

FIGMENT

I'm marching home from Leguin's, hep-two-three, along the river bottom. Cars and trucks are flying along the freeway less than a mile away. But I'm in a whole other world down here, thinking about today with the old man. It's cool how he never butts into the tale, instead lets me tell it to the end. If there is an end. It takes a good listener to make a story whole, and he has a deep-down way of listening.

A yellow moon floats behind raggedy old eucalyptus trees. It's so dark in here, like that moonlight is being sucked up by the mud that's supposed to be the Salinas. A couple more weeks of dry and it won't even be mud, it'll just be all cracked like that old man's face.

Then I see her. Even in that weird light, she looks like no more than a darker shadow against the trees. Her back is to me, and I can't see her purple toenails buried in the mud, but I know it's Roxanne.

"Foxy . . . Roxy?" I try to say it sort of funny, but my voice cracks.

She turns and stares at me.

"It took you long enough," she says. "Jee-sus, is that blood? He hurt you?"

"It ain't nothing like that . . . What do you know about he?"

A sadness seeps up from way deep inside of her, like she's a part of that moonlight and the mud and the trees, and she don't answer me. Maybe it's not really her. Just a figment of my imagination.

"The Blackjacks are just up the road," she says.

"What do you know about them?"

"There's no escaping them."

"Come with me," I say. "We'll go back to the old man's and we can . . ."

"Listen to me. Don't you go back there. Ever. No matter what the Blackjacks might do. Don't go back to that cellar. Ever."

"Man, it was you that locked me in there in the first place."

"It ain't the same now."

Then she turns and climbs up the ravine, back the way I came. Back toward Leguin's. Like a figment lost in my imagination.

Guys used to play army down here, pow-powing and screaming and laughing. Then one day Roxanne had come charging down the bank, ambushing us like some enemy platoon. *How can you play these games*, she had screamed at me, *after what the war did to your own father?* The other boys had scattered and it had just been the two of us.

You don't know nothing, I had said. *My dad was a war hero and then he came home and he met my mom and they had me and then he died.*

“You don’t know nothing,” I say to the trees, feeling like I just been ambushed all over again. It’s dark, but I know that river bottom, so it’s no big deal. What would my dorky ten-year-old self think if he saw me coming at him all covered in this for real blood? He wouldn’t even recognize me.

A song drifts out of the trees: *Time keeps on slippin', slippin' . . .*

I reach the bend and claw my way up the riverbank right smack into blinding headlights. Through my fingers I see two guys leaning against one of those old Chevy pickups with the big rounded fenders.

Blackjacks.

Wolfman’s voice crackles out of the truck radio: That’s the *Steve Miller Band*, *still on the charts*.

The Ace didn’t send flunkies like Buns Bernie this time. Two big dudes with long greasy hair tied in bandanas. These are Jokers. Somewhere there’s some kid safe in bed listening to that same station. I could dodge these creeps, but what’s the point? They’d get me sooner or later.

“What’s up?”

The Chevy is a primer gray that matches the taller guy’s hair. Maybe they stole the truck and think if they repaint it no one will finger it.

“Get a load of this kid. What a mess.” The gray-haired guy reaches in and punches off the radio, and then he lopez around me.

“I’d do a cherry red,” I say. “With black pinstriping. Maybe some chrome running boards and tail pipes. Glass pack, for sure.”

“Huh?” the other guy says. It hits me now that I’ve seen this guy from way back.

“This truck you stole. Maybe you don’t want to bring attention on it. But no point stealing it if it ain’t gonna be cherry. And don’t you think sometimes the best disguise is right there in plain sight?”

It’s his hair that threw me off. How does a twenty-year-old get gray hair?

“Hey, you’re Brent Keating,” I say.

“Shut up.”

“You used to drive with your dad in his tow truck.” Maybe if I can get him to see me, really see me, I might get out of this. “You came to our place a couple times to jump-start my mom’s car.”

“That piece-of-shit station wagon.” I see by the twist of his face that I’ve just made things worse, maybe ’cause it reminds him that his dad is in prison now for jacking car parts.

“Get a load of all that pig’s blood.” The blond guy circles me in the opposite direction. I don’t know him by name, but he’s one of those older creeps I avoided in school.

“What were you doing at the old man’s?” Brent asks.

“Cleaning up. He caught me.”

“That’s what the Ace figured.” Their circle closes around me. “You didn’t say nothing about the Blackjacks, did you?”

“No. He never asked.”

“How can we be sure?” He thumps a fingernail against his teeth, pretending to think.

“I . . .”

“Shut up!” He slams me against the hood of the truck, needles shooting through my brain, my face against the warm metal. “Just listen. And don’t screw up this time. Ace wants you to steal something from that old creep. Something valuable. One of those antiques he’s got.”

He slams me again, like that’ll help me remember.

“Now pay close attention, just like your life depended on it. You’re gonna steal something real valuable from that old man’s house and you’re gonna bring it to Camp Roberts. To those deserted barracks. Now for the good part. Just so you know we’re serious.”

Then they start pounding on me. Maybe it’s this pain of each thud on flesh and bone that makes me forget, but they never say when. Never.