

Chapter FOUR DERRY

New Hampshire, 1993

Poop Mark

Chic didn't go to school or call the next day, but he did show up late that next night, when everyone was in bed, tapping at my window. Half asleep, I had no idea what it was.

My head petrified to my pillow. Thinking it was a goblin tapping the roof or a stray dog lost in the woods, I wrapped the covers over my head the way I used to every night – *mummified*, Mom called it – and waited for it to go away. But the tapping came in threes, snuffles between them.

“Torch.” Chic finally said. “Lemme in, dude,”

For a second I thought it was Devon.

“Who is it?”

“*Nathan*. Jesus dude, c'mon.”

My room was unusually cold. The wood stove might have gone out or Dad hadn't stoked it. The clock read just after twelve. I drew back the curtain. Chic huddled in the dark. Most of his face was cloaked in a hooded sweatshirt creeping out of his denim jacket. None of my brother's friends wore winter anything.

“What are you doing?”

“Lemme in.” His mouth widened, but only a whisper

sometimes I taste can it

hissed. Cold pissed through the old metal frames of the window. Taut with cold, the half circle lock refused to move.

“Wait.” I whispered, pulling on jeans and a shirt.

“C’mon.” He blew into his hands, checking left, right into the stillness.

I looked around for something to pry the lock with: cassette tapes, rubber nunchucks, wood nunchucks, sunglasses, Ninja Turtles. All were useless. I grabbed a letter opener I’d stolen from my uncle’s house. Years ago. The first thing I ever stole. It was something I had to hide every time family came over, but they hardly ever came over. The handle of the letter opener was just thick enough. The lock snapped loose, turned.

“Be quiet.”

“Yeah.” Chic said, extending one leg onto the window sill, pivoting backwards, climbing down. I held out my hand. He didn’t take it. “Devon up?”

“It’s midnight.” I said.

“Yeah.”

I sat on the bed.

He wouldn’t look directly at me. He chipped off frozen snow that clung to his jeans, not telling him that my carpet shouldn’t get wet – Mom would know – I’d have to spend half an hour drying it before school. His fingernails picked at boot laces, scattering ice onto my book bag and bedspread. He picked white nuggets around the opening of his hood and brought his hand to his cheek to test its numbness. All I could see was his beat red nose.

“Mirror?” He asked, eyes darting.

“Huh?”

“Gotta mirror?”

“Shh. Yeah.” I pointed behind the door. A screen printed *Guns & Roses* commemorative mirror. Just enough exposed glass between the screen printed band members to qualify it as reflective.

“Perfect.” He said, only taking off his hood, his back to me. He slid out his pocket comb to straighten his kinked hair, fingers shivering. Drops of water tapped the carpet. I sat on my bed. Made sure no one else was outside.

when Mom left for the last time she didn’t take much with her /

“What are you doing here?”

He didn't answer. Exaggerated features surfaced in the dim. Sudden warmth brought pain back to Chic's swollen nose. Weltered skin still wet. His face was large in the glass, Axel and Duff and Slash framing Chic's swollen eye and the blood-rushed bone underneath it. Looked ready to bleed. He pulled his lower lip down so that his teeth white capped the threatening seepage. Pasty white turned to molding bruise. Scabs stuck like gravel to his nostril. His wallet chain swung as he combed.

I couldn't look in that mirror any more.

“Gunsss and Rosssses.” Chic said, reading the mirror.

I pressed my foot into the soggy carpet and begged God not to let my parents wake up.

“Guns and fucking roses.”

“Yeah.” I said.

Chic pocketed his comb, opened the door, and checked the hall. Clear. He snuck away. I heard knocking. Devon's door opened.

“Oh shit, man. *Shit.*” Devon whispered.

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On weekend nights I knew Devon and Chic would stay up as late as possible watching Metal videos and sneaking vodka and cigarettes and sometimes weed while the lamer bands on TV thrashed through their sets. Devon would let me stay up, but not really hang out in the living room unless I was drawing something for them or they wanted someone to harass. Mostly I played video games in the front room, the sound low, eavesdropping on them.

They would go to bed around 2 in the morning.

Then Chic would tell stories.

I only knew this because I stayed up, sneaking out of my bed to listen behind Devon's closed bedroom door. The bathroom linoleum stung cold on my bare feet, leaky sink dripping timed taps.

Inside a sleeping bag on the floor of Devon's room, Chic would make up stories, his voice hushed, drawing out details in

clothes / photo albums / whatever jewelry

Dogshit hadn't pawned / she left me a box of old vinyl / a note under my pillow / *always love you no matter what* /

one run-on sentence strung with ands and thens and slowly. Stories where he and Devon were hooking up with girls from school that they'd never have a chance with – Anne so-and-so and one of her unknown friends in some remote cabin, or even one of Ryan Whatley's goddess girlfriends of the month – somehow the girls had always liked them, never saying why they'd kept silent for so long, gushing when they'd finally cornered Devon behind a tree.

“Then what?” I would overhear Devon ask, barely audible.

I had to make sure Mom or Dad hadn't gotten up to use the bathroom. More than once I hid from Mom under the stairs where the webbed wings of bat creatures cloaked me in shadow, the same creatures that I feared would slit my Achilles tendon through the open staircase one late night. I could only be under there so long before they had me.

Chic would pause. Everything silent. Mom or Dad would flush and wash and wander back to bed, holding onto the washing machine for balance. I'd sneak back into position, crouch in the bathroom doorway next to Devon's room, holding my breath and listen, putting my finger to my nose remembering, *closest that finger is ever gonna get to pussy.*

Each story built up slowly, teasing out details, delaying the eventual hookup, bordering on the gratuitous when the two or four of them ended together in a naked mess. Skinny dipping, parents out of town, save us from the murderer in the woods. No cliché was off limits.

But the endings always devolved into extended sex scenes where I couldn't tell who was who or which person was standing where. Half asleep, Devon didn't care to ask.

And then Chic would be finished and everything was finished and, knees aching, I'd see four o'clock glowing red on my nightstand. We always slept in.

Saturday morning cartoons sucked now.

*

and *what the hell* / and when
will it ever be *right* if *right* is what we even *deserve* / underlined

Chic left at eight in the morning. Crawled back through my window, face still swollen. Even though it was a Saturday, Devon hadn't asked if he could sleep over.

Chic missed Mom coming out of hibernation by ten minutes, and I got up early to mop up the carpet the best I could, but it still looked like crap. Luckily, it was old and brown and my bedroom was the spare room before Devon demanded he have the larger bedroom to himself. "I need space for my drums..." he had said. Dad detached the bunk beds. Devon covered the walls in posters. That was a long time ago.

It was almost February, I think, when Mom got the call from Aunt Cathy. My cousin Mark had been home for two weeks watching more TV than being home schooled with Cathy working part time at the CVS. Mark was thrilled. He seemed fine. He just watched TV and laughed like normal.

Aunt Cathy would test him every day, first asking him to bring her a can of creamed corn from the shelf – she knew that he could recognize cereals from the packaging – and he would grab the right can, "Here, ma."

This went on for weeks. "I need the *extra* virgin olive oil, honey," and "Can you find me the baking soda?"

"What's it look like?"

"Well, it says baking soda on it."

He seemed fine.

And every parent made themselves believe that their kids would be the exceptions. Of course they would be.

Mark stacked his Spiderman and X-Men comic books neatly by his bedside, studying them as religiously as an academic, acting out *ka-pows* and *da-doooooms* with sneering lips. Aunt Cathy and Uncle Dale watched him from the hallway. His eyes scanned the pages like normal.

Another week passed.

It was when the news reported that pretty much all the kids in the world seven and under had no idea what words or sentences were, no recollection whatsoever, that Aunt Cathy sat down at the edge of Mark's bed and read him an Amazing Spiderman. Newsprint pages wilted in her hands. She was taken aback by the busy versions of Mary Jane, "She always this...

and lipsticked / my bedroom ceiling warped like old cardboard
and I hid her note in one of the few unstained tiles above / there

sultry?”

“Salty?” Mark looked up with his giant eyes.

“Never mind, honey.”

Aunt Cathy read a few pages to him. She started skipping sentences, names of villains, locations of secret headquarters, eventually skipping entire word balloons and making up paragraphs from scratch. For a minute she was actually enjoying the impromptu dialogue. She improvised more intelligent quips after dropkicks and uppercuts, “If you didn’t rely on those long metals arms to get around, Doctor Octopus, you wouldn’t be so morbidly obese and probably on the verge of type two diabetes.” – “You’re the one swinging around in pajamas, Spiderman!”

“AAAAHGGhh! Hit the gym, Octo-pus!”

At first she thought Mark had fallen asleep, like so many times before, curled on his pillow with his chubby cheeks squishing the linens, but he was wide-eyed and enthralled. It was as if the story was entirely new and someone was finally clueing him in to the invisible captions floating over his heroes.

“Cool.” He smiled.

Aunt Cathy looked into his eyes. No different than before. The comic flapped shut.

She looked up. Uncle Dale sobbed in the doorway.

*

Barely muffled beneath us, Devon’s double pedal bass galloped over crashing symbols. Drums rolled, smashing to damage everything around them. Death marches. Death beating. On and on. I let my leg jitter to his timing. We were safe upstairs. My can of Coke buzzed on the kitchen table. Dad looked at his watch.

“I just need a break.” Aunt Cathy cried over the phone.

“I know, sweetie. I know.” Mom said.

“It’s like nothing’s wrong and everything’s wrong.”

“I know.”

“It’s like... *I dunno.*”

Mom held her hand over the receiver as if it could translate her shrugging shoulders, mouthed *she wants Mark to*

was this crucifix that she had hanging
from her rearview that she threw at the house as she sped away /

come here for the weekend to Dad. Dad's mouth hung open. He mimed a telephone with his hand, moved it from this mouth to the table as if hanging up.

"Of course. That's fine. That's fine." Mom said. Cries crackled through the phone.

I searched Dad's face for skepticism or alarm or anything. Nothing. He knew I was looking.

"You can drop him off Friday night. Ok. Yup. No, no, no, don't worry." Mom said.

Still nothing from Dad.

I wanted Devon to hear this. He'd have something to say. Double base drums revved like he'd rolled a motorcycle into his bedroom. I wanted to be in there, too – inside the storm of sound.

Mom held the phone to her ear long after Aunt Cathy had hung up. The dial tone droned like a distress beacon. She sat. Dad took the phone from her and cradled it back on the wall, trying three times before it clung there.

I left the room.

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We got all of our news from Cable TV. Dad didn't care about sports and there was enough politics on the 24 news hour channels to keep Mom happy. Newspapers slipped wet like slugs down neighbors' driveways. One house had eight by their mailbox, ink blurring muddy on the unshoveled asphalt.

That meant their kids were infected.

In the early weeks of February, when no one knew the extent of the pandemic, when parents and physicians and senators wanted to believe it was just a fluke, it really didn't have a proper name. Parents whispered about it so their kids wouldn't be alarmed and kids whispered about it to each other because their parents were whispering.

"I think the Murphy's kid has it." They whispered.

"Hard to tell. You know."

"I know."

But no one knew anything.

Dogshit would've laughed if he were even home at the time