

1. Michael walks upstairs from the basement and into the damp heat of the living room. He flops onto the couch like a boneless slab of meat and lies there as if paralyzed. The basement is cooler than this, but it smells like cum. And shit. A pile of shit covered in cum. David shit beside the toilet again, and the staff haven't found it yet. Or maybe they have and don't want to deal with it. David will whine about having to pick it up. And then he'll get mad. "Fucking bitch," he'll say, and the staff will add a swear chore to the cleaning up the shit chore, and he'll raise his soft pale hands and swipe at the air, wanting to swipe at a face, his plump boy boobs jiggling under his T-shirt. Michael wonders what it would be like to take those in his mouth, if they'd feel like a girl's or like pouches of pudding. Probably like pudding. Is he a fag? Does wanting to suck David's boy titties make him a fag?

2. The fan flips the air around but doesn't make it any cooler. One of the staff walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge. She takes out ground beef, dripping a trail of blood on the floor to the stove, and drops it into a frying pan. In a minute, the smell rides on the hot air, dark and moist like old mushrooms. David follows the smell up the stairs from the basement and shuffles into the kitchen to stand at the side of the staff.

"What's for dinner?"

"Tacos."

"Make a lot."

"Yeah. You need to change your shirt before you eat."

"No. Why?"

"There are boogers all over it."

"So."

"It's gross. I don't want to eat looking at your bloody boogers."

"Fuck you."

"You can't eat until you change your shirt. And you can add a swear chore to your regular chores after dinner."

"Stupid bitch," David says, and goes downstairs to change his shirt.

3. When Michael was six, his foster mom made him eat Spring Breeze scented laundry soap for swearing. Spoonfuls of it burning his stomach until he threw it up all over his shoes, sudsy and fresh. She had stood there with the box of soap and smacked at his head with the metal soup spoon for messing his shoes. She was wearing a bright red shirt; he should have known better. The red shirt or the blue one with the bows on it meant she had woken up with a violence in her. She would squint at him like he was a stranger when he asked her something, or she would keep her head down and swing her hand against his face without looking.

He started paying closer attention after he noticed her shirts. It didn't take long before he could tell just by the sounds of her coming down the stairs what she would be wearing, how she would feel, what she would do when he asked her to sign the field trip permission note from school. He thought it meant he had special mind-reading powers. Like a gift to make up for the other things. When someone noticed his bruises and he was sent to another foster home, it was like his eyes had been plucked from his head or his ears cut off. He couldn't read minds at all.

4. Someone new starts every three or four months at the group home. Once, a woman came and stayed only a few weeks. She was fat and loud with huge tits and wore shirts that stretched thin over her belly rolls. She made fun of the other workers when they weren't around. She told Michael about her boyfriend, what he did to her with ropes once. He could tell she was saying these things because she wanted him to like her. "You don't need to fight with me like the other staff," she'd say. "Just tell me what you want. I'm reasonable." So he asked to see his case report, had said it all cool and casual like, as if he had seen it before, as if he hadn't been wanting for

years to look at its pages, and she had given it to him, pretending she didn't know she wasn't supposed to.

5. It was thinner than he had imagined it would be—a half-filled, three-inch binder with doctors' reports, court orders, and school assessments hole-punched into it. His name written in black Sharpie marker on the spine. The first page was his intake report:

Circle one

- Head lice: y/n
- Sexually active: y/n
- Sexually abused: y/n

A listing of clothes brought with him:

- T-shirts: 2
- Jeans: 1
- Socks: 3
- Underwear: 3
- Sweaters: 0
- Winter coat: 0
- Boots: 0
- Shoes: 1 pair (too small)

A tally of bruises, scars, wounds.

The psychiatric assessments: violent tendencies, ADHD, fetal alcohol, below-average intelligence. No one had taken him away from his mother. She had given him up. No other family had wanted him.

Most of the pages were copies of copies, the handwriting a ghost spider skittering off the page. It was good that he saw them now, before it was too late to read them at all. David hadn't wanted to see his. "My mother is a bitch who used to tie me to the toilet," he said. "I'll kill her if I ever see her again." There is a note written on the white board in the staff office that says David is not to take calls from his mother. His mother has never called.

6. Michael saw his mom yesterday. Sometimes she phones after having not talked to him for months, and his pits start sweating as soon as he picks up the phone. He forces himself to speak slowly though she giggles and teases. "Hey, Mikey," she'll say. "I miss you. Want to come stay for a few days? Get away from those whores?" And then they'll both laugh and he'll forget to keep his words slow.

7. Last Christmas, Michael's mom asked him to come for two weeks. He hadn't lived with her for that long since she'd gotten rid of him. He didn't want the staff to help him pack. He knew they'd say he didn't need to take every single thing, but he'd shoved it all in the bag anyway, sides bulging, zipper gaping open. When he carried it up the stairs, the worker on shift just looked at the bag and raised her eyebrows. It was Christmas holidays. No one wanted to fight about anything. When he was dropped off at his mom's, the staff handed him a plastic garbage bag full of wrapped presents they had bought for him with his "Celebrations" fund from the government. "Merry Christmas," she'd said, and hugged him before she left.

8. His mom put on lipstick and did her hair his second night at her house. "There's a Christmas party downtown," she said. "I'll be back in a bit." But she wasn't. She'd left Michael's baby sister with him, and for a while he did all right. But when the macaroni and the crackers and the cereal and all the frozen ends of bread shoved into the back of the freezer were gone and there was no money to buy anything and his sister wouldn't stop crying and he hadn't remembered to take any of his meds and he was so fucking tired, he cried into the cushions on the couch until the blood vessels burst at the corners of his eyes, and then he called the group home. He yelled at the staff, said he needed a ride back. His hockey duffel was still half-packed; it only took him a minute. Someone came for the baby. The bag full of presents went back to the car, to the group home, spread under the tree there. All the other boys had been sent out to spend the holidays with some family. Michael unwrapped the presents Christmas morning by himself. The staff who had been called in last minute sat in the kitchen texting on her phone.

9. Yesterday, when his mom had called, she had asked him if he wanted to come over for the afternoon. "I got lasagna," she said. "You can stay for dinner." Michael's pits were sweating. "Yeah, I guess," he said.

They ate on the couch watching *The Price Is Right* and scraping burnt noodles off the bottom of the tin. "Stouffer's is better," his mom had said during the commercials. "I should of got Stouffer's."

"It's good," he said. "I like it."

"What do they feed you there?" she asked, not turning from the TV

"I don't know. Spaghetti and chili and stuff."

"They make you eat vegetables?"

"Yeah, but I hate it."

"You eat your fucking vegetables." But she wasn't angry, she was putting on her motherhood like putting on a coat. "It's better than those other places you were."

"Yeah."

"Remember that woman who gave you instant porridge for every meal? And macaroni for a treat?"

"I hate that shit."

"Bitch had it right. No cleaning. No cooking. Just making money off of you." Bob Barker was on the TV again, but his mom kept talking. "That must piss you off. You think about that stuff and get pissed off?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe? You just take that shitty food from them and you don't care?"

"I got good stuff now."

She turned and looked at him, looked at his plate scraped clean and smiled, pleased. "Yeah, you do."

10. He went to the museum with his grade six class once, to learn about the shit white people did to the Indians. "Is that your mom?" they asked him at the tepee display. There was a red mannequin with black braids, a deerskin dress, and a baby strapped to her back. She held a wooden bowl full of wrinkled saskatoon berries that she was grinding for pemmican. "Look, it's Michael camping with his mom," one of the girls giggled. "It can't be," Michael said loudly, sweating. "She isn't drunk." Everyone laughed until the teacher shushed them.

They washed their hands in a line at the sink in another room, and mixed flour and shortening and currents in a bowl for bannock. It was lunchtime and the class was hungry. When the pans of bread were pulled from the oven hot and puffy, every hand shot out for a taste. "This is so great," one of his friends said with his mouth full. "I'm not even kidding. You should bring this for lunch every day." Michael nodded back. He had never tasted bannock before. It was good. He hadn't expected to like it. He folded up a copy of the recipe and put it in his pocket.

11. When the staff picked him up from eating lasagna at his mom's house, it was dark but still warm. His mom had fallen asleep on the couch when the lasagna was gone, and he didn't want to wake her, so he left without saying goodbye. They drove home in silence, he was so tired. He stood in the basement outside his bedroom, and the staff told him to hurry up and brush his teeth before bed. "Don't be such a fucking whore," he yelled at her, without wanting to, hardly thinking about it. She moved back slightly, and then gave him a swear chore, turned and climbed the stairs away from him in her ugly dress. He came up behind her then, reached out his hand, and hit her on the calf with the back of his fingers. Smack. Hard enough to sting but not to bruise. She had stopped and stiffened, and Michael felt a hot rush of blood through his throat and into his chest. She turned and looked at him and her eyes were already wet. Her neck flushed. She opened her mouth and closed it.

12. A little bird, he thought.

13. "You bastard," she said.

14. She was new and she was going to cry. She walked up the stairs without saying anything else, into the office and shut the door.

15. He was grounded for the week. The incident would be recorded on his chart, hole-punched, and placed in his case book, now one page thicker. He had told her he was sorry later, and he had meant it. He liked her good enough. She had nodded back at him after his apology. "It's all right," she had said. "I'm sorry I called you a bastard."

"Maybe you should get a swear chore, too."

"This entire job is a swear chore," she said back, and went into the office to write the report.

16. He wonders if she is afraid of being alone with him now. The others were going to a movie after dinner and she was staying behind to supervise him. Once, he heard the staff talking about some woman who was killed at a home. She had been working alone and one of the kids had beaten in her face with a bat. He can imagine it happening. Two years ago, when girls used to live at the

home with them, one of them had grabbed a butcher's knife from the dishwasher and chased the staff around the house with it, screaming that she was going to push it into their eyes. The staff yelled at the boys to go into lockdown and then they barricaded themselves in the office until the cops came.

He's way stronger than she. He can tell from her skinny arms. She can hardly carry all the plates to the table at once. And she only comes up to his chest.

17. "What do you want to do?" she asks, when the dishes are clean and the house is empty except for them.

"I don't know."

"The saskatoons are ripe in the backyard. Want to pick some with me?"

He's never picked berries before. He doesn't really want to.

"Come on. They're so good and it's hot in here."

18. The only thing she can find for a bucket is a plastic box that used to hold mail. She rinses it out and they put on their shoes and go around the house to the back. The ground is soft and spongy around the trees because of the sump pump drainage, and the grass a brighter shade of green than the rest of the yard. He bounces a little in his runners. "Look at them," she says, and pulls a cluster of berries into her hand. "They fall right off." She has long dark hair in a braid down her back.

19. The mosquitoes are thick by the saskatoon trees, and the repellent makes Michael's lips tingle when he licks his fingers from the first berries he tries. "This is like camping with my mom," he says to her. He tells her all about their summers in the woods, about the hikes they take, about the time they even stayed in one of those tepee campsites.

"We fried bannock over the fire and I picked some berries to go with it. I can hardly wait until we go this summer."

He tells her about his baby sister, about how much he loves her, how smart she is—she's already talking and she's only a year old—and about his uncles and aunts and how they always come over to visit when he goes to his mom's and how he wishes he was old enough to live on his own, do what he wants, see his mom all the time.

It's the heat. The sweet berries. The soft ground. It's her smiling nicely, nodding and staying quiet. It's that she's new and doesn't know anything. It's the thickness of the air, the sun caught in the trees. Like little pieces of foil hung in the branches. He opens his mouth and all the stories fall out.

20. Michael's box is half full of berries by the time he's done. He stopped picking awhile back and has been holding the high branches down low for her to reach. They will go inside soon. She'll mix flour and shortening and teach him to roll out a crust. They'll put in sugar with the berries and dot the filling with pats of butter. She'll show him how to pinch the edges of the pie closed with his finger and thumb, and then he'll take a knife and slash his initials across the face of it, sprinkling it with sugar again. When the pie is done baking, he will hold it while she takes his picture, while he tries to look tough in oven mitts. She will stay three years and imagine she loves these boys. She will leave them one month before Michael runs away to live with his uncle, and then to run away from his uncle, to nowhere, disappearing into the cracks of the city forever.

All names are changed to protect the innocent.

The guilty are protected accidentally, since guilt and innocence have not yet been determined.