

Bobby Conroy Comes Back From The Dead

by

Joe Hill

Bobby didn't know her at first. She was wounded, like him. The first thirty to arrive all got wounds. Tom Savini put them on himself.

Her face was a silvery blue, her eyes sunken into darkened hollows, and where her right ear had been was a ragged-edged hole, a gaping place that revealed a lump of wet red bone. They sat a yard apart on the stone wall around the fountain, which was switched off. She had her pages balanced on one knee – three pages in all, stapled together – and was looking them over, frowning with concentration. Bobby had read his while he was waiting in line to go into makeup.

Her jeans reminded him of Harriet Rutherford. There were patches all over them, patches that looked as if they had been made out of handkerchiefs; squares of red and dark blue, with paisley patterns printed on them. Harriet was always wearing jeans like that. Patches sewn into the butt of a girl's Levi's still turned Bobby on.

His gaze followed the bend of her legs down to where her blue jeans flared at the ankle, then on to her bare feet. She had kicked her sandals off, and was twisting the toes of one foot into the toes of the other. When he saw this he felt his heart lunge with a kind of painful-sweet shock.

"Harriet?" he said. "Is that little Harriet Rutherford who I used to write love poems to?"

She peered at him sideways, over her shoulder. She didn't need to answer, he knew it was her. She stared for a long, measuring moment, and then her eyes opened a little wider. They were a vivid, very undead green, and for a moment he saw a brightness in them, an unmistakable excitement. But it was the only sign she gave that she recognized him, and in another moment she turned her head away, went back to perusing her pages.

"No one ever wrote me love poems in high school," she said. "I'd remember. I would've died of happiness."

"In detention. Remember Billings stuck us with two weeks? The cooking show skit. You had a cucumber carved like a penis. You said marinate at slightly above room temperature for one hour and stuck it in your pants. It was just the finest moment in the whole history of the Die Laughing Comedy Collective. Of which, you may recall, we were co-captains and due-paying members. In fact, I think we were the only due-paying members."

"We paid dues?"

"Yeah, we paid the other members. It was the only way to keep them from quitting."

"No," she said, and shook her head. "I have a good memory for the clubs I belonged to in high school and I wasn't ever in any comedy troupe."

"What clubs did you belong to?"

"The Bobby Conroy Hate Team. The Bobby Conroy Has A Little Dick Club. The Who Knows A Funny Story About Big Gay Bobby Conroy Society." She looked back down at the pages balanced on her knee. "Do you remember any details about these supposed poems?"

"How do you mean?"

"A line. Maybe if you could remember something about one of these poems - one line of heart-rending verse - it would all come flooding back to me."

He didn't know if he could at first; stared at her blankly, his tongue pressed to his lower lip, trying to call something back and his mind stubbornly blank.

Then he opened his mouth and began to speak, remembering as he went along: *"I love to watch you in the shower, I hope that's not obscene."*

*"But when I see you soap your boobs, I get so sticky in my jeans!"* Harriet cried, turning her body towards him.

"Bobby Conroy, *goddamn*, come here and hug me without screwing up my makeup."

He leaned towards her and put his arms around her narrow back. He shut his eyes and squeezed, feeling absurdly happy,

maybe the happiest he had felt since moving back in with his parents. He had not spent a day in Monroeville when he didn't think about seeing her. He was depressed, he daydreamed about her, stories that began with exactly this moment – or not exactly *this* moment, he had not imagined them both made-up like partially decomposed corpses, but close enough.

When he woke in the morning, in his bedroom over his parents' garage, he felt flattened and listless. He'd lay on his lumpy mattress and stare at the skylights overhead. The skylights were milky with dust, and through them every sky appeared the same, a bland, formless white. Nothing in him wanted to get up, wanted to move past the first moments after opening his eyes. What made it worse was he still remembered what it felt like to wake up in that same bed with a teenager's sense of his own limitless possibilities, to wake up charged with enthusiasm for the day, no matter what had happened the day before. If he daydreamed about meeting Harriet again, and falling into their old friendship – and if these early morning daydreams sometimes turned explicitly sexual, if he remembered being with her in her father's shed, her back on the stained cement, her too-skinny legs pulled open, her socks still on – then at least it was something to stir his blood a little, get him going. All his other daydreams had thorns on them; handling them always threatened a sudden sharp prick of pain.

They were still holding each other when a boy spoke, close by. "Mom, who are you hugging?"

Bobby Conroy opened his eyes, shifted his stare to the right. A little blue-faced dead boy with limp black hair was staring morosely up at them. He wore a hooded sweatshirt, the hood pulled up.

Harriet's grip on Bobby relaxed. She was looking at the child too. Then, slowly, her arms slid away. Bobby's gaze held on the boy for an instant longer – the kid was no older than six – and then dropped to Harriet's hand, the wedding band on her ring finger.

Bobby looked back at the kid, forced a *hey-chumley* type smile. Bobby had been to over seven hundred auditions during his years in New York City, and he had a whole catalog of phony smiles.

"Hey chumley," Bobby said. "I'm Bobby Conroy. Your mom and me are old buddies from way back when Mastadons walked the earth."

"Bobby is my name too," the boy said. "Do you know a lot about dinosaurs? I'm a big dinosaur guy myself."

Bobby felt something, a shock to the heart, a sick pang that seemed to go right through the middle of him. He glanced at her face – didn't want to, couldn't help himself – and found Harriet watching him. Her smile was anxious and compressed.

"My husband picked it," she said. She was, for some reason, patting his leg. "After a Yankee. He's from Albany originally."

"I know about Mastadons," Bobby said to the boy, surprised to find his voice sounded just the same as it ever did. "Big hairy elephants the size of school buses. They once roamed the entire Pennsylvanian plateau, and left mountainous Mastadon poops everywhere, one of which later became Pittsburgh."

The kid grinned, and threw a quick glance at his mother, perhaps to appraise what she made of this off-hand reference to poop. She smiled indulgently.

Bobby saw the kid's hand and recoiled. "Ugh! Wow, that's the best wound I've seen all day. What is that, a fake hand?"

Three fingers were missing from the boy's left hand. Bobby grabbed it and yanked on it, expecting it to come off. But it was warm and fleshy under the blue makeup, and the kid pulled it out of Bobby's grip.

"No," he said. "It's just my hand. That's the way it is."

Bobby blushed so intensely his ears stung, and was grateful for his make-up. Harriet touched Bobby's wrist.

"He really doesn't have those fingers," she said.

Bobby looked at her, struggling to frame an apology. Her smile was a little fretful now, but she wasn't visibly angry with him, and the hand on his arm was a good sign.

"I stuck them into the table-saw but I don't remember because I was so little," the boy explained.

"Dean is in lumber," Harriet said.

"Is Dean staggering around here somewhere?" Bobby asked, craning his head and making a show of looking around, although of course he had no idea what Harriet's Dean might look like. The atrium at the center of the mall was crowded with other people like them, made-up to look like the recent dead. They sat together on benches, or stood together in groups, chatting, laughing at each other's wounds, or looking over the mimeographed pages they had been given of the screenplay. The mall was closed - doors of steel plate or Plexiglas pulled down in front of the entrances to the stores - no one in the place but the film crew and the undead.

"No, he dropped us off and went in to work."

"On a Sunday?"

"He owns his own yard."

It was as good a set-up for a punch line as he had ever heard, and he paused for a moment, searching for just the right one... and then it came to him that making wisecracks about Dean's choice of work to Dean's wife in front of Dean's five-year-old might be ill-advised, and never mind that he and Harriet had once been best friends and the royal couple of the Die Laughing Comedy Collective their senior year in high school. Bobby said, "He does? Good for him."

"I like the big gross tear in your face," the little kid said, pointing at Bobby's brow. Bobby had a nasty scalp wound, the skin laid open to the lumpy bone. "Didn't you think the guy who made us into dead people was cool?"

Bobby had actually been a little creeped out by Tom Savini, who had told Bobby to keep his eye out for a guy walking around with a *great* looking pile of entrails in his arms. "They're kind of swinging from a wound in his stomach. You got to touch them. I squirted some K-Y on them to make them glisten like they're fresh, man, I grossed myself out. Now they feel just like something you'd yank out of a turkey. Hopefully he won't drag them around and get lint on them."

But Bobby could see what the kid meant about how he was cool. With his black leather jacket, motorcycle boots, black beard, and memorable eyebrows – thick black eyebrows that arched sharply upward, like Dr. Spock or Bela Legosi – he looked like a death metal rock God.

Someone was clapping their hands. Bobby glanced around. The director, George Romero, stood close to the bottom of the curving staircase that wound down into the atrium from the second floor. He had stopped four steps up, so everyone could see him, but everyone would have been able to see him even if he came all the way to the bottom of the stairs. He was well over six feet tall and probably two hundred pounds, a bearish man with broad slumped shoulders and a dense beard, brown, peppered with silver. Bobby had noticed that many of the men working on the crew had beards. A lot of them had shoulder length hair too, and wore army-navy castoffs and motorcycle boots like Savini, so that they resembled a band of counterculture revolutionaries.

Romero launched into a speech. He had a big booming confident voice and when he grinned, which was always, it made dimples in his cheeks, visible in spite of the beard. He asked if anyone present knew anything about making movies. A few people, Bobby included, raised their hands. Romero said thank God someone in this place does, and everyone laughed. He said he wanted to welcome them all to the world of big-budget Hollywood film-making, and everyone laughed at that too, because George Romero only made pictures in Pittsburgh, and everyone knew Dawn of the Dead was lower than low budget, it was a half-step above no-budget. He said he was grateful to them all for coming out today, and that for ten hours of grueling work, which would test them body and soul, they would be paid *in cash*, a sum so colossal he dare not say the number aloud, he couldn't say it, he could only show it. He held aloft a dollar bill, and there was more laughter. Then Tom Savini, up on the second floor, leaned over the railing, and shouted, "Don't laugh, that's more than most of us are getting paid to work on this bomb."

"Lots of people are in this film as a labor of love," George Romero said. "Tom is in it because he likes squirting pus on people." Some in the crowd moaned. "Fake pus! Fake pus!" Romero cried.

"You *hope* it was fake pus," Savini intoned from somewhere above, but he was already moving away from the railing, out of sight.

More laughter. Bobby knew a thing or two about comic patter, and had a suspicion that this bit of the speech was rehearsed, and had been issued just this way, more than once.

Romero talked for a while about the plot. The recently dead were coming back to life; they liked to eat people; in the face of the crisis the government had collapsed, society was coming apart, people were panicking; four young heroes had picked this mall to hide out in. Bobby's attention wandered, he found himself looking down at the other Bobby, at Harriet's boy. Little Bob had a long, solemn face, dark chocolate eyes and lots of thick black hair, limp and disheveled. In fact, the kid bore a passing resemblance to Bobby himself, who also had brown eyes, a slim face, and a thick untidy mass of black hair on his head. Bobby found himself wondering if Dean looked like him; the thought made his blood race strangely. What if Dean dropped in to see how Harriet and little Bobby were doing, and the man turned out to be his exact twin? The thought was so alarming it made him feel briefly weak – but then he remembered he was made-up like a corpse, blue-face, scalp wound. Even if they looked exactly alike they wouldn't look anything alike.

Romero delivered some final instructions on how to walk like a zombie – he demonstrated by allowing his eyes to roll back in his head and his face to go slack – and then promised they'd be ready to roll on the first shot in a few minutes.

Harriet pivoted on her heel, turned to face him, her fist on her hip, eyelids fluttering theatrically. He turned

at the same time, and they almost bumped into each other. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. They were standing too close to each other, and the unexpected physical proximity seemed to throw her; all at once she didn't seem to know what it was she had been about to say. He didn't know what to say either, all thought suddenly wiped from his mind. She laughed, and shook her head, but the moment was somehow artificial, an expression of anxiety, not happiness.

"Let's set, pardner," she said. He remembered that when a skit wasn't going well, and she got rattled, she sometimes slipped into a big drawling John Wayne impersonation on stage as well, a nervous habit he had hated then and that he found, in that moment, indescribably endearing.

"Are we going to have something to do soon?" little Bob asked.

"Soon," she said. "Why don't you practice being a zombie? Go on, lurch around for a while."

Bobby and Harriet sat down at the edge of the fountain again. Her hands were small, bony fists on her thighs. She stared into her lap, her eyes blank, gaze directed inward. She was digging the toes of one bare foot into the toes of the other again.

He spoke. One of them had to say something.

"I can't believe you're married and you have a kid!" he said, in the same tone of happy astonishment he reserved for friends who had just told him they had been cast in a part he himself had auditioned for. "I love this kid you're dragging

around with you. He's so cute. But then, who can resist a little kid who looks half-rotted?"

She seemed to come back from wherever she had been, smiled at him – almost shyly.

He went on, "And you better be ready to tell me everything about this Dean guy."

She nodded, looked down again, hair falling across her eyes, hiding them. "He's coming by later. He's going to take us out to lunch. You should come."

"That could be fun!" Bobby cried, and made a mental note to take his enthusiasm down a notch.

"He can be really shy the first time he meets someone, so don't expect too much."

Bobby waved a hand in the air: *pish-posh*. "It's going to be great. We'll have lots to talk about. I've always been fascinated with lumber yards and – plywood."

This was taking a chance, joshing her about the husband he didn't know. But she smirked and said:

"Everything you ever wanted to know about two-by-fours but were afraid to ask."

And for a moment they were both smiling, a little foolishly, knees almost touching. They had never really figured out how to talk to each other. They were always half-on-stage, trying to use whatever the other person said to set up the next punch-line. That much, anyway, hadn't changed.

"God I can't believe running into you here," she said. "I've wondered about you. I've thought about you a lot."

"You have?"

"I figured you'd be famous by now," she said.

"Hey, that makes two of us," Bobby said, and winked.

Immediately he wished he could take the wink back. It was fake and he didn't want to be fake with her. He hurried on, answering a question she hadn't asked. "I'm settling in. Been back for three months. I'm staying with my parents for a while, kind of readapting to Monroeville."

She nodded, still regarding him steadily, with a seriousness that made him uncomfortable. "How's it going?"

"I'm making a life," Bobby lied.

In between set-ups, Bobby and Harriet and little Bob told stories about how they had died.

"I was a comedian in New York City," Bobby said, fingering his scalp wound. "Something tragic happened when I went on stage."

"Yeah," Harriet said. "Your act."

"Something that had never happened before."

"What, people laughed?"

"I was my usual brilliant self. People were rolling on the floor."

"Convulsions of agony."

"And then as I was taking my final bow – a terrible accident. A stagehand up in the rafters dropped a forty pound sandbag right on my head. But at least I died to the sound of applause."

"They were applauding the stagehand," Harriet said.

The little boy looked seriously up into Bobby's face, and took his hand. "I'm sorry you got hit in the head." His lips grazed Bobby's knuckles with a dry kiss.

Bobby stared down at him. His hand tingled where little Bob's mouth had touched it.

"He's always been the kissiest, huggiest kid you ever met," Harriet said. "He's got all this pent-up affection. At the slightest sign of weakness he's ready to slobber on you." As she said this she ruffled little Bobby's hair. "What killed you, squirt?"

He held up his hand, waggled his stumps. "My fingers got cut off on Dad's table-saw and I bled to death."

Harriet went on smiling but her eyes seemed to film over just slightly. She fished around in her pocket and found a quarter. "Go get a gumball kid."

He snatched it and ran.

"People must think we're the most careless parents," she said, staring expressionlessly after her son. "But it was no one's fault about his fingers."

"Oh I'm sure," Bobby said. He thought his own voice sounded flat, lame. She didn't seem to notice. She didn't even seem to know he had spoken.

"The table saw was unplugged and he wasn't even two. He never plugged anything in before. We didn't know he knew how. Dean was right there with him. It just happened so fast. Do you know how many things had to go wrong, all at the same

time for that to happen? Dean thinks the sound of the saw coming on scared him and he reached up to try and shut it off. He thought he'd be in trouble." She was briefly silent, watching her son work the gumball machine, then said, "I always thought about my kid – this is the one part of my life I'm going to get right. No indiscriminate fuck-ups about this. I was planning how when he was fifteen he'd make love to the most beautiful girl in school. How'd he be able to play five instruments and he'd blow everyone away with all his talent. How'd he be the funny kid who seems to know everyone." She paused again, and then added, "He'll be the funny kid now. The funny kid always has something wrong with him. That's why he's funny – to shift people's attention to something else."

In the silence that followed this statement, Bobby had several thoughts in rapid succession. The first was that *he* had been the funny kid when he was in school; did Harriet think there had been something wrong with *him* he had been covering for? Then he remembered they were *both* the funny kids, and thought: *what was wrong with us?*

It had to be something, otherwise they'd be together now and the boy at the gumball machine would be theirs. The thought which crossed his mind next was that, if little Bobby was *their* little Bobby, he'd still have ten fingers. He felt a seething dislike of Dean the lumber man, an ignorant squarehead whose idea of spending together-time with his kid probably meant taking him to the fair to watch a truck-pull.

An assistant director started clapping her hands and hollering down for the undead to get into their positions. Little Bob trotted back to them.

"Mom," he said, his gum in his cheek. "You didn't say how you died." Looking at her torn-off ear.

"I know," Bobby said. "She ran into this old friend at the mall and they got talking. You know, and I mean they *really* got talking. *Hours* of blab. Finally her old friend said, hey, I don't want to chew your ear off here. And your mom said, aw, don't worry about it..."

"A great man once said, lend me your ears," Harriet said. She smacked the palm of her hand hard against her forehead. "Why did I listen to him?"

Except for the dark hair, Dean didn't look anything like him. He was *short*. Bobby wasn't prepared for how short. He was shorter than Harriet, who was herself not much over five and a half feet tall. When they kissed, Dean had to stretch his neck. He was compact, and solidly built, broad at the shoulders, deep through the chest, narrow at the hips. He wore thick glasses with gray plastic frames, the eyes behind them the color of unpolished pewter. They were shy eyes – his gaze met Bobby's when Harriet introduced them, darted away, returned and darted away again – not to mention old; at the corners of them the skin was creased in a web of finely etched laugh lines. He was older than Harriet, maybe by as much as ten years.

They had only just been introduced when Dean cried suddenly, "Oh you're *that* Bobby! You're *funny* Bobby. You know we almost didn't name our *kid* Bobby because of you. I've had it drilled into me, if I ever run into you, I'm supposed to reassure you that naming him Bobby was my idea. Cause of Bobby Doerr. Ever since I was old enough to imagine having kids of my own I always thought -"

"I'm funny!" Harriet's son interrupted.

Dean caught him under the armpits and lofted him into the air. "You sure are!"

Bobby wasn't sure he wanted to have lunch with them, but Harriet looped her arm through his and marched him towards the doors out to the parking lot, and her shoulder – warm and bare – was leaning against his, so there was really no choice.

Bobby didn't notice the other people in the diner looking at him, and forgot they were in makeup until the waitress approached. She was barely out of her teens, with a terrific head of frizzy yellow hair that bounced as she walked.

"We're dead," little Bobby announced.

"Gotcha," the girl said, nodding and pointing her ball-point pen at them. "I'm guessing you either all work on the horror movie, or you already tried the special, which is it?"

Dean laughed, dry, bawling laughter. Dean was as easy a laugh as Bobby had ever met. Dean laughed at almost everything Harriet said, and most of what Bobby himself said.

Sometimes he laughed so hard, the people at the next table stared in alarm. Once he had control of himself, he would apologize with unmistakable earnestness, his face flushed a delicate shade of rose, eyes gleaming and wet. That was when Bobby started to understand, when he started to see at least one possible answer to the question that had been on his mind ever since learning she was married to Dean who-owned-his-own-lumber-yard: *why him?* Well – he was a willing audience, there was that.

“So I thought you were acting in New York City,” Dean said, at last. “What brings you back?”

“Failure,” Bobby said.

“Oh – I’m sorry to hear that. What are you up to now? Are you doing some comedy locally?”

“You could say that. Only around here they call it substitute teaching for some wacky reason.”

“Oh! You’re teaching! How do you like it?”

“It’s great. I always planned to work either in film or television or junior high. That I should finally make it so big subbing eighth grade gym – it’s a dream come true.”

Dean laughed, and chunks of pulverized chicken-fried steak flew out of his mouth. He blushed furiously, apologized, dabbed at the corners of his eyes.

“I’m sorry. This is awful,” he said. “Food everywhere. You must think I’m a total pig.”

“No, it’s okay. Can I have the waitress bring you something? A glass of water? A trough?” He lifted his finger

as a waitress – not theirs – went past. “Ma’am? Fresh bucket of slops here, when you get the chance.”

Dean bent so his forehead was almost touching his plate, his laughter wheezy, asthmatic. “Stop. Really.”

Bobby stopped, but not because Dean said. For the first time he had noticed Harriet’s knee was knocking his under the table. He wondered if this was intentional, and the first chance he got he leaned back and looked. No, not intentional. She had kicked her sandals off and was digging the toes of one foot into the other, so fiercely that sometimes her right knee swung out and banged his.

“Wow, I would’ve loved to have a teacher like you. Someone who can make kids laugh.” Dean said.

Bobby chewed and chewed, but couldn’t tell what he was eating. It didn’t have any taste.

Dean let out a shaky sigh, wiped the corners of his eyes again. “Of course, I’m not funny. I can’t even remember knock-knock jokes. I’m not good for much else except working. And Harriet is so funny. Sometimes she puts on shows for Bobby and me, with these dirty socks on her hands, we get laughing so hard we can’t breathe. She calls it the trailer park muppet show. Sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon.” He started laughing and thumping the table again. Harriet stared intently into her lap. Dean said, “I’d love to see her do that on Carson. This is – what do you call them, routines? – this could be a classic routine.”

"Sure sounds it." Bobby said. "I'm surprised Ed McMahon hasn't already called to see if she's available."

When Dean dropped them back at the mall and left for the lumber yard, the mood was different. Harriet seemed distant, it was hard to draw her into any kind of conversation – not that Bobby felt like trying very hard. He was suddenly irritable. All the fun seemed to have gone out of playing a dead person for the day. It was mostly waiting – waiting for the gaffers to get the lights just so, for Tom Savini to touch up a wound that was starting to look a little too much like Latex, not enough like ragged flesh – and Bobby was sick of it. The sight of other people having a good time annoyed him. Several zombies stood in a group, playing hacky-sack with a quivering red spleen, and laughing. It made a juicy splat every time it hit the floor. Bobby wanted to snarl at them for being so merry. Hadn't any of them heard of method acting, Stanislavsky? They should all be sitting apart from one another, moaning unhappily and fondling giblets. He heard himself moan aloud, an angry frustrated sound, and little Bobby asked what was wrong. He said he was just practicing. Little Bob went to watch the hacky-sack game.

Harriet said, without looking at him, without any notable enthusiasm, "That was a good lunch, wasn't it?"

"*Sen-sational*," Bobby said, thinking *better be careful*. He was restless, charged with an energy he didn't know how to displace. "I feel like I really hit it off with Dean. He

reminds me of my grandfather. I had this great grandfather who could wiggle his ears and who thought my name was Evan. He'd give me a quarter to stack wood for him, fifty cents if I'd do it with my shirt off. Say, how old *is* Dean?"

They had been walking together. Now Harriet stiffened, stopped. Her head swiveled towards him, but her hair was in front of her eyes, making it hard to read the expression in them. "He's nine years older than me. State your point."

"My point is nothing. I'm so glad you're happy."

"I *am* happy," Harriet said, her voice a half-octave too high.

"Did he get down on one knee when he proposed?"

Harriet nodded, her mouth crimped, suspicious.

"Did you have to help him up afterwards?" Bobby asked. His own voice was sounding a little off-key, too, and he thought *stop now*. It was like a cartoon, he saw Wile E. Coyote strapped to the front of a steam engine, jamming his feet down on the rails to try to brake the train, smoke boiling up from his heels, feet swelling, glowing red.

"Oh you prick," she said.

"I'm sorry!" he grinned, holding his hands palms-up in front of him. "Kidding, kidding. Funny Bobby, you know. I can't help myself." She hesitated — had been about to turn away — not sure whether she should believe him or not. Bobby wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand. "So we know what you do to make Dean laugh. What's he do to make you laugh? Oh

that's right, he isn't *funny*. Well what's he do to make your heart race? Besides kiss you with his dentures out?"

"Leave me alone, Bobby," she said, but she wasn't trying to walk off. Instead she had gone rigid, her head ducked down, and turned away from him.

"No."

"Stop."

"Can't," he said, and suddenly he understood he was angry with her. "If he isn't funny he must be something. I need to know what."

"*Patient*," she said.

"Patient," Bobby repeated. It stunned him – that this could be her answer.

"With me."

"With you," he said.

"With Robert."

"Patient," Bobby said. Then he couldn't say anything more for a moment because he was out-of-breath. He felt suddenly that his makeup was itching on his face. He wished that when he started to press she had just walked away from him, or told him to fuck-off, or hit him even, wished she had responded with anything but *patient*. He swallowed. "Well that's not good enough." Knowing he couldn't stop now, the train was going into the canyon, Wile E. Coyote's eyes bugging three feet out of his head in terror. "I wanted to meet whoever you were with now and feel sick with jealousy, but instead I just feel sick. I wanted you to fall in love

with someone good-looking and creative and brilliant, a novelist, a playwright, someone with a sense of humor and a fourteen-inch dong. Not a guy with a buzz cut and a lumber yard, who thinks erotic massage involves a tube of Ben Gay."

She smeared at the tears dribbling down her face with the backs of her hands. "I knew you'd hate him, but I didn't think you'd be mean."

"It's not that I hate him. What's to hate? He's not doing anything any other guy in his position wouldn't do. If I was eighty years old and about two feet tall, I'd *leap* at the chance to have a piece of ass like you. You bet he's patient. He better be. He ought to be down on his fucking knees every night, bathing your feet in sacramental oils, that you'd give him the time of day."

"You had your chance," she said. She was struggling not to let her crying slip out of control; the muscles in her face quivered with the effort, pulling her expression into a grimace.

"It's not about what chances I had," he said. "It's about what chances you had."

This time when she pivoted away from him, he let her go. She put her hands over her face. Her shoulders were jerking and she was making choked little sounds as she went. He watched her walk to the wall around the fountain where they had met earlier in the day. Then he remembered the boy and turned to look, his heart drumming hard, wondering what little Bobby might've seen or heard. But the kid was running

down the broad concourse, kicking the spleen in front of him, which had now collected a mass of dust bunnies around it. Two other dead children were trying to kick it away from him.

Bobby watched them play for a while. A pass went wide, and the spleen skidded past him. He put a foot on it to stop it. It flexed unpleasantly beneath the sole of his shoe. The boys stoppedped three yards off, stood there breathing hard, awaiting him. He scooped it up.

"Go out," he said, and lobbed it to little Bobby, who made a basket catch and hauled for Wellby's SuperDrug with his head down and the others right behind him.

When he turned to peek at Harriet he saw her watching him, her palms pressed hard against her knees. He waited for her to look away, but she didn't, and finally he took her steady gaze as an invitation to approach.

He crossed to the fountain, sat down beside her. He was still working out how to begin his apology, when she spoke.

"I wrote you. You stopped writing back," She said. Her bare feet were wrestling with each other again.

"I hate how overbearing your right foot is," he said. "Why can't it give the left foot a little space?" But she wasn't listening to him.

"It didn't matter," she said. Her voice was congested and hoarse. The makeup was oil-based, and in spite of her tears, hadn't streaked. "I wasn't mad. I knew we couldn't have a relationship, just seeing each other when you came home for Christmas." She swallowed thickly. "I really thought

someone would put you in their sitcom. Every time I thought about that – about seeing you on TV, and hearing people laugh when you said things – I'd get this big stupid smile on my face. I could float through a whole afternoon thinking about it. I don't understand what in the world could've made you come back to Monroeville."

But he had already said what in the world drew him back to his parents and his bedroom over the garage. Dean had asked in the diner, and Bobby had answered him truthfully.

One Thursday night, only last spring, he had gone on early in a club in the Village, called Nobody Move. He did his twenty minutes, earned a steady if-not-precisely-overwhelming murmur of laughter, and a spatter of applause when he came off. He found a place at the bar to hear some of the other acts. He was just about to slide off his stool and go home when Robin Williams leaped on stage. He was in town for SNL, cruising the clubs, testing material. Bobby quickly shifted his weight back onto his stool and sat listening, his pulse thudding heavily in his throat.

He couldn't explain to Harriet the import of what he had seen then. Bobby saw a man clutching the edge of a table with one hand, his date's thigh with the other, grabbing both so hard his knuckles were drained of all color. He was bent over with tears dripping off his face. He couldn't breathe. He wasn't laughing, he was making these desperate strangled sucking sounds – it was hilarity to the point of distress. The strangling man wagged his head from side to side, waved a

hand frantically in the air, *stop, please, I can't, don't do this to me*. Robin Williams saw the suffocating man, broke away from a discourse on jerking off, pointed right at him, and shouted: "You! Yes, you, motherfucker! You get a free pass to every show I do for the rest of my fucking life!" And then there was a sound, not just laughter, not just applause. It was a low, thunderous rumble of pleasure, a sound so immense it was felt as much as heard, a thing that caused the bones of Bobby's chest to hum.

Bobby himself didn't laugh once, and when he left his stomach was churning. His feet fell strangely, heavily against the sidewalk, his feet seemed miles away from the rest of his body, and for some time he did not know his way home. When at last he was in his apartment, he sat on the edge of his bed, his suspenders pulled off, and his shirt unbuttoned, and for the first time felt things were hopeless. And none of this he knew how to say to Harriet; it was an understanding that could not be shared.

He saw something flash in her hand. She was jiggling some quarters.

"Going to call someone?" he asked.

"Dean," she said. "For a ride."

"Don't."

"I'm not staying. I can't stay."

He watched her tormented feet, toes struggling together, and finally nodded. They stood at the same time. They were, once again, standing uncomfortably close.

"See you then," she said.

"See you," he said. He wanted to reach for her hand, but didn't, wanted to say something, but couldn't think what.

"Is there a couple people around here who want to volunteer to get shot?" George Romero asked, from less than three feet away. "Its a guaranteed close-up in the finished film."

Bobby and Harriet put their hands up at the same time.

"Me," Bobby said.

"Me," said Harriet, stepping on Bobby's foot as she moved forward to get George Romero's attention. "Me!"

"It's going to be a great picture, Mr. Romero," Bobby said. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, making small talk, waiting for Savini to finish wiring Harriet with her squib. Bobby was already wired – in more than one sense of the word. "Someday everyone in Pittsburgh is going to claim they walked dead in this movie."

"You kiss ass like a pro," Romero said. "Do you have a show-biz background?"

"Six years off-Broadway," Bobby said. "Plus I played most of the comedy clubs."

Romero shot a finger at him and winked. "Ah, but now you're back in greater Pittsburgh. Good career move, kid. Stick around here, you'll be a star in no time."

Harriet skipped over to Bobby, her hair flouncing. "I'm going to get my tit blown off!"

"Magnificent," Bobby said. "People just have to keep on going, because you never know when something wonderful is going to happen."

George Romero led them to their marks, and walked them through what he wanted from them. They were down at the southern end of the mall, in front of Penny's. Lights pointed into silver spangly umbrellas, casting an even white glow, and a dry heat, over a ten foot stretch of floor. The revolutionaries milled around the camera. A lumpy striped mattress rested on the floor, just to one side of a square pillar.

Harriet would get hit first, in the chest. She was supposed to jerk backwards, then keep coming, showing as little reaction to the shot as she could muster. Bobby would take the next bullet in the head and it would bring him down. The squib – a condom partially filled with cane syrup and food coloring – was hidden under one Latex fold of his scalp wound. The wires that would cause the Trojan to explode were threaded through his hair.

"You can slump first, and slide down and to the side," George Romero said. "Drop to one knee if you want, and then spill yourself out of the frame. If you're feeling a bit more acrobatic you can fall straight back, just be sure you hit the mattress. No one needs to get hurt."

It was just Bobby and Harriet in the shot, which would picture them from the waist up. The other extras lined the walls of the shopping mall corridor, watching them. Their

stares, their steady murmuring, induced in Bobby a pleasurable burst of adrenaline. Tom Savini knelt on the floor, just outside the framed shot, with a hand-held metal box in hand, wires snaking across the floor towards Bobby and Harriet. Little Bob sat Indian-fashion next to him, his hands cupped under his chin, squeezing the spleen, his eyes shiny with anticipation. Savini had told little Bob all about what was going to happen, preparing the kid for the sight of blood bursting from his mother's chest, but little Bob wasn't worried. "I've been seeing gross stuff all day. It isn't scary. I like it." Savini was letting him keep the spleen as a souvenir.

"Roll," Romero said. Bobby twitched – what, they were rolling? Already? He only just gave them their marks! Christ, Romero was still standing in front of the camera! – and for an instant grabbed Harriet's hand. She squeezed his fingers, let go. Romero eased himself out of the shot. "Action."

Bobby rolled his eyes back in his head, rolled them back so far he couldn't see where he was going. He let his face hang slack. He took a plodding step forward.

"Shoot the girl," Romero said.

Bobby didn't see her squib go off, because he was a step ahead of her. But he heard it, a loud, ringing crack that echoed; and he smelled it, a sudden pungent whiff of gunpowder. Harriet grunted softly.

"Annnd," Romero said. "Now the other one."

It was like a gunshot going off next to his head. The bang of the blasting cap was so loud, it immediately deafened his eardrums. He snapped backwards, spinning on his heel. His shoulder slammed into something just behind him, he didn't see what. He caught a blurred glimpse of the square pillar next to the mattress, and in that instant was seized with a jolt of inspiration. He smashed his forehead into it on his way down, and as he reeled away, saw he had left a crimson flower on the white plaster.

He hit the mattress, the cushion springy enough to provide a little bounce. He blinked. His eyes were watering, creating a visual distortion, a subtle warping of things. The air above him was filled with blue smoke. The center of his head stung. His face was splattered with cool, sticky fluid. As the ringing in his ears faded, he simultaneously became aware of two things. The first was the sound, a low, subterranean bellow, a distant, steady roar of applause. The sound filled him like breath. George Romero was moving towards them, also clapping, smiling in that way that made dimples in his beard. At the periphery of his vision he saw little Bob leaping up and down, his fists raised over his head, Sylvester Stallone at the top of the steps leading to the public mezzanine in Philly, what a great movie that was. The second thing he noticed was Harriet curled against him, her hand on his chest. She was smiling, an easy contented smile like he hadn't seen at any other time, the whole day.

"What? Did I knock you down?" he asked.

"'Fraid so," she said.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before I got you in bed with me," he said.

She stared into his face. Her blood-drenched bosom rose and fell against his side.

"You are so quick Bobby," she said.

Little Bob ran to the edge of the mattress and leaped onto it with them. Harriet got an arm underneath him, scooped him up, and rolled him into the narrow space between her and Bobby. Little Bob grinned and put his thumb in his mouth.

"Let's have a sleep over," Little Bob said. "Let's all sleep together."

"Why not?" Bobby said, and shut his eyes and dropped his head against the mattress. His face was close to the boy's head, and suddenly he was aware of the smell of little Bob's shampoo, a melon-flavored scent.

The next thing he knew, someone was twirling his hair. He opened his eyes again. Harriet's finger moved around and around, turning little circles in his hair. She continued smiling at him, watching him steadily across her son. His gaze drifted towards the ceiling, the banks of skylights, the crisp, blue sky beyond. Nothing in him wanted to get up, wanted to move past the next few moments. He wondered what Harriet did with herself when Dean was at work and little Bobby was at school. Tomorrow was a Monday; he didn't know if he would be teaching or free. He hoped free. The work week

stretched ahead of him, empty of responsibilities or concerns, limitless in its possibilities. The three of them, Bobby, and the boy, and Harriet, lay on the mattress, their bodies pressed close together and there was no movement but for their breathing.

George Romero turned back to them, shaking his head. "That was great, when you hit the pillar, and you left that big streak of gore. We should do it again, just the same way. This time you could leave some brains behind. What do you two kids say? Either one of you feel like a do-over?"

"Me," Bobby said.

"Me," said Harriet. "Me."

"Yes please," said little Bobby, around the thumb in his mouth.

"I guess it's unanimous," Bobby said. "Everyone wants a do-over."