Kid’s Night Out

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Mom’s cigarette burned in her fingers down to the butt. One long ash, still intact. Then, poof, it was out. The trail of smoke hovered at the ceiling. Her eyes slid shut, and her head rolled back until it bumped the lazy boy’s vinyl back, an empty bottle of Chablis in her left hand, a burned out cigarette in her right. I watched mom pass out from one end of the couch, and Danny watched Johnny Carson from the other end. I kicked him and he looked over at mom and then back at me. I nodded. We kicked off our blanket, hopped off the couch, and tiptoed across the linoleum in our blue footie-pajamas. The door squeaked open; we snuck out, and made sure not to let it slam after we let in a drift of cool nighttime air. Mom’s snores buzzed through the screen door. The plastic feet of our pajamas crackled on the cement steps. Around the corner of the house, we sprinted down the double-wide driveway we shared with the Goodyear shop next door.

A Hostess semi-trailer was parked along the highway at the end of our driveway. A delivery van had backed up to the semi-trailer door. Their rear bumpers touched, creating one long vehicle that blocked our drive. The driver was busy filling the van directly from the back end of the semi-trailer.

We leapt in the open door of the van. We ran down the metal alley of the van to a board that bridged the open back ends of the van and trailer to one another. We were greeted with the buttery scents of baked wheat. It smelled like soft, fresh bread direct from grandma’s kitchen. But it wasn’t the bread we wanted.

“Hey there kids. What are you up to tonight?” The truck driver was a blur with a voice. We were drunk with the familiar scent of the snacks. He laughed. “Go ahead and have one.” Just the words we were waiting for – the choice of anything we wanted! I chose a chocolate mini-donut six pack, and Danny grabbed some Twinkies.

“Thanks, mister,” I said, and my brother mimicked me. Danny was my four-year old blond shadow. He was a year younger than me. We dangled our feet off the edge of the trailer and ate our treats. I melted the chocolate coating on the outside of my mini-donuts in my mouth. The cake part of the donut was fresh; it was soft and moist and dissolved in my mouth. Each donut was four bites. There were six of them in the pack, and I savored each one. Danny’s Twinkies were devoured in a minute flat. He eyed my donuts and stuck out his bottom lip. I rolled my eyes, opened the box, and drug my tongue across the tops of the four remaining in the box. I offered him one with a smile on my face. He looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, and took two. He smiled back at me with chocolate on his front teeth.
We tried to stay out of the truck driver’s way. We watched him pick through his racks and dolly the chosen ones down to the van. The driver was probably as old as our dad, in his late 20s, with wavy blond hair that needed to be cut. He was tall enough that he had to duck every time he hauled a load onto the van. His blue shirt with the Hostess patch on the left pocket stretched tight around his belly. The buttons threatened to pop.

“I bet you kids are cold tonight. It’s September in Wisconsin, for crying out loud! Tomorrow, you two need jackets and shoes before you come outside to visit, you hear?”

“Okay. What are those poles?” Danny pointed toward the metal poles that locked the tall stacks of red and blue racks into the trailer.

“Load locks,” he said. “They keep these racks from falling when I’m driving.”

“I bet they wouldn’t tip over if I was driving,” my brother boasted.

“You’re funny, little man. But I bet you couldn’t see out the windshield if you were driving,” the driver chuckled as he transported load after load.

“Could so.” Danny looked away.

“Have you ever been inside a big rig before, little man?”

“Nope, but I’m gonna drive one when I get big.”

“I bet those Twinkies are going to help you get big too.”

“Yup, I already ate ‘em. Can I have more?”

“Nah, just one. If anyone noticed them missing, you couldn’t have any at all. Say, do you kids have any bread in your house? Here, take this loaf.” We looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. “Eat some with peanut butter or jelly on it for breakfast tomorrow, okay?” I grabbed the loaf and thanked the man.

“Say, you kids want to see inside my big rig?”

“Sure,” we looked at each other and shrugged.

“I’m finished up here. I have a few extra minutes, I don’t have to be at my next stop until midnight,” he looked at his watch, slid the wooden bridge up into the trailer, and locked the dolly under a strap to hold it in place.

We waited for the driver at the passenger door, which was unreachable. His dry, cracked hands snagged on my pj’s as he lifted me up to the cab, then my brother.

“Wow! There’s a bed in here!” We ran around it like it was an apartment. “Why you got a bed in here?” Danny asked.

“I don’t use it much, but sometimes I have long drives and have to stay overnight. I bring my bedroom with me.”

“A TV too! Can we watch it?” We climbed onto the bed, and I reached for the knob to turn on the mini-TV.

“No, not tonight.” He looked at his watch. “I have to stay on schedule.
Maybe tomorrow."

“Aww,” we whined, but didn’t argue. We climbed out of the bed and sat up front. Danny played with the steering wheel that was as big as a hula hoop. He couldn’t see out the windshield.

“A CB! Wow, you got everything in here! Ten-Four, good buddy,” I said into the mouthpiece, like I heard the Duke boys say on the Dukes of Hazzard.

“Okay kids, it’s time to head out.”

My brother took the CB from me, “Over and out.” He hooked the CB back into its cradle. “Wow, thanks mister,” my brother said to him as he lifted us down the ladder to the ground. He watched us walk down our driveway and around the corner of the house, waving. We heard the big rig wind up and the asphalt rumbled like Paul Bunyon was walking out of town. He rolled away, and we imagined him talking to the Duke boys on his CB.

“I’ll be Daisy and you be Rosco P. Coltrane,” I said to Danny on our walk back to the house. “Try to catch me in the General Lee!” I took off running, gripping the loaf of bread that was banging my leg.

“No way! I’m Bo Duke!” He chased me. We rounded the house. “Look!” Danny pointed. We stopped. There was our dad’s friend, Larry, dropping him off in the wrong driveway next door. Dad stumbled out of the Matador and took a couple steps before he fell to his knees in the grass. We looked at each other, and without saying a word, we ran to him. I threw the loaf of bread toward the front door as I passed it.

When we got to him, he lay face-down in the grass. I saw the stubble on his chin that he rubbed against my cheek. The ear that I shoved wet-willies in. The one tooth in front that was a hair longer than the rest. He was wearing a blue button-down shirt with white corduroys that were stained with grass and something brown he sat in at the tavern. He wasn’t moving.

Danny bugged his eyes out at me. My heart raced. I bent down close to dad’s face. He reeked of cigarette smoke and beer. I prodded his shoulder to see if he would move. Nothing. I lifted the only exposed eyelid with my thumb. Bloodshot white. I jumped back.

“Da-a-ad?” my brother quivered, breaking the silence.

No response. Danny and I locked eyes.

I tilted my head down by his ear and yelled, “Dad! Wake up!” I leaned back. He grunted. Then he growled out a whole sentence. “Wada hellasziza iels-goned odone!” We fell to our knees and shook his shoulder. He was like a paperweight. A paperweight that mumbled and groaned into the ground.

We couldn’t go home and go to bed while dad lay on the cold, hard ground of the electric company next door. It was across the driveway and up a small hill to get to the house. So we grabbed his arms, pulled straight above his head, and tugged together. He didn’t move. “Harder!” An inch of grass slid
beneath his cheek. He was as heavy as the deer I watched him drag out of the woods last winter.

We tugged, kicked, and jerked dad across the blacktop. When we reached grass on the other side, the hill was too big to pull him up. “The wheelbarrow!” Danny yelled. We sprinted back to the house and emptied it of half-melted ice and bottles of booze. Then we each grabbed a wooden handle and lifted. It wobbled. It took a few seconds to balance it just right on the front wheel. We clumsily pushed it back to dad. We tilted the wheelbarrow down toward him. The last of the icy water splashed on his shoulder.

“What the hell?” Dad’s face scrunched up a scowl, but his eyes didn’t open. We wedged the corner of the wheelbarrow under his face and shoulder and tried to shove the rest of him into it. It was like trying to shove a golden retriever into a kennel.

“This isn’t going to work!” I reached up to try and grab the handle, but couldn’t. I kick-shoved the wheelbarrow out of the way. Dad’s head rolled out and his face smacked the ground. His nose started to bleed.

“He’s bleeding!” Danny pointed at Dad. “He’s gonna be mad when he wakes up.”

“You better not tell. He won’t know we did it,” I said. “We’re going to have to roll him up this hill.” He rolled back down. Twice. Then he puked. A pool of vomit curdled in the grass. His mustache and sideburns were caked white. Blood was smeared across his cheek. Every breath we took was laced with the odor of puke.

“Dad! Wake up! Just wake up and go in the house!” I started to cry, yelling at him. I kicked the back of his thigh, and fell down.

My brother sat by me. “We’ll get him in the house. Don’t worry, Denise.” Danny held my hand. His fingers were cold, so I rubbed them a little bit to warm them. I wiped my tears and stood up. We yanked, pulled, and shoved him up the hill. We were almost to the front door when he woke up.

“What the hell are you kids doing up?” he bellowed, spitting chunks of puke at us. He wiped his mouth and wobbled to his feet. He was wet and covered in puke, blood, mud, and grass stains. He opened the screen door, and pointed for us to go in the house.

“We were trying to help you!” I said. “We didn’t want to leave you sleeping outside in the grass.” He didn’t stop to listen. He stomped past us. Hunks of dirt and grass fell on the stairs as he zigzagged up to his bedroom. We watched to see if he would fall backward. He caught himself on the guardrail twice and made it to the top.

Danny looked at me. “I’m hungry,” he said. I reached out the front door and grabbed the battered loaf of bread that looked like the rolled up bathroom rug fresh out of the dryer. Danny opened the fridge. “We don’t have any jelly.”
He drug a chair over to the counter and opened up the cupboard. "No peanut butter either. How 'bout honey?"

"Yeah, give me that." I knelt on another chair, unwound the bread bag, and spread four slices of bread out on the counter. I drizzled honey on all four pieces, while Danny held his finger under the stream.

"Mmmmm," he said, licking the honey off his finger. He reached forward, legs bent and in the air, balanced on his ribcage, and turned on the tap. He filled two glasses with water. I pressed the bread into two sandwiches.

The living room was illuminated by the glow of an American flag waving on the silent television. We cuddled up in a blanket on the couch, setting our waters on the coffee table. Mom was next to us in the lazy boy, snoring. I bit into my honey sandwich. The cigarette butt was still between her fingers. Her head rolled forward and stopped when her chin hit her chest. The ash fell.