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Dummy-Hanging Night on Woods Hill

Let me tell you who lives in that house--Jeremy, the kid I still stuck up for, even after he wet his pants in public. It happened while we were in Miss Lovejoy's music class, when she started belting out an aria from La Traviata. I guess it was a combination of things, Miss Lovejoy's hawk-like beak and elephantine ears, her silly facial expression as she crooned at the ceiling, and the wasp that was orbiting her head as if looking for the right moment to put her out of her misery. Anyway, Jeremy just lost it--in more ways than one. He started laughing hysterically, covering his mouth, making guttural grunts, gurgles, and groans while his face got as red as his hair. Each time the coloratura hit a high note, he wheezed in agony, until the dam gave way. Then the bell rang, jolting Miss Lovejoy out of her euphoria, sending a disappointed wasp gliding out the window, and leaving Jeremy sitting alone, head buried in his arms, while the last few drops tapped into the puddle below his desk.

"See, I told you he was a screwball," triumphed Toby as he, Bob, and I headed out of Lincoln School Opera House and into the October afternoon. I wondered how Miss Lovejoy would react when she discovered one of her students wasn't housebroken, but, once again, I played the role of defense council.

"It doesn't make him crazy, just 'cause he pissed in his pants," I began, but watching Toby's huge frame and Bob's compact one stagger down the steps, I knew I was off to an inauspicious start.

"Aw, c'mon," Toby said, regaining his composure, "it's not just that; it's the other stuff he does."

"Like what?"

"Like last week--remember, he got in trouble in science class when Mr. Crenshaw asked him to define flagellum, and he said 'the guy who sailed around the world.'"

"So why is that crazy?" I asked.

"Because Crenshaw was in a bad mood," Toby said, "and nobody in his right mind wises off with Crenshaw in a bad mood."

"Besides," added Bob, "how come Jeremy had to go to that special school for whackos? You know," and to emphasize his point he crossed his eyes, stuck out his tongue, and gyrated his index finger around his temple.

Bob's question was a stumper. In fact, I had wondered about it, too. Jeremy Saunders had lived in Carlstadt as long as any of us. But suddenly, in the middle of second grade, he vanished from Lincoln School and wound up going to the Fairchild Academy. Now he was back with us in the eighth grade, and no one knew why he had left or why he returned. Still, I didn't think it proved insanity.

"Maybe he went to a special school because he's really intelligent."

"INTELLIGENT?" Toby said, "he's the kid who rubbed oil of winter-green all over his balls, and he couldn't go to school for three days!"

"That was just a rumor," I said, "we don't know he did it."

"Oh yeah? Well, Danny O'Hara said Jeremy told him himself. And you're forgetting that Danny lives next door to him, and he said he heard Jeremy howling like a werewolf--howling that night.

"Or maybe there was a full moon," offered Bob.

I could see that, once again, I was losing the jury so I rested the defense. The only thing I did accomplish on our way home was to convince Toby and Bob to let Jeremy go with us for a soda after football practice.

Of course, I wasn't sure Jeremy would even show up for practice after what had happened the day before.

He tackled the coach. Well, not really tackled, but he certainly made coach Bragg, or Sarge, as we called him, go crashing to the ground. We had fumbled five times in our last two games so we were getting a clinic on how to carry the ball. As we sat in two lines facing each other, Sarge rumbled through the space between, first from one direction, then the other, all the while demonstrating how the ball should be ensconced in the hand, arm, and body. But on his third time through, Jeremy suddenly broke from line and rolled directly into the coach's path, cutting his legs out from under him.

"Garrrrgh!" groaned Sarge as his ursine, beer-nourished body collapsed in a malignant heap. We held our breath in shock, fear, and anticipation; things the size of Sarge are usually felled only by woodsmen.

"You stupid-assed blood clot!" he shrieked as he sprang to his feet and loomed over Jeremy.

It was another non sequitur, something Sarge was famous for. A few days before, when I had thrown a pass that fluttered and died about five yards in front of my receiver, Sarge told me that I should either get the ball pumped up or call Western Union.

"Saunders, you NUTS? What the hell'd ya do that for?" Sarge stood with his, as if ready for mortal combat.

Jeremy, unflinching, looked directly up into Sarge's baleful stare. "Well, you were showing us how to carry the ball so we wouldn't fumble. I just wanted to see if it really worked." He looked neither sheepish nor smirking, and he didn't glance around for anyone's approval. He genuinely expected a civil response.

"Well, ya see, Saunders, I didn't fumble," Sarge said, holding out

the ball as proof. "Happy? NOW YOU GIVE ME TEN LAPS! The rest of you guys, let's practice hangin' on to the ball."

Jeremy shrugged, stood, and headed for the fence surrounding the field. The tension broke, and as we started our ball-carrier-versus-tackler drill, the usual football chanting took over: 'MON, BABE--WAY TA GO, WAY TA GO--GOOD HIT, GOOD HIT--C'MON, HANG ON T' THAT BALL. While I waited for my turn to get mowed down, I watched Jeremy slowly jogging around the far end of the field, which borders Route 17. Suddenly Jeremy leaped the fence and resumed his slow trot away and on the other side.

"Saunders!" yelled Ski, an assistant coach, who also saw Jeremy's break for freedom. But Jeremy never turned around, and he made his way on to the parking lot of Steve's Sizzling Steaks, paralleled the highway for a few seconds, then disappeared as he crossed in front of the restaurant. "Hey, Sarge, you want me to go get'm?"

"Nah, we've got more important things to do now," Sarge said, staring in the direction where Jeremy had vanished from view. "I'll deal with that corn flake tomorrow."

And tomorrow was officially here after I had dropped off my books, changed into my uniform, and hurried to the field, savoring the last few bites of the shiny red apple I had brought from home. The time between lunch and dinner for even the most sedentary thirteen-year-old is both cruel and unyielding. However, for a football player on Carlstadt Recreation it was worse than medieval torture. The empty, which had already formed in one's stomach by the time practice started, widened and deepened to a void that reached up to the throat by the time the drills were under way. And when the wind was from the southeast, the aroma of steak and savory sauce wafted over from Steve's, thus making cannibalism an attractive alternative to a pass defense. Sarge had always said he liked hungry

ballplayers; in that regard we were all-Americans.

I gave the apple core a quick once-over, making sure I hadn't left even the tiniest morsel, and then I fired it into the sewer on the corner of Ninth and Berry. There wasn't a moment to waste; all the guys were already on the field and putting on their cleats. I had just enough time to scurry down the hill, hop the fence, and join my teammates. First were warm-ups, and when Sarge conducted opening calisthenics, even his language was elongated.

"A-a-a-all right, boys, let's stre-e-etch those muscles. That's it, give those hams a go-o-od workout."

Sarge was a cruel man to say "hams" in front of the starving youth who lay scattered and contorted all around him on the grass of Peter Rasmus Jr. Memorial Little League Field. It wasn't even 4:00, but already they were cooking up the steaks over at Steve's. To take my mind off the aroma from each balmy gust of wind, I stretched my neck muscles by looking up at the sky. Mr. Crenshaw was wrong. What I saw weren't cumulus clouds, but mounds of fluffy mashed potatoes flecked with rich, greyish-brown, beef gravy. Perfect with a sizzling steak. It didn't even help to glance over at the girls, who always came down to watch us practice. On Indian summer days like these, Jill, Kathy, Nancy, and all the others had their last opportunities to wear their short shorts, normally capable of sending our thoughts flowing in directions other than athletic. No matter. Whether spring or autumn, until a young man has had dinner, his fancy turns not to love, but carbohydrates--in any form. What I saw as I gazed up at the first row of stands weren't soft, smooth inner thighs, but luscious, creamy cheese that, if spread on crackers, would be perfect with fluffy, mashed potatoes and a sizzling steak.

Fortunately, Sarge's voice snapped me out of my thoughts, which were

bordering on barbaric.

"Hey, Morrow, C'mere, I wanna talk to you."

I slowly untied the knot that was my body, took another look at the cheese for inspiration, got up, and followed Sarge away from the warm-ups to talk in private.

"Look, Morrow, I have a favor to ask you," he said, clamping one of his huge paws onto my left shoulder. I hoped the conversation wouldn't last too long; my throwing arm was already beginning to numb.

"What is it, Sarge?"

"You're the only one on the team who talks to Saunders. You know, all the other guys think he's a jerk, and they say I ought to give him the boot for that stunt yesterday."

"But you're not gonna do that, are you?"

"No," Sarge replied, relinquishing his grip and then holding out both palms as if in plea. I smiled, thankful he spared Jeremy and also allowed my arm to continue living. "But you gotta talk to him. Are you gonna see him over the weekend?"

"Well, I thought I'd see him at practice today, but I guess he's not gonna show. Yeah, I'll call him tonight, probably see him tomorrow."

"Good, tell him he's still on the team if he wants to be. He's tall, got good speed, and he catches everything you throw at him. But he can't do any more crazy stuff, and he's gotta follow directions like everyone else. O.K.?"

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"Sure," I said, and then I started back to join the wind sprints that were about to begin. But after I took only a few steps, Sarge called me back.