

The Crescent

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For all my family and friends, past, present and future.

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GARNET MURRAY INHALED deeply, the last trace of white paper up in smoke. Bob Barker's soothing voice emanated throughout the living room as the acrid smoke filled her lungs. *He's the most handsome man in the world.* Her face burned with racy thoughts tossing the cigarette butt into the smoke glass ashtray, anchored on the brass stand beside her chair. She eyed the collection of butts accumulated since rising this morning; with a notion to quit the disgusting habit, she walked across the worn area rug confident, once again, it wouldn't be today. She loved her cigs as much as she loved her kids, sometimes more. She paused and reflected, watching the neighbourhood kids play kickball on the road out front, the tension easing in her neck and head. She tucked a loose strand of black grey streaked hair behind her right ear rather than undoing her signature scrawny ponytail and starting all over again. Her stained toothy smile quickly evaporated; the muffled cries from up the stairs averted her attention back to the television. Increasing the volume, she settled back in her chair, reaching for her cigarettes.

It was unanimous; the group decided more players were needed if they were going to have a decent game of kickball. The kids sat on the curb debating who they should invite. Ronald, the tallest and oldest wasted no time suggesting Evelyn.

Daniel quickly turned to face him. 'You know damn well she wouldn't play a stupid game of kickball. You just want to ask her because you've got the hots for her.'

Ronald felt his face redden. Ever since he was twelve years old he'd had a huge crush on Evelyn. 'If you weren't my best friend I'd punch you out,' he said calmly, reaching for a stone.

Ronald's younger brother, Timothy, as always, picked up on his brother's angst. 'It's better if we stay down at this end of the street to avoid Crabby Appleton. He's already got two of my Indian rubber balls.'

No one had any idea what Crabby Appleton's real name was, just the rotten reputation he had of stealing any ball that landed on his well-manicured front lawn.

'I bet that SOB's got quite a stash,' Ronald said sarcastically. 'The freak of nature stands behind his living room sheers just waiting for something to land on his precious grass and out he runs wearing the same baggy beige pants and plaid shirt. I wonder if his wife ever washes them,' he added, holding his nose.

The kids laughed heartily. They had all witnessed this tall, lanky man with a squished head sporting a reddish brown brush cut, quickly run out, grab a ball then run back inside with it. The kids, shocked by his behaviour, would torment him from the curb. Depending on his mood, he'd reluctantly give the ball back, but not before reciting the same boring speech regarding the need to respect other people's property. Needless to say, all the kids hated his guts.

It was beginning to get hot. 'If we're going to play, hurry up and decide,' Cathy said, searching her legs for peeling skin from previous sunburns. 'I'm getting burnt to a crisp,' she sighed, peeling off a large strip of dead skin.

'We could ask Glenn or Jimmy,' Andrea said, looking toward their house on the corner.

David shook his head. 'Naw, he's gotta look after his mother.' He tried to balance the dirty white volleyball on his fingertip, but it fell onto the road. 'And Jimmy's gotta help out too. So the Smythe kids are out,' he said, retrieving the ball.

'What's wrong with their mom?' Dana said.

Andrea spoke first. 'I heard my mom telling Mrs. McPherson that Mrs. Smythe takes lots of pills for her condition.'

‘With a house full of kids running ’round all day I’d take pills too,’ Ronald said, knocking the ball off David’s middle finger.

‘You creep! I just got it spinning,’ David yelled, retrieving the ball from the middle of the road.

‘Don’t be such a whiner,’ Ronald said, tucking his hands behind his head, laying back on the grass.

Once again, Anne Smythe slept through the alarm. She could feel someone tugging at the sheet covering her flabby body. ‘Mommy up, Mommy up,’ the tiny voice encouraged.

Anne rolled away, tugging hard at the sheet pulling her young daughter, Katherine, into the side of the bed.

‘Where’s your brother?’ she barked, turning back, tucking the sheet around her. Katherine stared wide-eyed at her mother.

Anne, suppressing the sudden urge to shake her daughter opted for the bottle of pills sitting on the nightstand beside her bed. Expertly, she flipped the lid off catching it with her left hand, popping two valium into her stale mouth, chasing them with a mouthful of water.

Katherine continued coaxing her to get out of bed, but she ignored her pleas tucking the sheet closer to her squishy body; years of child bearing had taken its toll not only physically, but mentally. Her thirty-four year old body was a flabby mess, her mind messier still.

She turned toward Katherine, the second youngest of five, waiting patiently beside her. ‘You need your hair washed,’ she said, reaching a hand out from under the sheet, running her fingers through the tangled blond curls. ‘You’re a mess.’

Katherine, oblivious to her comment, widened her bright blue eyes, smiled broadly, lifting her arms and twirling around in circles. Falling to the floor, she kicked up into the air. It was then Anne focused on the stained diaper and the stench that rose with each kick.

Her head pounded, turning sharply away, focusing on the ceiling waiting for the pills to take hold.

Katherine righted herself, moving closer to the bed. ‘Bad girl!’ she said, slapping her mother’s face.

‘What do you think you are doing? Get out of here!’ she screamed. As her daughter scurried out of sight Anne focused on the ceiling praying, *Dear God, please make me barren.*

Katherine ran screaming down the hall, her diaper heading south. Her older brother, Glenn, scooped her up in his arms.

‘Me hungry,’ she whined as her brother hoisted her up onto the change table. ‘Me want Sucar Cisp and Mommy won’t get up,’ she cried, rubbing her eyes vigorously.

Glenn smiled tenderly reaching for the last clean diaper. ‘Mommy’s just tired,’ he said patiently, holding back a gag, gently cleaning her bottom. The foul smelling contents had hardened into the folds of her skin.

‘You’re all set,’ he said, pulling up the white rubber pants, placing her on the floor. She ran full tilt to the kitchen while he finished tidying up. He was surprised all her racket hadn’t disturbed Rose, the youngest, sleeping soundly in the crib. He spoke quietly to Sherry, the oldest of the three girls, lying on the top bunk reading *Black Beauty*. ‘Do you know where Mark is?’

Without looking at her brother she replied, ‘probably doing some stupid experiment in the basement.’ Lately, Mark spent his free time working on experiments he had learned in science class in his makeshift lab downstairs.

‘Have you had breakfast yet?’

She looked up from her novel. ‘No, and I’m not hungry.’

‘Are you feeling okay?’

‘I’m waiting until Mom gets up, whenever that will be,’ she said, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling.

‘If you change your mind, I’m getting breakfast ready for Kath,’ he said, watching her turn the page.

Glenn dumped the contents of the soiled diaper into the toilet and flushed. He continued to thrash it against the porcelain; the running water removing most of the hardened excrement. He thought he was beyond the gagging, but today's load was horribly ripe. With watery eyes, he squeezed the water out, tossing it on top of the overflowing diaper pail. He debated taking the pail downstairs to wash, but Katherine's demanding cries guided his next move.

Ronald eyed the second hand on his new Timex watch, a gift for his 14th birthday. 'Do you realize, with each passing second, we've lost that time and it's gone forever?'

Dana said, 'I've never thought of that. It sounds so morbid.'

'Only stating the facts, therefore, I refuse to waste any more of my precious time. If you don't hurry up and think of...hey Daniel, go ask George.'

Daniel turned toward Murray's driveway. 'Not happening.'

'He's not as bad as his twin sister, Gloria,' Sharon said, bringing her hands five inches from her face, fiercely rubbing the tips of both thumbs against the tips of her fingers with paisley green eyes locked intently on the task, transporting her elsewhere.

'Why do you do that?' Dana asked sarcastically, watching Sharon working feverishly with her fingertips.

'Do what?' she said, jarring her hands down to her sides, quickly running off.

'Speaking of retards,' Timothy concluded.

Garnet sat in a cloud of smoke; mesmerized by the Price is Right. *Garnet Murray! Come on down! You're the next contestant on the Price is Right! She ran quickly toward the stage sending the audience into frenzy, walking excitedly toward Bob Barker smiling like the Cheshire cat watching her approach. Standing mere inches from him she couldn't resist the urge to clamp her skinny arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. No kiss though. Bob Barker*

didn't like women kissing him. Her heart pounded wildly. With eyes closed, she raised her nicotine stained fingers to her nose, inhaling the scent deeply; the remedy when cigarettes were beyond her reach. The persistent knock on the front door interrupted her fantasy. 'George! Get the goddamn door!'

Daniel's loud excessive knocking could be heard at the curb where the others waited.

Theresa craned her neck to see what was taking so long. 'Why isn't anyone answering?'

'Who knows? The old lady's probably sittin' smoking cigarettes, totally oblivious to what goes on in that house,' Ronald said, spitting as far as he could into the middle of the road; the gob splashing heavily onto the pavement.

'That's disgusting!' Janice said, eyeing the glistening wad.

'Now don't go getting all silly now. The sun will evaporate it like it always does,' he said, lying back down on the grass.

George angrily tossed the magazine under the bed, walking slowly down the stairs watching his mother whiff her two fingers stuffed under her nose. *Stupid bitch is probably out of cigs.*

'Didn't ya hear me calling ya? Someone's been banging on the door for ten minutes now.'

'I was busy,' he said, walking toward it. He stared vaguely at Daniel through the screen door.

'We gotta game of kicker goin'. Wanna join us?'

George didn't blink. 'Naw.'

Daniel said, 'What about Barry?'

A weird look crossed George's face. 'He's helping my sister.'

Daniel smiled. 'No sense asking if Gloria can join in then.'

'No sense,' he said, slamming the door.

'George! How many times have I told you not to slam the damn door? Mommy's got a headache. Now, be a good boy and get Mommy's cigarettes for me.' She didn't want to miss one second of the Price is Right.

‘Yes Mommy,’ he said, reaching on top of the fridge. He handed her the new pack, then ran back upstairs, two at a time, slamming his bedroom door.

She lit a much needed cigarette, inhaling deeply. *I honestly don’t know what gets into that kid sometimes.*

Barry sat on the edge of the bed perspiring profusely, his face buried in his hands. He tried wiping the perspiration off his face, rubbing briskly with his hands. ‘Please stop crying, Gloria. Mommy will get really angry and we don’t want that.’

Though it was over 80 degrees in the bedroom, Gloria lay in bed wrapped tightly in the thick princess eiderdown, a gift from Grandma Perkins for her eighth birthday. *See all the pretty pink princesses. One day you will be a princess* her grandmother had promised. Gloria wiped her blue eyes and runny nose on a princess, whimpering at the snotty mess she left behind. She always seemed to make a mess of everything lately.

Barry stood, running his fingers through his hair as he walked to the other side of the bed where his tightly cocooned sister lay on her side. ‘I’m going to go to my room now so you can sleep.’

George looked up when the bedroom door opened. ‘Where’s Gloria?’ he asked in a concerned tone.

‘Sleeping,’ Barry said, lying on his bed. He reached underneath for the magazine with curled edges, turning to the centerfold, feeling an instant rush.

Daniel took his time walking back down the driveway. ‘None of the Murrays can come out,’ he said, sitting down beside Theresa.

Timothy spoke first. ‘Barry too?’

‘He’s helping his sister,’ Daniel said, pulling on a piece of long grass, sucking on the end.

‘Helping her with what?’ he persisted.

Lately, Barry rarely came outside. ‘How the heck should I know. I gotta go. It’s too hot for kickball now anyway,’ he said, pitching the grass, walking away quickly.

As if on cue, the other boys ran off in different directions.

‘Game over,’ Theresa smiled.

Garnet turned off the television watching the boys run away, leaving the girls sitting on the curb. She could tell by their smiles they were having a good time. *I used to have fun when we lived downtown. My best friend Thelma, god I miss her; her and I would sit and drink coffee while our kids played.* A smile crossed her face reminiscing about their days together.

I hate it here. It was all Ben’s stupid idea to move to the suburbs. He claims it’s better for the family. What’s he know? The neighbours here are unsociable, so stuffy. Not like Thelma. She was the best. She thought about Gloria upstairs in her room on such a beautiful summer day. *She was such a happy child until this stupid move.*

Gloria waited for the bedroom door to close. *I hate you Barry.* Unable to hold back the tears she sobbed into her pillow, wishing she was dead.