

# Chasing Sirens

*Forrest Ashby*

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Except for the funny way his leg had snagged in the bike chain, the kid didn't look dead. "Move back," a cop said. He wiped his brow with a sleeve then elbowed me toward the squad car. "Yeah, you. Back!"

I stepped forward anyway, noticing the pretzel-shaped bend of the bike tire, the eerie whiteness of the tennis shoe, and saw that this wasn't Benny. This kid was too sleek, too strong, too perfect.

I caught myself against a yield sign and bit into an aspirin. When I'd first heard the sirens, I was afraid I'd find a different scene. Blue lights flashing off pavement. My brother Benny floating belly up in a rain-slicked alley. Skull crushed, throat slit, ass rammed full of Coke bottle glass or worse. Cops bagging him in ziplock. Plastic kissing his skin like wet pajamas.

"Poor thing," an old woman beside me said. She bumped the yield sign and hobbled around me for a better view, her shoulder hunched over her purse like it was some special crutch. "Hurts to look at him." Her hair, thinning and knotted in metal curlers, sat protected under a scarf of see-through wrap, but against the pulse of ambulance light, everything else about her looked banged up and flattened out.

I popped another aspirin, watched as cops and paramedics separated kid from bike chain. What got me most was that nobody thought to close his mouth. As they lifted him over the handlebars, I could make out the dull glint of capped tooth, the shine of tongue and cherry sourball. I closed my eyes and fumbled my pockets for breath mints.

Sometimes at night when sirens woke me, I calmed myself by imagining Benny swinging upside down from the rungs of a fire truck safety ladder, his shirt fallen over his face, the words *Catch Me if You Can* finger-painted above his belly button. Or I pictured him digging up pods in a city greenhouse, his nose streaked with potting soil and bubble gum. Firemen swapping knock-knock jokes as they uncorked his toe from the mouth of a twenty-foot garden hose. Not a scratch on him. Everything a-okay.

"Anybody know the boy?" the old woman asked. Sidestepping her, I smacked elbows with a guy just

because he was in my way, then shot a final glance at the kid who looked smaller now that he'd been freed from the bike. Behind him, the driver of the damaged van paced the sidewalk; he kept punching air and muttering *fuck*.

The sirens started up again. I kicked a rusted can of paint thinner and headed toward a back alley where I squatted, rolled a joint I didn't have the stomach to smoke, then cupped my hands over my ears and concentrated on the seashell call of Benny's voice.

*Danny*. Long and breathy, like wind in my bones. *Find me*.

Above, a window shattered, tinkling glass into the alley like sparkles of man-made rain. And that's what I would've told Benny if he were there with me. Check it out, kid. Sparkles of man-made rain.

*Licorice*, Benny had said to me once. When he was six or seven and just beginning to share his simplified version of the world with me, he lifted a Band-Aid from his knee, lowered his nose to the wound, sniffed, and giggled out *licorice* like it was the most natural thing to say.

So I said it too. There in the alley, with blood leaking out of my fist. "Licorice." Hanging in the air like that, the word didn't sound like much.

Several nights later as snow fell, Brewster slid back the glass door to the balcony of our apartment. "Crazy maniac," he said. "Put some clothes on. What you wanna do? Freeze up like some fool statue?" He laughed, tossed me a bathrobe which I let drop near my feet, and when I refused to budge, he stripped to his underwear and joined me. "Okay," he said, hopping and blinking and laughing alongside me. He grabbed a handful of snow off the railing, and finding it too powdery to pack into a ball, rubbed it briskly across his belly, the fierce muscles contracting, the muddy brownness of his skin yellowing with each scrape of cold. "Okay," he asked, still rubbing, "what the hell are we doing?"

Catching snow, I told him.

I spun full circle twice, tilted my head back,

mouth open. It rarely snowed so hard or so fast so early in the year, and when freak things like that happened—a subway train jumping the rail inside a terminal, scooping an umbrella out of a commuter’s hand, skidding to a stop inches from a troop of shell-shocked Girl Scouts, nobody hurt, not a scratch on the umbrella, well, *that* never happened, but you get the idea—when miraculous events like that took place, I almost believed that anything was possible.

I gulped down granule after granule of snow.

Just maybe, I thought, as Brewster’s arms slid around me. Maybe the kid was out there, shoveling a path home with a rusted piece of gutter pipe.

“You had enough of this game?” Brewster asked, his breath bubbling over my ears like road tar. “Let’s go inside. I’m freezing.” And to coax me, he slipped out of his briefs and zinged them slingshot style toward the glass door.

“In a minute,” I whispered.

So he waited, and I imagined the freakish picture we’d give Benny if he suddenly showed up: two bare-assed guys holding each other in a snowstorm.

“He’s out there,” I said, so forcefully my shoulders jerked back and popped Brewster in the jaw.

Brewster let go of me, and shaking snow from his tight curls, sighed like he’d heard this all before. He slid open the door to the apartment and stepped inside. “Coming?” he asked. “Or am I spending the rest of my night with a popsicle?”

“Right,” I said. Suddenly, I felt cold, naked, stupid. I stepped inside, unable to look at anything but the gross blueness of my feet.

“Look, I’m not trying to discourage your doing something that might help you find the boy.” Brewster paused long enough to throw down a towel. “Here, wipe your feet.” He latched the door behind me and drew the blinds. “But I know how you let your heart get caught up in these crazy notions, like you’ll find the kid holed up in a balloon factory—he’s so transfixed with helium he forgets to leave—or some fool thing like that. But Dan, the kid’s been gone what, thirteen months? And he’s dumb as a tadpole to boot. He might not be anywhere you can find him, you know?” He grabbed hold of my head, and with another towel, roughhoused my hair so fiercely I almost punched him.

“You don’t know,” I said.

Brewster twisted the tip of the towel, told me to wipe out my ears. “I’m just saying you gotta watch out

for your own self. No sense looking your life away for something that’s always gone.” He kissed the back of my neck and muttered something I immediately blocked out.

*I love you, perhaps, or how’s about some pretzels?*

At birth, Benny’s brain had been choked of oxygen for three minutes. That was Mom’s explanation anyway; she made no mention of her drug use. My brother Vince and I looked out for him as best we could, but there was no getting past what a goof he was. One day when he was thirteen, Benny ditched school to smoke dope with his buddy Skully. That, in itself, was nothing unusual, but Benny never returned home. The next morning, Skully turned up facedown in a construction ditch, a bullet hole through his throat. The only sign of Benny, other than some sneaker prints, was a discarded Bazooka wrapper. Cops first figured Benny pulled the trigger, but that didn’t make sense to any of us who knew him.

For the first five weeks after Benny disappeared, Vince and I searched alleyways, side streets, runaway shelters, crack houses, hospitals, bus stations, churches, skating rinks, you name it. Vince took sick leave, then lost his job at the warehouse. I quit going to school. Finally one night, after five weeks of searching, Vince bought a case of cheap beer, showed up at the group home I’d just moved into, and tossed me a can after the house supervisor went out for a smoke. “Drink,” Vince said, plopping down in a beanbag chair and rolling up his sleeves. “Take a look. Pretty nasty, huh?” From the wrist to the elbow, his arms were tattooed with leafy jungle vines. Grayish green. Like old bruises. Along one side of the stems, a vein stood out, bubbled and black, infected. “Had it done in Chinatown. Told the guy to carve me up like something I’d see in a Tarzan movie. I was hoping crocodiles, but what the hell.” As he was leaving, he grabbed hold of my collar, shoved me against a porch post and told me it was over, the kid was nowhere, simply out of here. “You got that in your skull, Dan? Benny’s gone for good. Poof.” He kissed my nose, the only time he’d ever done something like that, then shook me. “Poof.”

Not long after that, I started checking the morgue. By the end of the first year, I’d stared into the faces of at least ten unclaimed dead kids.

A few weeks after the snowfall, I took a peek at an overdose victim too small to fit Benny’s description.

Poor kid was nine or ten years old, eleven tops. I let the attendant know I wasn't amused. "Why the hell you showing me little guys? Benny'd be fourteen by now. Got that? Fourteen."

On the way home, I lost my key somehow, and Brewster had to toss down a spare from the balcony. Once I was inside, he greeted me with a toothbrush in his mouth and nothing on but boxer shorts. His stomach was a little pudgy, but his chest and shoulders were solid, the products of a nightly exercise ritual—two hundred push ups, zero sit ups, a bucket of mocha mint ice cream.

He swallowed the toothpaste and took the brush out of his mouth. "You look beat. How'd you lose your key? You fuck somebody?" He said it like he was joking, but I could tell he was trying to start something.

I told him I'd been to the morgue. Brewster didn't respond at first, just closed the door and asked if I needed anything. "Want some coffee, aspirin, a beer?" I told him about the unclaimed dead kid.

He left me by the doorway and came back wearing jeans and a football jersey. "I've got some back pay due me. If nobody claims the kid, we'll front the costs of the burial. You and me, we'll take care of things. Swear." He started rubbing his hand along the back of my neck. Then he pulled away and brought me a beer. "So tell me again how the key ended up gone."

Instead of answering, I left. I walked about four miles until I reached the burnt-out tenements. There were nearly a block of them. Glassless, broken buildings, chipped and vacant, propped up, it appeared, by the dangling arms of metal fire escapes. Newsmen called it the most dangerous part of the city. I stopped and stared. The only signs of life were the lovers' vows spray-painted beside gang names on the outer walls. Nick loves Angie, crossed out, loves Paula, crossed out, loves Sue.

Police found bodies there two or three times a month. Frozen bag ladies. Cut up old men. Women with bras stuffed in their mouths. Every now and then, a murdered child.

I imagined Benny being trapped in there. Held hostage by some sleazeball. Some pimply circus fat man with yellow syphilis sores. The kind of weirdo Vince liked to warn me about. The troop master who branded his name on the butts of boy scouts. The birthday clown who bashed in the heads of paper boys, then cemented their bodies into his walls. Or some perfectly

decent-looking guy who the neighbors couldn't believe was a psychopath. The kind of guy who'd pay a kid ten bucks to cut his lawn when all the other neighbors offered five.

I sat on a curb near a fireplug, stared out at the battered buildings, and as much as I tried, I couldn't believe what Vince and Brewster did. As crazy as it sounded, I knew Benny was safe.

I thought about how the littlest things used to scare him. A creak in the floorboard, lightning, Mom's lavender lipstick, a knock late at night when he and I were the only ones home. There were mornings when he was afraid to ride the school bus, afraid of the mean kids' jabs, jokes, their poked-out tongues and squirrely faces. There was the time we took him to the laundromat and he was afraid to stand near a particular dryer. No explanation for it. He screamed when Mom dumped a load in, wouldn't shut up until she changed dryers. And there was a whole week of nights when Benny was five and couldn't sleep if the lights were out; he'd rock and whimper and drool onto his pillow. He kept this up until Vince and I chipped in and bought him a little flashlight. The preschool kind he could turn off and on with a button. After that, he fell asleep each night with a trickle of light inching up his neck, making his chin glow orange.

Most of all, I thought of the thirteen-year-old kid. Big-boned and goofy, talking like there wasn't an ounce of brain in his head. A kid who smoked dope because it helped cover how dumb he was. A kid who, on one of the last nights I saw him, asked me if it was true Spiderman wasn't a real guy. He'd just seen something bad, a bus crash maybe, and needed to let Spidey know.

"Hey you." This tall guy whistled, moving toward me out of the shadows. He waved something in his hand. A rock or brick. A block of something solid. "My pup's hurt in that building over there. You know anything about helping animals?"

I got up, started walking the other way, slowly so the guy wouldn't think I was scared.

"Hey man, I'm talking to you." I heard his shoes scrape sidewalk, pick up speed, knock gravel against the fireplug.

I stepped up the pace, checking the sidewalk for a board or piece of pipe, anything I could use to knock him off me. I scooped up an empty whiskey bottle, shook it out of the paper bag.

The footsteps tapered off, headed back the way they'd come. I tapped the bottle against my leg, feeling

more sick than scared. I thought of Benny following the guy into the shadows, expecting to find a baby basset hound or beagle, some cute little fluff ball with a splashing tongue and tail that went flap against the floorboard.

“Jesus,” I said, feeling what Vince must’ve felt the night needles cut jungle veins into his arm. I busted the bottle against a street sign and held the jagged blades upward.

Within twenty minutes, I reached the Strip. Blinks of neon lit up the sidewalks, giving the bright heels, the leather skirts, the sequined gloves, every piece of fur and jewelry out there a psychedelic wash. “Hey tiger,” this whore in a leopard vest purred as I passed. A fresh-faced girl with daisies in her hair smiled and asked if I needed a sweatshirt. A guy in wire-rimmed glasses hurried by, afraid to look up. I bypassed a cop at the corner and crossed the street.

A couple of newcomers were out, eleven or twelve year olds with tank tops. No muscles yet to speak of, one or two armpit hairs. Scrubbed faces, sooty fingers, the all-American street dweller look. They both wore baseball caps. The kid in rolled up sweat pants was chalking out his price on the sidewalk. The other, less bold, was sitting on the steps of a closed deli and trying his best to tape together the leftovers of two cigarettes. When the cop crossed the street, both kids darted into the alley. The cop laughed and bopped his bobby stick against a parking meter. I headed the opposite way, pushing through a crowd of men outside an all night donut shop. I went in and ordered coffee. The flyer about Benny was still taped to the wall behind the cash register; his Xeroxed face grinned goofily.

“Anybody said they recognized the kid?” I asked, giving the donut guy a dollar.

He shrugged and held up his hands like the only English he understood was *decaf* or *cream filling*. I took the coffee outside, ignoring the glance of the guy who opened the door for me.

One of the strip shows had just let out and the sidewalks were crawling with big men wearing turquoise rings and bolo ties. A sunburned guy in a cowboy hat winked and smiled. His teeth were tobacco stained, his gums greenish. On his vest, he’d pinned a name tag that said Las Vegan.

“Howdy,” he said proudly.

At *Peep Box*, Zack’s new doorman wouldn’t let me in until Zack signaled I was of age.

“We’ve been having trouble with cops lately and you look like a baby.” Zack rested his palm on my shoulder. He led me through the hallway of peep show booths, holding me close to his side so the guys in shadows wouldn’t think of hassling me. All around me, there were tokens dropping, video voices moaning and sighing, curtains sliding back from booths. Men whispering, coughing, popping gum.

At the end of the hallway was Zack’s private office, disguised by a sign that said *off limits, bathroom*. Inside were a toilet and urinal, a sink, a desk and a leather swivel back chair. Taped to the walls were posters of calendar boys and catalogue men, plus a few stills from Zack’s favorite porn films.

Zack locked the door behind him, told me to have a seat in his comfy chair. He slid open his desk drawer and pulled out a box of king-sized rubber bands. “So how you been, kid. Any luck with Benny?” He snapped a rubber band around his wrist, let it hang there like a cheapo bracelet. “You’re looking good, by the way.” He licked his lips jokingly. “Think you’re man enough for me yet?”

“Not yet.” I whipped out some cash.

He laughed and tossed me a baggie of weed which I stuffed in my jacket pocket. If Brewster found out, he’d have my ass. Before Benny disappeared, I rarely touched the stuff.

Zack walked me back to the main storeroom and told me his plans to redecorate. “I’m talking new carpet. Maybe some wood paneling inside the booths. Strobe lights. Good idea, huh?”

“Sure.” Anything would help if it got rid of the plastic smell, the wrinkled wrap Zack put on fuck magazines so a guy couldn’t peek without buying. I stuck an aspirin in my mouth and sucked. Zack was chewing on a Giant Sweet Tart and snapping a rubber band against the glass counter. Fat and ordinary, he had this diamond-like twinkle in his eyes that was both wormy and comforting.

“You’ve got an admirer,” Zack said, nodding toward this old guy we called Geezer who was blinking at me from behind a skin rack. His purple fingers reached into a gravy colored trench coat and pulled out a wallet. The story was he wore a trench coat because he was always stiff. Some sort of freak-o creep who kept an ice pick tied to his belt loop. He coughed, then held up a ten like it was some ornament I was supposed to reach for.

“Get out of here, Geezer.” Zack shot the rubber band at the skin rack. “Use your tokens. I’m sick of looking at you.”

Geezer grunted, put the ten away, and raked his fingers through the Hawaiian beads that lead to the booths.

The bell above the entrance jingled, and Ringo skirted in smelling like cinnamon gum and baby powder. He twisted his way around a rack of hardcore comic books before pausing to flip his skinny braid, long and shoe-polish black—Apache vogue, he called it—over the curve of his shoulder. “Hi Danny, Zachariah,” he said, flirting his bracelets at us. “Not much action in here tonight is there? Not the case outside. Just around the corner there’s this cute little Anglo-Saxon in a muscle shirt. I swear he’s the limits, wiggling to and fro like he needs to be tamed. And so creamy. What skin.”

“So if he’s out there, what are you doing in here?” Zack asked.

“Decadence,” Ringo sighed, patting his T-shirt, “is not a practice I adhere to. Not in this day and age anyway. Artificial stimulation is the way to go if you ask me.” He eyed a model he liked on one of the magazine covers and scraped a polished fingernail across the plastic. “Plus why should I torture myself? Who wants to see the fellow he chooses over me? If it’s someone pimply and wilted, my bubble will pop. ’Course, I can sympathize. That little bombshell’s waiting for some mythical Richie Rich to come along and rescue him.” He tapped the cover of the magazine. “Why does he degrade himself like that? Such a nice face, forearms too. Pity, but I suppose we all have our little perversities. Oh Danny, what a punkish jacket. Is it new?”

I laughed, told him to keep his hands off. “It’s new enough.”

Ringo stroked the collar anyway, then squeezed in his cheeks and blew me a kiss with his graffiti lips, the upper one painted purple and the lower one peach with blue stripes. “How romantic. Is it a love gift?”

Before I could answer, he started telling a story all three of us knew. About the time months back when Brewster had dragged me out of this place, all the while yelling for me to stop whoring. It didn’t matter that I was there to check with Zack about posting Benny’s missing person flyer. The whole scene was a bit of a production—Brewster overturned a skin rack and threw a basket of condoms against the wall. He calmed down considerably once he’d dragged me clear of any onlook-

ers. Ringo, of course, didn’t mention this part. He was content to remind us only of the drama he’d seen from the security of a peep show booth.

“A masterpiece.” Ringo was so wound up he was spitting. The blue stripes on his lips were starting to smear. “Violent, passionate love in the midst of this vile . . .”—he swept his bracelets through the air and knocked off two *Hot Blonds in Action* picture paperbacks—“this horrid, icky little place. Even if he is a thousand years older than you, why do you keep coming *here* if you’ve got that?”

An unshaven guy in overalls entered the shop and eyed us up and down. I didn’t like the way he smelled—too much like a gas pump—and Ringo shrugged him off because he was too arrogant, too thin, and not wearing any jewelry. The guy bought a handful of tokens and headed for the booths.

“I trust he doesn’t think I will follow,” Ringo said so the guy would hear.

“Don’t be rude.” Zack shot a rubber band at us. “Tonight’s slow enough as it is.”

A muscular kid with blond curls and surfer arms stepped into the shop. He was a couple of years younger than me and he showed off these flopping eyelashes and a dopey, bouncy way of walking. Athletic and tall, here was Ringo’s bombshell.

“Don’t say hi,” Ringo chirped as the kid pushed through the beads. “Rub it in my face. Torture me. Ruin my life.” He shrugged, flitted his wrist toward us. “Younglings. Who can figure?”

Geezer came out of his booth and joined us in front of the shop where he smiled sheepishly.

I popped an aspirin and sucked on it until my tongue felt raw enough to drop off. Brewster had tried it the day before—chewing on aspirin without swallowing. “How the hell can you do that?” He held his mouth under the tap and coughed. He looked pretty funny with his head in the sink and water drooling down his belly, soaking his underwear. These were the dumb things I liked best about Brewster.

Zack opened a can of pineapple juice. Geezer, still smiling, waddled up to Ringo and told him he liked his makeup job. Had he considered putting a pearl in his nose?

“No thank you.” Ringo sucked in his lower lip. “I don’t degrade myself on a whim.” He smiled at me, rolled his eyes, then wiggled his fingers in a wave. “Gotta fly. Bye-bye boys. Be good. Be honest. Be savory.” He

turned and motioned toward the booths before stepping out the door. “If the little beauty ever returns to the world of the living, tell him I for one consider him forgiven. Heartbroken and penniless, I must carry on.” He bounced open the door with his hip and was gone.

Zack scooted the can of pineapple juice across the counter. “Finish it if you want. Too sour for me. You think that kid’s eighteen?”

All the sugar was stuck to the bottom and I downed the juice in one thick dose. Zack turned off the fluorescent lights and flipped on these hazy greenish lights that gave the skin racks, the lifeguard posters, the Hawaiian beads a deep-sea glow.

“Like it?” Zack asked. “Green’s my favorite.”

“It’s okay.” All it did for me was bring out the plastic smell. “I’ll be back in a minute.” The green light along with the sugar I drank was giving me a sick feeling like somebody had punched me. I popped another aspirin and stepped through the beads.

There was no light in the hallway. Just several booths lined up like stand-up coffins, the doors glowing from the blues of viewing screens. I pulled back the door to one of the booths, stared at the empty seat, the mess on the floor, the brightly lit screen—blank except for a request for tokens—and all at once, I was hit with this crumbling feeling like the aspirin had eaten through my tongue and kept going. Like somebody was dipping me in a tube of acid, letting my hair, skin and insides bubble up, pop, and peel off.

I flung open the door to another booth. There was no clear reason for doing it. I knew what the bombshell was doing. I didn’t need to see, but something—I was still burning up inside, sweating like crazy—something told me to rip back the door and do whatever I could to rescue the kid from the gas pump inside.

The guy in overalls was standing, wiping himself off with an oil rag. “Jesus,” he said, squinting to see who just broke in on his fun. “Jesus,” he said again and I realized he was talking about the bombshell who was buckled over on his knees and spitting on the floor. “He’s all yours.” The gas pump knocked my shoulder as he left the booth. I heard the rattle of beads behind me.

“What you looking at?” the kid asked. He lifted his head but didn’t try to get off his knees. Even in the dark I could see the glassy, see-through glaze in his eyes. He brushed his bare arm across his mouth. “So what the fuck you staring at?”

I left the booth and stepped through the beads. Zack was still playing with the lights, flipping them on and off so fast that if you looked around at all the blinks of light and all the boys in plastic wrap, you’d think you were in one giant peep show. He didn’t even notice when I ripped Benny’s flyer from the register and walked out.

It just didn’t seem right, leaving any part of him there.

That time Ringo was talking about, when Brewster dragged me out of *Peep Box* and carried me home, when the fighting was over, Brewster propped me on his couch, soaked up the ooze from my nose with a pillowcase, and kissed me all over with tiny, shivering presses. “I’m sorry, Dan, but I can’t take it no more. You gotta steer clear of those places. They’ll corrupt you. And hey, I promise you. I won’t mess you up like this again.”

“Okay,” I told him, and in my imagination, we celebrated our pact by roasting chestnuts, cupping the shells over our toes and cracking our feet so fast and hard against tile the neighbors below must have thought we were tap-dancing.

Outside *Peep Box*, the Strip was crowded, women on one side, boys on the other. Cars with tinted headlights and electric windows scooted along; men with big wallets stuck their hands out, snapped their fingers, whistled *hey, need a lift; where’s your mom; you got the time; I’m buying; you’re looking tight, kid, tight*. A cop car slowed down and crawled along beside me, lingering awhile before zipping forward.

I passed Geezer, who was standing under a street lamp, poking an ice pick into a taco and flicking out tomatoes. For an instant, I was sure I caught him singing the alphabet song in the same sort of mixed up way Benny did—no vowels other than the “a.” I stopped dead and glanced back at him.

Geezer’s lips weren’t moving, but I could still hear the song, loud and clear as if the tune were steaming up from the street grate. I ran to Geezer, knocked the ice pick and taco from his grasp, grabbed him by the collar, and threw him backwards into the lamp post. “What’s that?” I screamed, shaking and shoving him, banging him against the light until he started crying.

Geezer wasn’t singing a word. Still I heard them, jumbled and confused. Benny’s ABCs. No mistaking.

“What are you, a stinking ventriloquist?” I yelled. Then I let go. As he dropped to his knees, his chin

struck my shoulder and he emptied a mouthful of chewed-up taco onto my sleeve.

I took my time getting home, and Brewster greeted me by shoving a couch at me, a lightweight love seat with cushions, that missed and banged against the door. "Where you been?" he shouted.

I told him Zack's, and who knows how long we fought. We kept punching half-heartedly and throwing things, making a first rate mess of the place. For me it was a relief to attack somebody who hit back.

Finally, Brewster faked a heart attack. "Give me air," he gasped. He fanned his face, then grinned with swollen lips. "That was the goddamned stupidest thing I've ever done with you. Why didn't you let the sofa hit you? The whole ruckus would've been done with." He offered me a towel. "My main man, I don't know why I put up with you."

After we showered, Brewster held me at least an hour without falling asleep or saying anything. "I guess we're like family," he finally said.

When I didn't answer, Brewster headed to the kitchen and filled a glass with gin and ice water. He set the glass on the night stand and joined me under the covers. He turned me on my side, and spitting ice slivers from his mouth to my skin, traced his thumbs over my ribs. The coldness of the ice soaked into me. I felt healed and hurt and opened up, all at once sorry and glad I was at the tip of his touch.

I made a mental note to track down Geezer, to apologize maybe or buy him a new taco.

Brewster shrank against me and shuddered. His eyelid, slightly purplish, blinked against my face. He stroked my hair with his fingers. "My main man," he murmured. "We're all we have. Like it or not, that's who we are to each other. I think it's time we start treating each other that way."

He kissed me again, and feeling more sick and sore than turned on or sure of anything, I finally told him yes, he was right as always. Since we were sort of like family, it was only right we treated each other nicer.

Hours later, I dreamed Benny was alive and well and nesting inside my pillow. All around him, children were laughing and clapping and cartwheeling through foam and feathers, making a first rate fiesta out of pillow stuffing. They didn't notice Benny at first, but once they did, they pointed fingers, feet, ponytails, lunchboxes, anything, at that strange kid who was trying too

hard to be one of them. *Dummy*, the kids called him. He munched down mouthful after mouthful of feathers. *Dodo, Igor, Retard.*

When I awoke, Brewster was snoring in spurts, his body coiled away from mine, the sheets kicked off, the whole room ablaze with moonlight. And I couldn't help hearing the faint click of the clock changing time, the improbable squeak of pane glass frosting over, the familiar rattle of train staying on track, miles before the whistle announced its approach, that distant, creaking rat-a-tat-tat. I closed my eyes, pressed my ear to the pillow to drown out all sounds that ordinarily would've been too slight or faraway to hear.

But I heard them anyway. Feet shuffling four stories down, gnats humming in ventilators, floorboards tightening, box springs oinking. Outside cars coughed, wind toyed with plastic, dogs sprayed lamp posts, stop signs, each other.

I rolled over, buried my head under the pillow, but there the sounds from my dream came alive and I heard children laughing, taunting, somersaulting through the very heart of my pillow. They sang about Benny, a kid so misguided he mistook feathers for junk food.

Alone and surrounded in noise, it seemed pointless to wish he'd ever learn his way home. I wished it anyway.