

1.1 [one big happy family]

Today starts out half decent.

First off, I sleep in, so Floyd's not only out of the bathroom before I need it, he's already gone to work. Opal's in her studio—fancy word for the room where she keeps her angel cards, crystals, and aromatherapy crap—so she's out of my hair. I did a wash yesterday; my Levis and Reebok T-shirt are clean. Things are adding up.

Yeah, I know it's been nearly three weeks. Twenty days, to be exact, and his max is usually a month. But for some of that time he was on vacation, so I'm hoping it doesn't count.

I throw on old clothes and go downstairs. His empty coffee mug is sitting on the kitchen table, the Eric Lindros mug he's had for years: Philadelphia Flyers, #88, good-looking guy, big, physical. Everything I'm not.

Using both hands—you *dropped it, kiddo?*—I place the mug in the dishwasher, back right-hand corner, nothing touching it. Then I fry up some bacon, the kitchen all to myself.

The bacon turns out crisp but not burnt, *perfecto* when you add two eggs easy-over and four pieces of toast slathered with strawberry jam.

Cassie sidles into the room, clutching her stuffed skunk and a picture book. She just turned four. She's my sister.

The skunk was Opal's idea of a joke: aromatherapy in action. Cassie calls the skunk Rover because she wants a puppy, even though I told her we can't have one. Ever.

Okay, let's deal with the basics.

Name: Brickson (Brick) Thaddeus MacAvoy

Father: Floyd Thaddeus MacAvoy

Mother: Opal MacAvoy (formerly Audrey Brickson—last name got dumped after Floyd swaggered into view, no regrets that I can see, and what kind of a name is Audrey when you're preaching how a bunch of gardenias will bring about universal love.)

Age: fourteen years and seven months

Grade: nine, come September

Sports: hockey, Bantam, B team, defence

Girlfriends: none

Address: 138 Hilchey River Road, RR #4, and no, I don't blame you if you've never heard of it. Head down the eastern shore of Nova Scotia and you're going in the right direction.

Nearest town: Hilchey Bay. Could be you've never heard of that, either.

Longterm plan: leave here the day I turn sixteen. Three weeks before Christmas. *Yes, Floyd, there is a Santa Claus.*

Thaddeus was Floyd's father; by all reports, he wasn't someone you'd want sitting across from you at the kitchen table. As for my name, the *-son* got dropped a long time ago.

Cassie slides the picture book on the table and sits down, tugging on Rover's ear. I pass her a strip of bacon and half a piece of toast.

"Eat up," I say.

"We gotta take that book to the library."

The book is about a pink dragon called Petronella, whose hobby is turning the villagers' gardens to soot. "It's not due back yet."

"It gives me nightmares."

That's her word for bad dreams; she's been having them the last six months. "I'll take it back today," I say.

"You and me."

"Just me."

"Me, too!"

I spent last week babysitting her while Floyd and Opal were away. Seven whole days, no time off for good behaviour. So this morning the plan is to take a spin into town on my own; I use the ATV Floyd won at the fire hall fundraiser. School's been out a week and a half and already I'm bored out of my skull.

"How about we wash the ATV?" I say. "It got muddy when we drove along the river the other day."

"Don't want to. In town, we can go to the bakery."

She talks okay, for a little kid. Never said a word until she turned three, then came out with whole sentences right away. She keeps this talent under wraps when Floyd's around.

"Want some Cheerios?" I say.

"Not hungry. I don't want to stay here by myself."

"Opal's upstairs. What was the nightmare about?"

"A dragon burned down all our trees, its eyes were red like its brain was on fire. I hid under my bed and its claws went *scritch-scratch* on the floor."

“Gross.”

“You weren’t there to save me.”

I pat her on the sleeve. “Dragons like Petronella live in faraway countries, Cassie.”

“She lives in our oven. She’s why the tuna melts went black.”

I had my head in a book and forgot about the tuna melts, that’s why they went black.

Try telling that to Cassie, who has enough imagination for six kids. Good thing she watches daytime TV. Tyrone and Pablo from *The Backyardigans* are sweeter than fudge, and so are the reruns of *Blue’s Clues*.

She doesn’t eat the bacon, though, or the Cheerios that I arrange in a little necklace around her bowl; and she doesn’t want to wash the ATV. Instead she marches through the mudroom, wrestles the door open, and goes outside. When I hear Opal coming downstairs, I go outside as well, carrying Cassie’s picture book.

Cassie is sitting on the step. She ignores me.

I start up the ATV and drive away.

At the mall I play Rescue 911 and Big Buck Hunter, get right into it, hands and brain working together, a real buzz. Wish that would happen at the rink. Then I order a Coke and a footlong Cold Cut Combo with extra mustard and onion, skip the tomato. I eat in one of the booths.

I’m leaving Subway when I catch sight of Lorne Meisner. He’s standing by the beauty parlour, his back to me, waiting for his mom. He’s such a jerk, one of those kids

who just begs you to pick on him.

Can't give him a wedgie at the mall.

I stroll up behind him, my sneakers quiet on the tile floor, dig my fingers deep into his shoulder, and squeeze. The kid's nothing but bone and gristle.

I say, innocent as can be, "Hey, Lorne. How's it going?"

"Good." He's trembling.

"Only good?" I twist a little harder.

"Real good." He starts whimpering, so I let go.

He scuttles into the nearest store. Ladies lingerie.

When I turn around, a jolt goes right through me. Pete MacLellan, Floyd's boss, five-feet-seven in his built-up heels, is standing outside the pet store staring at me. He was brought in from Truro a year ago, after the previous boss retired. Ever since, it's been no fun living with Floyd, who'd obviously assumed he'd be the next boss.

As I pass Pete, I nod politely. Then I head for the mall exit, trying to walk the way Floyd walks, like you've got the world by the tail and you're whipping it around your head.

The library's my next stop. I cross the parking lot to Main Street. The GM dealership where Floyd works is on my left; I walk faster. RCMP detachment is next, and the bakery. You can smell their chocolate chip cookies a block away. If the cops aren't overweight, I don't know why.

Chocolate chip cookies always remind me of Kendra, who used to work at the Happy Whale Daycare when I was little and went there five days a week. Kendra baked cookies that were moist and chewy, loaded with chocolate.

The library is a red brick building with a few scrubby bushes on either side of the door. There's a rack just inside where they display the theme of the week. Perennial Gardening. No use to me.

Billy Gottrich is thumbing through the DVDs, his jeans bunched around his ankles, crotch mid-thigh. Pathetic. While it's tempting to hassle him, I decided long ago never to bug anyone at the library.

After making sure he's not watching, I choose six picture books for Cassie, all by Dr. Seuss. You got it – major guilt trip because she had one of her nightmares and I didn't bring her to the library with me.

I flip through them to make sure there aren't any dragons.

Three books have come in for me, travel books on the High Arctic and Mongolia; an autobiography of the tennis player, André Agassi; a couple of CDs—Metallica and AC/DC. I swipe them through the automatic checkout.

Major omission when I was giving you the basics: I'm a reader. Non-fiction mostly, because I like to hoard information. I've tried novels. You can't trust the facts any more than you can trust the authors to keep the emotional lid on. I even tried poetry. Lids off and toss 'em in the air, that's what poetry's all about.

Although I own an old-fashioned boom box with a CD player and an AM/FM radio, I don't own a laptop, iPod, iPhone or Blackberry, and Floyd hogs the TV. What else is there to do every evening from November to April but read?

I wish I owned a laptop. On Sunday mornings, when he and Opal sleep in, I sneak into his study and use his; ditto when they go out together. But it's not as good as having your own.

1.2 [the Semple challenge]

The ATV is parked behind the mall, which backs onto Dave Sanger's woodlot. I buckle my helmet. A network of trails through the woods around Hilchey Bay connects the houses, the river and the logging roads. To go home, I follow the river upstream as far as the bridge. We had the wettest June in years, so what with mud and the usual rocks, steering takes concentration.

The river's so freaking goal-oriented, always in a big tear to reach the sea.

Then I get lucky. Glenn Semple's walking across the bridge with his greyhound, Igor. No one else on the road owns a dog; but if they did, it'd be chained up, not mincing along on a pale blue leash that's long enough for six dogs.

I stop at the base of the bridge and tug off my helmet. Hilchey River Road is the route for logging trucks from the crown lands north of here, so I'd better hustle. As I clamber up the bank, Igor skulks behind Glenn, flattening himself against his legs. You can't blame him—I've been known to fire rocks in his direction.

Quickly I check to see if anyone else is around. Glenn hangs out with Tully Larkin, who also lives down the road. All three of us are in the same grade.

Although Glenn's half a head shorter than me, he doesn't have the wit to act scared.

"Saw you at the mall last week with your little sister," he says. "Poor kid, having you for a brother."

"You never know when to shut up, do you?"

"She's cuter than you."

Before I can get my balance, he bunches his fists and lands two good ones to my chest. My heels dig into the dirt. I grab his wrist, twist his arm behind his back and pull up, nice and easy.

Glenn's standing on tiptoes. His teeth are gritted, but he can't keep the sounds from escaping. He doesn't cry, though. Never has.

Igor whines in sympathy. Then I hear a truck at the top of the hill, Jake brakes blatting as it starts down the slope. I kick Glenn's feet from under him and let go of his arm. He drops to the ground, still clutching the leash. The ATV starts like a charm and I'm across the road before the truck's in sight.

You gotta be careful with the arm-twisting routine because you can dislocate someone's shoulder that way. I Googled it.

Glenn moved here from Toronto two years ago. His father is a retired music professor who owns a bookstore on Main Street. Glenn makes top marks in school. He has blond curly hair and plays the flute. He doesn't play hockey, football, basketball, or soccer. All of which should put him at the bottom of the social pile.

The girls are all over him. The guys like him. Even the jocks tolerate him.

None too smart putting *life* and *fair* in the same sentence.

1.3 [half-split]

Our place is near the bridge; Floyd inherited the house and all the furniture from his father before I was born. You can't see the house from the road because of the trees and because the driveway curves around some granite boulders. Erratics, to be accurate, left by the glaciers 10,000 years ago. My life expectancy is 75.8 years (Statistics Canada,

your tax dollar at work). Does this comparison help me appreciate the daily grind? No.

Just as well the house doesn't show from the road because it's in serious need of a coat of paint and a new roof. Trees crowd around it as if they're propping it up.

I take the last bend, gravel spitting from under the tires. The brakes jam on without me even thinking about it. The ATV slews toward the ditch.

To one side of Opal's car a heap of split hardwood has been dumped on the ground. Two cords, by the look of it.

Jeez. I'm not psyched for this.

It happens once a year, and once a year it's my job to turn the heap into a woodpile. You've heard of obedience training? I'm the beagle.

Is it better to start now, even though I won't do it right, or wait and be accused of slacking off?

Before I can wipe the scowl off my face, Opal comes out the side door. She's wearing her work clothes—long flowered skirt, fringed turquoise shawl, dangly earrings made of crystal. Her eyes are turquoise, too, and it's not contacts; Cassie's are the same color, except Cassie's don't come at you like lasers.

Opal has straight black hair and cheekbones that'll stay put until she's ninety. It weirds me out that my own mother, no matter that she's piss-poor at the job, is beautiful.

"You were gone long enough," she says. "Cassie's upstairs. I'll be back later this evening."

Two cords of wood hasn't totally blitzed the hype from the Glenn episode. "I want you to look after her again in a couple of days."

"You don't run my life, Brick."

“You don’t pay me for babysitting!”

“We put a roof over your head.”

“Some roof—covered in moss with the gutters falling off.”

She brushes past me and climbs into her shiny new Malibu. Three years ago Floyd won the provincial award for GM Salesman of the Year; he and Opal went to Halifax for the ceremony.

I can’t remember ever calling them Mom and Dad. Or Mother and Father. I don’t call Floyd anything, while Opal (likewise Audrey) always made it clear that being anyone’s mom was rock-bottom on her list of priorities.

Normally, with Floyd at work and Cassie in her room, I could watch TV. I go upstairs, drag on my oldest jeans and rummage for my work gloves in the bottom drawer. Floyd’s the self-acclaimed Hilchey River Road woodpile expert. He studies the different types of trees and reads articles on the Internet, adjusting his theories year by year. In the meantime, I supply the boypower, because let’s not kid ourselves—manpower it ain’t.

Floyd’s the man of the house. Also self-acclaimed.

Manpower, I’ve decided, is like the peak of Everest. Not many get there, and they leave a mega-trail of garbage along the way. Useful Fact: if you’re ever crazy enough to climb Mount Everest, in the Dead Zone at the peak where the oxygen runs out, you’ll be staggering past the corpses of long-dead climbers. Impossible to cart them away. Don’t get too big for your crampons.

Anyway, feel free to skip the following description of The MacAvoy Woodpile, as stacked by yours truly last July. It’s behind the house in the middle of the clearing (yep, I mow the grass, you catch on fast). It’s two tiers deep, oriented west-east to catch

the prevailing winds, and the free ends each have one tier angled north-south to keep the stack in place. Top is covered with two black tarps, (maximum heat absorption, hence maximum evaporation, up to 50% of the weight of green wood is water, I could go on). The whole thing sits on wooden pallets from Home Hardware. No bottom rot in our woodpile, no sir.

I haul six pallets from the cellar. First decision, where should they go? Don't want them under the trees. They shouldn't go too close to the back of the garage. Should I start by taking wood from last year's pile and stacking it in the cellar? Should I lie down on the grass, put my ball cap over my eyes and go to sleep?

After I lay the pallets on the far side of the present pile, I tip several wheelbarrow loads of wood onto the grass beside them. Birch logs, half-split, the grain pale. Put 'em bark side up, leave gaps for air circulation, one-over-two then two-over-one. I quit on the third row. I've shown willing without doing so much it'll take me all day tomorrow to redo it.

1.4 [and introducing...]

Floyd comes home at seven that evening. He brakes by the heap of birch logs and turns off the ignition of his Hummer H2 SUV, Slate Metallic. He'll keep that vehicle until it's an antique.

I'm in the kitchen washing a saucepan. KD for dinner, spirals at Cassie's request. Floyd walks around the logs, then strolls out back. I fight the temptation to go to the other window and watch him.

Five minutes later he saunters into the kitchen and leans against the doorframe,

hipshot. “Why did you put the pallets there?” he says, pleasantly enough.

“So last year’s wood is nearest the cellar door?” Declarative statements can be dangerous. They don’t teach you this in grade eight English.

“Kiddo, I keep hoping—against all the evidence—that you’ll develop a modicum of brains and initiative. Wouldn’t it have made more sense to start by piling last year’s wood in the cellar?”

“Guess so.”

“You *guess* so?”

“Yes. Yes, it would have made more sense.”

“So do it. Correctly, this time.”

He pauses. My turn to say something. “Okay.”

“Which pallets will you use?”

Trick question? “The ones I put on the grass?”

“Brilliant.” He straightens. I tense. He says, “I expect the new wood to be stacked by the time I get home from work tomorrow. That’s not asking too much, is it?”

I shake my head. Beagle with its tail between its legs.

“Once you’re done in the dishpan, you’d better head for the cellar.”

I nod. *Yes sir, no sir, three bags full, sir*. Which, in case your childhood was deprived of nursery rhymes, comes from “Baa, baa, Black Sheep.” After Cassie outgrew Mother Goose, she latched onto *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and if you’re reading that book to a kid you don’t have a worry in the world about TV violence.

The cellar isn’t deep enough for me to stand up straight. The overhead light is a bare bulb, the steps rough wood, ending near a cupboard barricaded by boxes; I don’t

want to know what's inside. The rest of the cellar? Cracked cement floor, cobwebs, grimy little windows, perfect set for a horror flick.

However, we have a state-of-the-art oil-wood furnace. I haul open the door to the outside and toss the logs I piled this afternoon off the pallets. When I've carried the pallets back down to the cellar and lined them up a foot away from the side wall, I start transferring last year's dry wood into the cellar and stacking it just so.

I quit at nine. Too dark outside to see what I'm doing, bumped my head twice on the sill, moths dashing themselves against the light bulb, and I'm bone tired.

Wales is losing to the New Zealand All Blacks, so that takes care of Floyd. In my socked feet I circle his chair and climb the stairs. Cassie's fast asleep, Rover squashed against her chest, *Horton Hatches the Egg* lying open on the quilt. Usually I read her a bedtime story.

I set my alarm, then read about the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. All that space with hardly anyone in it. A tree called saxaul grows in the sand; camels like to eat it. If you burn a saxaul tree, it gives off three times the heat of birch.

Long way to go for a cord of wood.

Three in the afternoon, 27° and not a breath of wind; the scorched smell of pine resin hangs in the air. My shirt is stuck to my back. Back, arms, legs, head, all aching. The cellar wood is stacked. The heap in the driveway is three-quarters stacked. Floyd could be back in two hours, nothing he'd like better than to catch me with the job not finished.

Opal's been gone all day. Cassie is helping me. Need I say more.

"Why don't you get two SuperSandwiches from the freezer?" I say. "Then you

should sit in the shade for a while.”

It’s a two-over-one row. The bark is dead-white and crisp; it burns with an oily black smoke and it’ll start a fire if you’re ever lost in the woods with a pocketful of matches.

Cassie comes back with two chocolate sandwiches. Keeping my ears cocked for the Hummer, I sit down in the shade and gulp mine down, then tip back my water bottle and drain it.

FLASHBACK (my earliest memory?)

I’m maybe three and a half. We’re in the back yard. Floyd is throwing the ball and I’m supposed to catch it. We’ve played this game before. The first couple of times I manage just fine and he smiles at me. It’s important to make him smile. I smile back. Then I fumble four catches in a row, the ball rolling away over the grass. When I pick it up for the fourth time and turn around, he’s walking up the steps to the side door. His fists are bunched, like he’s clutching candies he doesn’t want me to have. He goes inside. The door shuts.

I start to cry.

Man, where did that come from? I drop the empty water bottle on the grass. Ice cream is dripping all over Cassie’s fingers; she’s crooning to Rover, something about his nightmares and how she’ll look after him.

Standing up, I grip the handles of the wheelbarrow like I’m throttling them. On my way back to the heap of wood, the barrow bangs into the side of the garage because

I'm not watching what I'm doing. Terrified, I check the shingles. No damage. My lucky day.

I fling logs into the wheelbarrow. They thunk against the metal, bounce so hard that bark cracks off and chips fly into the air. Sure, Brick, no sign of Lorne or Glenn, go bash some birch logs.

Fire a couple through the living room window straight at Floyd's TV, why don't you?

My throat's so tight I can scarcely breathe, and the wheelbarrow, I see dully, is full.

The driveway's raked, wheelbarrow leaning against the garage wall with the handles level, new woodpile as geometric as I can make it, and Floyd's home. He jumps to the ground, carrying his laptop, and strides toward the house. Sometimes (not often), I realize what a handsome guy he is.

I retreat to the living room, where Cassie's watching *Tree House*. He comes in holding a sheet of paper. "Project for you. I had some free time at lunch and found this on the Internet—I want you to take about a third of the wood you've stacked and make a Shaker round. There's a picture here, with a description."

He grins at me, Mr. Charm, *Have I got the lemon for you*. "My father never liked trying anything new, he swore the old ways were best. But I'm an innovator. If this works, we'll do all the wood in rounds next summer."

You'd think by now Poker Face would be my middle name. The grin vanishes. "Is there a problem?"

I swallow and shake my head. I'm raining on his parade. Bad idea.

"Sounds neat," I say.

"Come on, kiddo, drum up a little enthusiasm. Don't they teach you to be open-minded at school?"

"Sure, we'll give it a try."

He tosses the paper on the coffee table. It skids to the floor. "You can start tonight," he says, "lots of daylight left."

As I reach down and pick the paper up, he takes the stairs two at a time. He only does that when he's in a good mood.

A more useful innovation than a new woodpile would be a mood gauge for Floyd: a dial that swings from Terrific through Relatively Neutral to Extraordinarily Bad. Invent one for me. I'll love you forever.

The wood in a Shaker round splays out from the centre like the spokes of a wheel. Like the rays on the yellow suns Cassie used to draw. $2 \text{ cords} \div 3 = \frac{2}{3}$ of a cord.

Last spring the guidance counsellor brought in a psychologist to talk about something called boundaries. *Being able to say no is a skill we all need to learn. There are occasions in everyone's life when it's the only appropriate word. Discerning those occasions is also a skill. Saying no is one of the most empowering things you can do.* Etc.

She had a decent smile and the girls were lapping it up.

No, Floyd, I won't unstack and restack the woodpile.

Like, hello.

A Shaker round looks like a short fat cylinder with a cone-shaped top. Reminds me of those haystacks that French guy painted, over and over again, in the 1800's.

Monet. According to the biography I read, he was “irascible” with his children.

When I go outside and look at the woodpile, so neat and tidy, I realize I’d been thinking that maybe, just maybe, Floyd would say, *Good job, kiddo*. Or even, *Not a bad job, kiddo*.

It’s dusk by the time I dismantle a third of the woodpile and rearrange the pallets on the grass. I’ll get up early tomorrow, beat the heat.

2.1 [shaker up]

A Shaker round is a challenge because you have to fill in the spokes as you radiate outwards. Also, the outer end of each log will dry quicker than the inner end, so the pile needs to dip towards the centre. Sound easy? Try it sometime.

It takes me a while to adjust the diameter; but then I get into the swing of it, and the funny thing is that even though Floyd forced me into making the Shaker round, I forget about him while I’m working on it. In the end the pile looks cool, a hole down the middle for air circulation, logs stacked on top to make a little cone.

It doesn’t look like a haystack. More like a mini-fortress in the wilderness. If I had a Canadian flag, I’d stick it in the hole.

If Floyd had a sense of humor.

Cassie and I eat Singapore noodles with mixed vegetables for supper, Cassie telling me how Pablo of the Backyardigans disguised himself as a ghost and terrified poor Uniqua. I'm at the kitchen counter loading the dishwasher when the Hummer pulls up. Floyd stays sitting in the cab, hunched over the steering wheel, staring straight ahead. Through the window I can see his fingers drumming on the wheel.

“Cassie,” I say, “go upstairs.”

I taught her this command when the nightmares began. She picks Rover up by one ear and scrambles up the stairs. The hinges squeal as her bedroom door shuts.

The counters are pale green vinyl, scarred with knife-cuts and burns.

Floyd gets out of the Hummer and locks it. He never slams doors, but tonight it's as though he's being extra-careful. I move away from the window, pretty sure he won't bother to check the Shaker round.

His feet scrape on the steps, the mudroom floor creaks, then he opens the kitchen door and steps inside.

I'm five-ten and still growing. He tops me by three inches.

He lays his laptop in its black leather case on the table. “Where's Opal?”

“Out,” I say, clearing my throat. “She'll be back later this evening. You had supper?”

He loosens his tie and tosses it on the table. “I lost a sale today,” he says. “The jerk went to Truro, got a better price. You think I should have gone lower?”

50-50 chance of the wrong answer. “No.”

He steps closer. His eyes are the same color as mine, grey. No light in them.

Worst part is the waiting.

He says, “A family to support—my wife, a useless son, a daughter who behaves as though she’s mentally deficient—and you think missing out on a commission is irrelevant?”

“No.” I hate it when he piles on the “big” words.

“No? Is that all you can say?”

Saying no is a skill... I fight back the sickness rising in my throat. Once, when I was about ten, I puked on his new shoes.

I’ll say whatever you want me to say. Since I don’t know what that is, since nothing I say will be right, I keep my trap shut.

“Pete had the nerve to call me into his office afterward,” Floyd says. “He lectured me on how to deal with difficult customers, implied I should have tried harder. One mistake and he treats me as though I’m worthless.”

I could say, *That’s too bad.* I don’t.

Floyd steps closer. So close I can see the stubble on his chin—he’s a man who has to shave twice a day. His breath smells of wintergreen.

“After Pete finished his spiel, he pretended to be a boxer, jabbed me a couple of times in the chest. He thought that was funny. And then do you know what he said?” Floyd doesn’t wait for an answer. “He saw you at the mall bullying a boy much younger than you. Is that true?”

“I only scared him a little. No big deal.”

“I’m Pete’s head salesman. According to him, your behavior reflects poorly on me, and therefore on GM.”

No use to run. Tried that.

I brace myself against the wall.

Slowly Floyd takes off his jacket and arranges it on the back of the nearest chair so the shoulders are level and the sleeves hang free. He rolls up his shirt sleeves. I hope Cassie stays in her room.

There's a pause. A crack in time. His eyes and mine.

A blur of movement, *whump*, and I'm doubled over. Can't breathe, pain roaring through my chest. Then he yanks my head up and starts slapping my face, back and forth until I think my neck'll snap like a chicken's.

Tears—I can't stop them—spring to my eyes, spill down my cheeks. He says, slapping as he talks, "I don't need you complicating my relationship with Pete. So this is my other job, to show you who's boss. Especially when you make mistakes. You're crying like a baby, why are you doing that? How old are you? Fourteen going on four?"

His fist sinks into my belly and I go down.

I feel like I'm four. Sniveling and pitiful, a coward.

If I wasn't a coward—if I fought back—he'd kill me.

I sneak an upward glance; he's been known to kick me when I'm down. But he's inspecting his knuckles.

"I'm going upstairs to have a shower," he says. He's scarcely out of breath. His shoes have mud on them. They march away.

When I take a breath, muscles in my side cramp, pain like a gutting knife between my ribs.

It's over. Until next time.

Which won't be this week or next week. He likes to keep me on edge, though,

never knowing when it'll be or what I'll do that will trigger him.

I try to push myself up, then collapse again, sliding down the wall. Too soon. But I don't want Opal to find me here. Or Cassie. Another shallow breath, no cramp this time.

Nothing broken. He's too clever for that. Took boxing when he was a young fellow, prides himself on his control. My cheeks feel like they're on fire.

Nausea surges up my gullet. I swallow it, sour taste and all. I need to pee. Have to wait until he's out of the bathroom, don't have to be too smart to figure that out. I manage to stand upright, the whole way, leaning against the wall. More snivelling. Pitiful is an understatement.

No black eye. No right to the jaw.

Clutching the back of the chesterfield, I cross the living room. The stairs look as high as Everest. I drag myself up them, step by step, terrified of meeting him partway. Lurch over to the wall, edge along it, and then I'm in my room. Very quietly, I close the door.

Floyd has his rules. Never gives me a shiner when school's on. Never uses a belt. Never comes into my room.

Not much of a room, but it's mine. I sit on the bed, hugging my belly, head hanging. And yeah, I'm crying again. Cassie cries less than me, ain't that the truth.

The bathroom door opens, the bedroom door shuts. I wait, willing the pain to subside, knowing it won't until it's good and ready. Something you might be wondering: why I don't juice this up with a few swear words? He's death on swearing. In grade one I began hanging out with the Donovan boys from Swamp Road; I came home from school one day and reeled off all the neat new words they'd taught me at recess, you know the

ones I mean. Floyd belted me clear into the pantry. Hard to say who was more shocked, him or me. Before that, he'd cuffed me on the ear a few times, but nothing major.

That was when the fear started.

By the time I leave my bedroom, the light's out under Cassie's door, Opal's come home, and Floyd's downstairs with her. I take some Advil and go back to my room. My headphones are broken, or I'd listen to a CD. A good dose of AC/DC—that's what I need.

You know their song, "Stiff Upper Lip"?