been trying to play all along, which is Pretend That You're Twinnie.

But then a truck pulls up across from the house, and out comes the husband, looking none too pleased. And Mutt's dumb enough to stand there and not do anything or run or even think of anything to say, he just keeps leaning against the railing with one hand on the brim of his hat, as the husband comes stomping across the front lawn, and up the steps of the porch, and, after giving a nod to Mrs. G, walks straight into the house, leaving the door wide open. Then still

before Mutt can think of anything smart to do, the husband comes straight out again, shaking the umbrellas out of the umbrella stand, the umbrellas clattering out onto the porch, and then he takes a swing at that sweet spot right under the brim of Mutt's hat, and damn if he doesn't connect with some forehead.

When Mutt wakes up at first he's not anyone. But then he's Mutt again, Mutt draped over the swing on the porch, watching Gwenn and the husband making out a couple feet away from him, the husband sitting on the railing, and Gwenn with her hand up his shirt, feeling around for whatever it is she hadn't found with Mutt.

The hell? Mutt mutters, touching the lump above one of his eyebrows. Shit, the husband says, Carl's awake. Oh, Gwenn says, looking at Mutt. Sorry. Then they take off inside, leaving Mutt on the porch with Mrs. G. Mutt looks at Mrs. G, but she's got nothing to say.

Mutt stands up but gets dizzy, ends up leaning against a post, wrapped around it the same way he's usually wrapped around Gwenn. Then Gwenn comes out carrying a box of her pills and the husband follows her with the one stolen television they still hadn't sold. The husband doesn't even look at Mutt, just hikes it out to his truck with the television.

He wanted to kill you, Gwenn says, stopping on the stairs. But I told him not to.

I thought you hated him, Mutt says. She says, well I did. You don't understand love—you're too young. What do you mean, I don't understand love? Mutt says. What do you think I'm doing here with you? Gwenn doesn't say anything. I thought he wanted Carson Jr.? Mutt says. No, just me, she says. He wanted me without Carson Jr. What he's always wanted. So that's what I'm going to give him.

Then she carries her box out to his truck and gets in and they're gone.

Mrs. G goes inside and Mutt follows her. Carson Jr.'s watching a

movie about superheroes. Mrs. G sits down next to him. Carson Jr. flops his head onto her lap, still watching the movie, and Carl the Dog trots in, growling a little, and then hops onto the couch between them, looking out the window at the place where the husband's truck used to be. Mutt thinks: an all-star lineup. And then he thinks: Carson Jr. is not your problem, so don't you even think about making him one.

So Mutt takes off the boots and the hat and leaves them on the stairs and puts on his sneakers and leaves. And he leaves not only Carson Jr., but also Carl the Dog, so that that way they're each leaving a problem behind, him and Gwenn, dumping them off onto Mrs. G, and it's not like she's going to remember their names long enough to do much dwelling on it. And Gwenn'll be back anyway, Mutt knows, sooner or later. He rounds up him getting left to him getting away — she won't find him sitting around waiting for her, he thinks, not this time.

So Mutt starts sleeping in Gwenn's car, parking it out at Two Draw. He was dumb enough not to take any food from Gwenn's when he left, and he refuses to go back, in case she's already there. So he steals a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread from Town & Country and starts living off that. Except a week later the bread's gone and so's the peanut butter and he's still in the car.

Mutt realizes he's going to have to choose between two futures: one where he goes back to Gwenn and keeps living off the pill money they collect, or one where he gets a job at Hotel Garza cleaning bathrooms or at Jackson Bros. Meat Packers skinning deer and boning hogs. Except he doesn't want Gwenn and he sure as hell doesn't want minimum wage. He doesn't see leaving Post as an option, not because he wouldn't want to, but because it just never occurs to him that leaving's even possible. So since each of his choices isn't actually a choice, Mutt decides he'll just go back to what he was doing before Gwenn ever happened.

So Mutt goes to see the V.P.

The V.P. keeps him waiting outside his office for almost an hour, then finally buzzes out front and tells them to send Mutt through. As soon as Mutt walks in, Mutt knows he's in trouble, because the V.P.'s got a new throne, instead of the foldout Big D had said he'd been sitting on. The V.P.'s new throne's got clawfoot legs, trunk-sized arms. The chair he's got Mutt sitting on has legs like twigs and no arms whatsoever. So, the V.P. says.

So, Mutt says. I'm thinking I'd like to give school another chance. *You're* going to give *school* another chance? V.P. says, rolling up one of his sleeves to his elbow. How about *school* giving *you* another chance? Do you think this school would *like* that? Or do you think it's possible this school might be opposed to that sort of thing?

Well, Mutt says, I don't know. I guess I hadn't thought of it that way. What makes you so eager to get back into the classroom all of a sudden? V.P. says, rolling up his other sleeve. Mainly that I'd like to be somebody someday, Mutt says. I mean somebody other than a shelfstocker or a gas station attendant. And you think another semester's worth of trig and American history is going to make you a big shot? V.P. says. Well, that and a diploma, Mutt says. But I never said I wanted to be a big shot. Just not a shelfstocker.

Your parents know you're in here? V.P. asks. No sir, Mutt says. They said you've been working out at the rigs, V.P. says, leaning back in his throne, making a face at Mutt like one of Carson Jr.'s. Rigs get too tough? You decide you're not cut out for a man's work after all?

Sure, Mutt says. Whatever you say. That's right, V.P. says. You take that attitude back into the classroom, too. When Ms. Casares tells you something about Edgar Allan Poe, you don't give her shit about him being boring and dead. You say, sure, Ms. Casares, and you remember what she told you. When Ms. Holly tells you something about isosceles triangles, you don't make a joke about anatomical features that may or may not resemble those triangles—not loud enough for other students to hear, not even just to yourself in your head. You say, sure, Ms. Holly, and you remember it. And when Mr. Saba tells you to

mix x amount of chemical A with x amount of chemical B, you don't throw in some extra chemical C just to see what'll happen. You say, sure, Mr. Saba, and you mix x of A with x of B and you watch what happens and you learn from it and set off absolutely zero fire alarms in the process. You got that?

Sure, Mutt says. Absolutely.

But that's if I were to actually take you back, V.P. says. Did you actually think there was a chance of that? Well, Mutt says, maybe. Why? V.P. says. Mutt says, just trying to be positive, I guess. You are one of the dumbest kids to ever have come out of Post, V.P. says, which is pretty sad, considering your dad was one of the smartest. And me calling you dumb isn't just me being mean—it's a fact, it's statistics, it's your GPA. So I'll let you back, V.P. says, but even with that diploma, I don't think you've got any chance of doing anything outside of stocking shelves.

So that's it? Mutt says. I'm back? That's it, V.P. says. You start tomorrow. In the meantime, get lost.

But instead of leaving, Mutt heads into the cafeteria to look for The Big D to tell him the news. And Mutt's excited, because he's going to become somebody after all, even if he'll never have that jersey. Mutt spots D and the rest of everyone at a different table than usual, along the back wall instead of at the table by the vending machines. D's mowing down on a basket of cheese fries, and telling a story while he does, losing bits of fry every time he gets to a good part. Mutt pulls up a chair, and D stops midsentence, between "ass on the counter" and whatever was coming next. Damn, The Big D says, swallowing some fries. You're back?

Mutt laughs. You better believe it, Mutt says. D says, and the jersey? No jersey, Mutt says, but I'm back. Damn, D keeps saying.

But then someone's telling D to finish, and someone else is asking a question, looking for particulars about some boss from the story. And no one's calling him Big D anymore, just Dean, and when did that happen?

And D's already forgotten Mutt, shoveling another handful of fries into his mouth and getting on with his story. And Mutt's seeing that his return isn't glory like he thought it'd be, just straight tail-between-the-legs. So Mutt gets up and says he's going to get some food, but when he gets to the end of the line he walks straight past it and down the hall and out the door, already hating the thought of coming back in the morning.

And then while Mutt's driving to his parents' house to beg back his room, he gets a seriously stupid idea, although he doesn't acknowledge it yet. The idea just sits there in the back of his head, keeping to itself, not saying much of anything. But later, when Mutt first notices it, and the idea starts talking, he'll realize that it's been there since just now, or maybe even before, maybe since he left Gwenn's in the first place.

So your car's back, his mom says when she opens the door. Mutt's dad is working on his computer at the kitchen table, running numbers. Mutt's mom sits down across from him, signing checks for the bills they've got to pay. So Mutt sits down too.

And Mutt tells them that he'd like to move back in, if that's alright, because he's quitting his job at the rigs and he's going to get his degree.

And then they're just sitting there, not saying a word.

Just until I finish school, Mutt says. Then I'll get a job, start paying my own way.

Mutt's dad takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Mutt's mom gets up and stands behind Mutt, putting a hand on his shoulder, and it's the first time she's touched him in maybe a year. Did you hear that? she says. Sure I heard, his dad says. I'm sitting right here. She squeezes Mutt's shoulder and sits back down, looking like she's posing for a photo where she's supposed to be happy. I'm so thankful, she says. I'd just about given up on you—no diploma, and running around with that good-for-nothing woman, with her dealing all those drugs. What woman? Mutt says. And who says she's a dealer? And then I heard you've been living out at the lake, his mom says, and I

thought, that's it, we've lost him for good.

Well I'm proud of you, his dad says. It'll be nice to have you around again. We'll get you that diploma, and then maybe start looking at trade schools or something. Year or two, you'll be making good money. Then he shoves back on his glasses, gets back at the numbers on his screen.

You need any help moving your things back? Mutt's mom asks, getting up to get a carton of juice out of the fridge. No, Mutt says, I can get it myself. One load, no problem.

Which is when Mutt first notices that idea sitting in his head, and he thinks, well shit. And he knows it's bad but he wants to believe it's good. Mainly he just wants to tell Gwenn what he's doing, to tell her that he's getting his degree, that he's got friends again. But what if the husband's there, he thinks. But then he thinks: he's probably not there. But what if he is, he thinks. But then he thinks: but maybe he's not. And maybe Gwenn is, and maybe she's lonely.

So Mutt tells his parents he'll be back with his things, and then he drives across town to what he's starting to realize might not be a mansion after all. And the truck isn't around, so Mutt thinks, see, he's gone. He probably dropped her back off after a day or two, already sick of her drinking. But just in case the husband is around, Mutt parks down the road, then sneaks up onto the porch, peeking in one of the windows, the same one he'd caught the husband peeking in a couple weeks before. But Mutt can't see shit. The lights are off—it might as well be a window into nothing. So Mutt thinks, do I knock, or do I not knock. Then he decides: not knock.

So Mutt just walks right in.

And as soon as Mutt does, he realizes his idea wasn't just stupid—it was about the worst one he's ever had.

All he wants is to never have come, to have meant what he said when he'd told himself that he was never coming back to this place, not for nothing. But here he is, and Mrs. G's on the couch with her husband's hat in her lap, and her skin a weird enough color that Mutt

knows she isn't just sleeping, she's gone.

And shit just everywhere—some of it human's, some of it dog's. And bags of pretzels torn apart, left in shreds near the staircase, and all of the pretzels either missing or crumbs. And a puddle of puke next to the umbrella stand, crusted over.

Carl the Dog? Mutt shouts. And he's not even feeling that bad for Mrs. G, because now all of those hers are gone, and she's finally nothing, not like before, but this time, really nothing. And Carl the Dog comes skulking in from the kitchen, snarling at Mutt. Hey, Mutt says, what the hell's your problem? But Carl keeps barking and snapping. Where's Gwenn? Mutt says. She here? And then he remembers Carson Jr.

And Gwenn's not there, and Mutt realizes that if she hasn't come back yet, she might not ever be coming back—that maybe she's better at meaning the things she says than he is. And he can tell that meanwhile Carl the Dog and Carson Jr. have been fighting for territory in this house that they couldn't get out of—Carson Jr. eating anything he could figure out how the hell to get out of its wrapper or its can, and Carl the Dog doing everything he could to eat Carson Jr. The signs are everywhere. Split-open boxes of macaroni, of oatmeal, of chocolate chip cookies, left scattered across the carpet. A half-chewed sneaker under the dining room table. Claw marks along the frame of the kitchen door Jr.'d managed to get closed.

Mutt tosses Carl the Dog out into the backyard, his hand getting bit in the process. And then he decides to leave, and make an anonymous phone call from the payphone on Main Street to tipoff Tahoka PD that there's a dead body in Post, maybe two.

But even while he tells himself what he thinks he's deciding, instead he opens the kitchen door. Carson Jr.'s inside sprawled out on the floor, eating a handful of uncooked macaroni. His arms and shoulders are covered with bite marks from where Carl the Dog had been nipping at him, and Jr. keeps saying button, which makes no sense, but the way he's saying it, Mutt can tell he's happy to see him.

And Mutt thinks: Mrs. G's gone, and Gwenn's not coming back. And then: so either it's you, or it's no one. And then: goddamn it.

So he carries the boy out to Gwenn's car, and as he does, he's rounding down the grades he would have got, C's to D's, diploma to no diploma. And he runs out to the backyard and opens the side gate so that Carl the Dog can get out, and as he jerks open the latch, he's rounding down everyone he ever knew, Big D from best friend to just Dean, his parents from people who probably love him to people who'd probably rather just have him gone. And then he runs back to the car and they're driving, Mutt's trying not to think about it, but they are, and as they coast past Main Street Carson Jr. pukes all over the passenger door but Mutt's too afraid to stop, because if they lose their momentum now, they're going to lose it for good, and as the car swings onto 84 Mutt's rolling down the windows and Carson Jr. starts crying about the mess he's made, and Mutt's thinking, maybe I'll find her and she'll take him, but then he rounds that down too, because he knows there's no way in hell he's ever going to find that woman, the woman he met on this same road at about this same spot that they're now passing. And then they're farther, farther than most anyone he's ever known has ever been interested in going, driving to someplace new for the both of them, and Mutt feels like he's stripping off a jersey and turning it in, and then another, and then another, until he's pulled off just about every jersey this town had ever taught him to wear, and I don't know how to explain what I thought I was doing, or why I thought we'd get as far as I thought we'd get, but I knew I had to keep driving until we were too far away to come back again even if we wanted to. It's just that if you do something bad enough to a person, sometimes it makes you feel like you want to do whatever you can to make them somebody different, somebody so far removed from that person they were that they won't even feel like what you did to them was to them, but to someone else entirely. Which is what I'm doing. I'm going to fill this kid's head with as many perfect little memories as I can, until they crowd out anything that's left of the feel

of the dog's teeth popping through the skin on his shoulders, or the smell of his dead grandmother, or the taste of the macaroni I'd fed him that I'd topped with my snot instead of the syrup that he wanted. The more that I hate him, the more I'm going to work at it. And I hate him enough already to keep working at it until long after I'm gone. ■