

A Skank Named Jackie

Chapter 1

August

It was getting dark, not that it mattered much. I was going to call Luke and invite him over to play Dragon Mountain and maybe drink some of my parents beer but I just couldn't seem to get off the fucking couch. It was an old couch, probably the oldest thing in the room. The color was supposed to be green but the sun coming into the den had faded it to a goldish on some parts and my mom had thrown a bunch of hippie, patterned pillows on it to make the effect seem planned and "sun kissed", but that was a lie. It wasn't the sort of couch you wanted around to look at, it was just goddamned comfortable.

I was fingering the left arm absently, picking at the old grey tape that was still there. I remember talking about it with my sister when I found the stuffing on the floor after the stupid tabbie cat got at it. We taped it with duct tape and said it was our fault because my sister was scared my parents would tell her to get rid of the cat after that. We were laughing about how we could have done it ourselves and she said we were roughhousing on the couch like we did when we were kids and then we did this re-enactment of it that was hilarious, it had all of us laughing. There was no way that they bought the story, but just the fact that she tried to cover for this stupid animal was funny. Everyone was just too sad about the whole deal to fix it when she was gone or get a new couch.

That dumb cat was a sort of reminder too, none of us liked him, he didn't like being pet, unless it was my sister doing the petting and he would bite you if you tried to play cat games with him. He ended up living at The Jenkins when the food around here sort of seemed to dry up, I mean we weren't eating, why should we feed the fucking cat? Don't get me wrong, it wasn't like we were against ethical treatment of animals or anything but we just couldn't look at that cat the same way when she, well, Fuck, I really don't wanna think about that now.

My therapist, god that sounds so dumb, but the guy that gives me these pills I've been taking, he said I needed to try to stop my mind before it wandered into places I didn't wanna be. Like, when I started thinking about my sister sometimes and I guess just the pain or something of it all, it would make me think about doing these drastic things to stop my feelings and the images I saw. That was the reason they sent me to the hospital, and getting out and on with my life, well, really it came down to me. The drugs can only do so much, so when I started thinking about the real bad shit I would try to "re-direct", (that was the dumbass word he used), my thinking to happier things. I don't mean like that "happy place" bullshit where you think of some fairy meadow somewhere, I mean like thinking about other memories, good things me and HER used to do or something instead of just the end all the time.

It probably all seems like something that's supposed to be ingrained in you to stop yourself from going crazy. Every one has bad things they could think about, and most people seem to do ok at not thinking about it all day long. I just didn't have the same control over my brain and my emotions right now. And that was another thing, he said to start trying to be ok, I was supposed to "be in the now", like looking down at the things around me, but that was the thing that got me started on thinking about the couch in the first place so I guess I'm not very good at it. It probably seems dumb that we have to pay this guy to help me work on just finding some good things in life to think about. Anyway, I totally wasn't about trying to go see that guy more than once a week so I tried his ideas out.

I took another sip of my coca-cola, tasting the metal of the can as I pushed the last warm sip down my throat. No more cokes and far away from the closest store. Looking out the window, I mean basically I'm in like Suburban hell over here so it's like these big trees that are supposed to make us feel like we're in the woods or something. And that's supposed to give us the freedom to do whatever we want, like stand around in our underwear or something, but really we are right next to each other and could look right into each other's lives just by peering around a tree. That would be cool too, if I was in the city and I looked out the window and saw some interesting people doing stuff, but it's so boring around here, there's not really much to look at anyway.

I've been trying to relish these last days, before my parents get back from their vacation and it stops being summer. It's already starting to fade away, getting dark at 7pm and the darkness just seems to keep coming, it's going to get darker until it's so dark and cold all the time, and my freedom will be cut off. I don't walk around in the winter nights but in the summer I could if I wanted to, the possibility to keep going, walking into the night, it's there waiting for me with every nightfall.

We've been having these really amazing sunsets lately too. I can see the beginnings of one now, the pink and red glow shining brightly through the pines in the backyard. It's beautiful. It makes it hard to watch the television anymore cause I can't see it but I don't really watch it anyway, it's just on. I sighed. Sometimes, when it's been happening I go outside and look at the sunset, watching the reds and oranges seep into the mountains. I take pictures of it with my cellphone and sometimes I think about HER, like how it might not feel so dumb if I had someone to watch it with and she had a way of making normal things seem like the most, precious and amazing moments in the world, almost as if only we were seeing it and we were watching this gift that the world had provided, just for us to see, at that exact moment in time. Nowadays, I don't feel like it's that special anymore and sometimes, I just wonder who else is out there looking right at the same time as me? Is it possible they could feel the same moment of beauty like all over the world? I wish we could find some way to say hello to each other from across the sky, so we didn't have to feel so alone.

We used to have a lot of good times in this old family room. Life is so surreal like that, like when it's happening, you never would think you'd be looking back on yourself someday saying, wow, I was so free back then. When you're in it, it just seems like

normal kid stuff, nothing special. How could you know then that you would find yourself longing for those casual moments of childhood, like maybe even your whole life. And, it seems so clear now, the way mom looked when she tried to make herself frown, telling us to “stop horsing around, you’re making a mess,” when really her face was so goddamned happy. I don’t think I ever see her happy like that anymore, where she can’t even hide it to nag at me to stop doing some stupid thing. Don’t get me wrong, my mother could definitely get pissed when she meant to. My sister used to get so frustrated at her, she’d say she hated her. I just didn’t get it, sure, I hated my parents too, they were real bummers, but I didn’t have that passion about it. I didn’t feel like I needed to prove it to them either, what crapheads and hypocrites they were. I mean most teenagers start thinking having parents is a drag. My sister Beth seemed to need to really prove Mom wrong or something.

Beth and Mom weren’t enemies though, thier whole relationship was intense. I always thought Beth and I were the closest because she would come into my room and talk to me about stuff, lying down casually on my bed, letting all her thoughts pour out of her, laughing out loud or crying sometimes. Most of my friends didn’t talk to thier sister like that, I should have felt more lucky about it.

I found out about it one night a year ago, what I was missing. I was up late “studying”, but really I was surfing facebook profiles and sorta stalking this one girl at school that posted cute photos that peaked a sudden interest. I was searching around trying to talk to my friends that knew her, for almost two hours. Sad thing was, we’d probably never talk in real life anyway. I walked into the kitchen for something to drink when I heard them talking. Thier voices were real soft and nice sounding so I just stopped in the hallway, like right in the middle of the hallway listening to them. I didn’t know it was going to be so interesting, but then I was trapped holding my glass with ice cubes drying up at the bottom. Beth had been crying before I think, her voice sounded scratched up and then mom started talking to her and it was wierd, it sounded like she was talking to her as this different person that I had never met and maybe just dad and her old friends knew and I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. It took a while for me to figure out what they were talking about because I came in the middle of something but it was probably about love.

Mom was telling her all her thoughts and feelings. I mean thats the thing with my sister being different and everything, she was really “emotional” and it was hard for her with boys. Thats when I knew that mom and her were close in a way I couldn’t be cause mom opened her mouth and started talking about dad, saying that she wasn’t always “in love” with him but she had made this decision that she loved her family more than anything and that she was going to stay with him. I was so shocked, not that mom felt that, I mean it wouldn’t be too hard to guess with the way dad was a total idiot sometimes, but its not something you ever say out loud if you are married and especially to your daughter. The most shocking part of it though, was the way my sister was taking this information, just listening to her like it was the most normal thing in the world for them to talk this way. I guess thats why I gave myself away cause I couldn’t really deal with it on some level, so I just made a noise in the hallway and decided to make for the refridgerator.

“Hi Honey, you ok?”

Mom had a kind of mechanical concern in her voice and movements and my sister looked up at me with her bleary eyes like I was interrupting but she smiled anyway.

“Yeah, just getting a coke”.

“You want to sit with us for a while?”, mom looked at my sister with a “to be continued later” look that all mom’s probably perfect from the time they get thier first child and realize all the things they can’t talk about. My sister looked down at her tea cup. She played with the tea bag, not looking at me but I knew. If I sat down with them it wouldn’t be the same. Mom would just be mom again talking about dumb stuff like schoolwork and what we ate for dinner and this other person would vanish. My sister was the only one that could change her, could make Mom into someone else and my sister wouldn’t say it but I knew she wanted me to go away so she could be with that person again, not me.

“Nah, I’ve still got a-lot of studying to do”.

I walked away and it was silent so I looked back. She was looking up at Mom and I caught a moment between them. It was a look that showed an intimacy between two people that could communicate wordlessly, not a mother and daughter that fought all the time and almost came to blows with each other. It was wierd. I guess I realized, I didn’t have that with anyone, not with my close friends and not with Beth, not really, not like that.

I got a nasty itch that stopped my thoughts for a second and I looked down at my empty coke can, thinking about what I could do to amuse myself. There always was Luke and with him, there were no surprises. The good thing was his fridge was always stocked with soda, string cheese, all the good shit. But, the problem was with him moving to a new apartment, there was the whole sleep situation. When he was living a couple houses down, before his dad left with some other lady, it was real easy to hang out with him. We still did the same things as before, I mean, its not like we ever talked about his dad being gone or my sister or really anything, even. I was the one that started with drinking all the time and starting to want to get into trouble just for the hell of it, taking our whole hanging out sessions up a notch from the fun we used to try to have when we were in middle school.

Luke was old reliable though, every day was pretty predictable around him and that could be comforting when it wasn’t fucking boring. Most times, we’d go to his room, and talk about the new games coming out, the merits of this consule versus that one and which one was totally pussy and then we’d play video games for like five or six hours and eat a bunch. We’d maybe get a loaf of white bread and jumbo sized peanut butter and some soda and just sit and play games, it was easy. We’d sleep when our eyes were starting to tear from staring at the screen for too long. That was the thing though, I just wasn’t into sleeping at that new place. There wasn’t a proper guest bed anymore so I had to sleep on

the floor and the carpet was this really scratchy grey stuff that just covers dirt but didn't seem to do too good of a job cause I could still smell the old tenants cat pee and cheese odor. I would spend the whole night burying my head in Luke's sleeping bag trying to get the smell away and trying not to think about what smells probably lied in that bag, what with Luke using it all the time at camp for the past five years. Of course, there was no problem with beds at my house, but Luke was always too lazy to take the stupid bus to come over. And lets face it, I was too lazy to want to do that more than once either which meant I'd have to stay over there and then forget about sleeping all night. Not being able to sleep made me feel bad too, really bad, like there was something wrong with me, like my sister was really dead.

Shit, why did I have to think about that? I got up, stretching and looked out the window at the lights now glowing under the fall of darkness from the house next door. There was something else I could do. Inside the glowing house next door, right across the hedges from me, a teenaged girl was up and around tonight like always. Her name was Jackie. I didn't like her or anything like that, but it wasn't like there were many choices for me and she seemed good enough for a laugh.

They were some of the only renters in the neighborhood, meaning they were poorer than everyone else and everyone knew it. The Millers, who had owned the house had come out of a long bout with cancer to come out as a Mr. John Miller who no longer cared to live in our quaint little "village" any longer and rented the place out to the horror of all his neighbors. The only thing that shut people up about it was the renters put in end to us all watching Mrs. Miller slowly deteriorate. Not to be cruel or anything but, Mrs. Miller's sickness really sucked the life out of the block. I mean, one day she was pruning her hedges all smiles and pleasentries and the next, she is cutting down everything in sight so she can stare out at us all getting sicker for five goddamned years.

I'm all for being a good neighbor but how many casseroles can you give to someone to cover the fact that you just can't stand seeing her drawn face, hair lopped off and covered in an old scarf all yellowed and stretched as she sat on her stupid porch using those bony fingers to "knit" for god knows what reason cause she didn't have any dogs or children. I would have paid to put that shrubbery back up so you didn't have to drive by and face her every day, just sitting out in the open like that, exposed. We had no choice but to be involved just by the consistency that Mrs. Miller had with her habits. When she wasn't there, it was the sickness progressing, and who knows what that meant was happening at the hospital. It was enough to make you shut yourself off from Mrs. Miller and hide out back with the pines.

Of course, SHE was nice to the Millers, genuinely. She wasn't scared of the death touching her, I guess. Some people are just like that. They're extra strong inside to handle the stuff the rest of us can't. She was born with it, something that helped her empathize on a deeper level but it was too much for her too. She'd move a cat from the road when it was hit and meowing in pain, whereas I'd shy away from it. I just didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. Maybe that makes me weak somehow but its like I just get

immobilized somehow and I need people like her around that are just so natural about it. But now they were both gone.

I moved the curtain away from the window to look at Jackie's house. Not really sure what got me to go over there finally. Like I said, I was bored and my parents were gonna be gone for a couple more days and I was kinda done with the hanging out at the house thing. Maybe I was curious about what I could get her to do but I think I kinda already knew before I even went over there how things would end up.