

GREEN

I've got a Christmas miracle for you: Skinny got a date.

Maybe that Tom Jones getup did the trick, but he called up a girl who'd danced with him the weekend before. Her name's Mona Lisa, and I know because Skinny's been saying her name in his bed ever since. I'd hear moans to go along with Mona and sighs to go along with Lisa, and I'd hear his breathing pick up so high you'd think he was dreaming of toting her up the tallest hill in our neighborhood.

She goes to Sacred Heart Academy, Mona Lisa does, an all-girls high school like Assumption. A lot of the girls from those two schools go out with boys from the all-boys high schools on our side of town, one being St. X where Skinny went, and the other being Trinity.

If you're thinking Skinny was in a good mood for the last couple of days, you'd be right. But he's also been thinking he's big-time, too good to even shovel snow from the front steps, and acting like he had a girlfriend just because he'd found one to go out with him one time.

So why would I be in a hurry to get out of the house? I didn't want to hear anymore of Skinny's bragging or cut-downs, and besides, Violet Kirkpatrick's Christmas party's tonight. And I had my escape perfectly planned.

It began by me jumping down the stairs, making Dad yell, "Dammit to hell, Chas! Knock off the jumping!"

"Sorry, Dad," I said, taking it easy down the last of them.

Okay, now they knew I was dressed and ready to leave.

When I reached the hallway landing, I could see Skinny in the living room. He was showing off his early Christmas present from Mom and Dad. It's what's called a Nehru jacket. They wear them in India and have collars almost like priests and a weird row of buttons that runs all the way down to below the crotch. And Skinny's was green.

Okay. I snuck down the steps to the side door, but when I got there, I could only see my old CPO. *Damn. I really wanted to wear my early Christmas present CPO to the party.* I had to think quick on my feet. "Mom, where's my new CTO?" I knew as soon as I said that it didn't sound right, but before I could correct myself, Skinny jumped in.

"Duh, CPO," he shouted sarcastically. "It stands for Chief Petty Officer."

"Duh back," I said. "I just said it wrong."

Mom must've given Skinny a warning look because then he said, "Yeah, I know. He's just a dumb little kid."

"It's hanging up on the bottom landing," Mom said. "Where it's supposed to be."

"Welp, I don't see it. I just see my old —" I found it hanging beneath my old one, and then I remembered I'd worn the old one when clearing snow off the sidewalk.

Okay. I put it on.

Okay. I opened the door.

"Found it," I said. "Bye Mom! Bye Dad! Be home by ten-thirty! Oh, and 'bye to

you too, Gumby!”

Okay. I stepped outside.

“Be careful. Wait!” Mom yelled. “You be home at — ”

Okay. I slammed the door.

“*Nokay,*” I said, slapping my cheeks. “Bye Gumby?” I said out loud. I’d meant, *’Bye Gandhi. Jesus! I’m so stupid!*

But trudging up our snowy back hill, I thought about it some more, and *Yep,* *’bye Gandhi is definitely the smarter zinger, but seeing as how Skinny’s jacket was green, and it looked the way it did,* *’Bye Gumby worked good, too.*

“This, Chas Man, will be your greatest night. Ever!”

I went dashing through the snow all the way to Blarney’s house. Not that I thought Mom would drive after me, telling me I’d better be home by ten or I’d be grounded. I knew for sure she’d get back to me on that. No, I ran to Blarney’s because I was that excited. The plan was for me and Blarney to go get his date, and then we’d grab mine and head over to Violet’s party.

And yep, you read it right. Blarney got a date. He asked Teri Berry to Violet’s party. It wasn’t any Big Mystery, but like *forever* Blarney was gonna get around to asking her out. By the time he got the straight poop that she would most definitely and absolutely, certainly go out with him for the one-hundred-thousandth time, even the school cafeteria ladies hoped he’d finally pop the question.

Welp, weeks went by before he got the nerve to call her up, and when he finally did, he tells her he didn’t get something in our Math homework. But Blarney, he rarely did homework, Math or any kind. And as it turned out, there wasn’t any Math homework due, but Teri Berry didn’t tell him she knew that. So when Blarney said he didn’t call about anything else, Teri Berry told him she’d help him with his homework if he’d come over to her house.

Blarney goes over to the Berry’s and spends the whole time talking with her parents, cutting up and making them laugh. Before long it’s too late to do any Math homework (never mind there wasn’t any), and all the while Teri Berry got edgier and edgier waiting for Blarney to ask her to Violet’s party, which was coming up in a couple of days. Blarney told me afterward that because of how Teri Berry acted, edgy like I said, he began to think he wouldn’t ask her to the party, or anywhere else for that matter, and so doesn’t.

The next day at school, all of Teri Berry’s friends heard about what happened, and they jumped into action, firing off notes to Blarney like letters to the North Pole this time of year. I mean, they scolded him, shamed him, and made him feel miserable. Humiliated beyond belief, Blarney follows her home after school and, throwing snowballs around her to get her attention, he at last asked her out, yelling it from a block down Princeton.

“Avocado’s just a rocket,” Teri Berry’s Dad said, drinking a high-ball from a Holly leaf glass and talking about the different colors of laminates he sells. “It’s selling like crazy, and why not? Avocado green goes well with anything.”

Me and Blarney sat on the edge of the Berry’s family room couch, making the couch cushions slant up, nodding, waiting for Teri Berry to come downstairs. Their family room was all holidayed up in Christmas decorations for the party they were having. Besides a Christmas tree with gobs of presents underneath, a gold and silver garland ran up the fake wood-paneled walls, a stereo hi-fi played *A Partridge Family*

Christmas and a nativity scene sat atop the TV showing the latest news from Vietnam.

“A true green,” he went on. “Not a drab green like olive green, but a vibrant shade of green. Vivid. We’re seeing more and more Avocado from your major appliance makers. Even the small electrics — your blenders, your toasters, your electric can-openers.”

Just then Mrs. Claus entered in a Mrs. Berry apron. She held a tray carrying an orange fondue set.

“Fondue anyone?” Mrs. Berry said.

“Mmmm-mmm-mm...fond of fondue, Mrs. Claus.” Blarney said.

Mr. and Mrs. Berry laughed more than it was worth.

“That’s burnt orange,” Mr. Berry said, talking about the fondue set. “A sleeper color so far, but I’m cautiously optimistic that in the seventies, you’ll see a lot of Burnt Orange.”

“Daddy!” Teri Berry said, coming in and zipping up her pink snow jacket. “Like they came over to hear all about kitchen counters.”

“No,” Mrs. Berry said, chuckling again. “They came over because they’re fond of fondue.”

Teri Berry rolled her sizable eyes in embarrassment at her Mom’s lame joke, not realizing it was Blarney’s lame joke to start. I wanted to laugh but held it back. Blarney saw Teri Berry roll her eyes and, instead of saying *Hi* or saying how nice she looked, the knucklehead got up to try out the fondue. After dipping a piece of crusty bread with a burnt-orange-handled fork, Blarney tasted Mrs. Berry’s cheese ball soup and complimented her long and hard on how good it tasted. As clumsy as he was in picking up a date, Blarney knew a thing or two about how to butter up a Mom.

I figured I’d better give it a whirl myself, thinking it might be better than the time Mom used our Avocado colored fondue set. It wasn’t any better than Mom’s, but I made out like it was just to be a gentleman.

When the three of us headed down their driveway a few minutes later, I took a few seconds to snap my CPO, and I decided I liked having snaps better than the buttons my old CPO had. Plus, this one had a lining and was warmer on your colder nights. I then looked over the sticker on the Berry’s new Vista Cruiser. *Mr. Berry sure must sell a lot of laminates*, I thought. *This baby is loaded*. When I caught up with them, for some reason Teri Berry walked off down Princeton in a huff.

“I said I’m sorry,” Blarney said, laughing. “All I said was the fondue forks looked like little frog gigs, only for little horny toads.”

By the time I caught up with Blarney, Teri Berry had turned around and was now stomping the snow-packed sidewalk. “But the crack about do they make the handles in camouflage? And how you’d go sneaking up on poor little horny toads and stab them?”

“It was a *joke!* Like I’d really go around giggling horny toads,” Blarney said, unable to stop laughing when another thought popped into his head. “Besides, they’re *horny* toads — they’ve got important stuff to attend to.”

“You made fun of our fondue set!” she cried, deciding that was the real reason she was mad.

We were almost to Judy’s house, so I trudged across her neighbor’s snowy front yard. When I went by the Flattery’s older Vista Cruiser station wagon in the drive, I traced a gloved finger in a curvy line across the snow-covered rear window.

“Teri,” I heard Blarney say as he got to her. “I was just poking fun at it being burnt orange. Burnt orange is a funny name for a color, don’t you think?”

“Yes. I mean no,” she said, again stomping the packed snow. “Besides, everything in our kitchen’s burnt orange.”

Blarney fell over laughing and rolling in the snow on the short hill of Judy’s lawn. After I rang Judy’s doorbell, I looked back to see Blarney reach up and pull Teri Berry down with him. Teri Berry screamed, but when Blarney got her to roll over in the snow with him, she started laughing and screaming.

“Gawd!” Judy said, opening the door. “And this is their first date?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re perfect together.”

“Chas,” Judy said. “I might be boring tonight.”

“Why?” I saw she’d been crying.

“My Dad,” she said. “He might be missing. Mom just heard. It’s preliminary. We might know more tomorrow.”

I looked off, thinking of what to say. Blarney and Teri Berry threw snowballs at each other.

“Look,” Judy said, glancing into her living room. “I really shouldn’t go. I won’t be any fun for you. Besides, my Mom is like...freaking out.”

“I’ll stay here with you.”

I grabbed her, hugged her tight as ever, and she started sobbing. She shook her head and pulled away.

“Bye, you guys,” she said down to Teri Berry and Blarney without any cheer.

They looked up just as Judy went back into her house and closed the door.

“Chas Man,” Blarney shouted. “I *told* you to use Scope.”

They knew it wasn’t bad breath but bad something-else when I gave them a salute. “It’s her Dad.”

The porch light went out, the Christmas lights turned off.

“He hurt?” said Teri Berry.

“Killed?” said Blarney.

I shrugged and showed them Big Mystery. I walked down to the sidewalk. “Go on,” I told them. “Maybe I’ll come later.”

Could be they said something back to me, but if they did I didn’t hear it. I just stood there looking back at Judy’s house, dark except for the gloomy, greenish glow in a front window.

If you’d been across Princeton Drive that night, you would’ve seen the three of us. You’d have seen a David Blarney puppet wrap a Teri Berry puppet in his arms. And you’d see puppet strings as a punch-drunk puppeteer walked them off stage in search of other four-legged creatures.

Mine, he slept.

I stood on popsicle-stick legs, numb to the icy roots growing up my feet, keeping me frozen in time.

You’d have heard nothing as I gave up a dead holler at an unreal night, so fantastical, so weirdly bright with cotton lining houses, white felt blanketing lawns and stand-up trees, all beneath a knock-out moon, under pin-prick stars.

And everything under a dungeon silence.

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I wandered around for some time, fully expecting I'd head on home and skip Violet's party. I figured I needed to take my time because I didn't want anybody to be home when I got there. I didn't want to be around anybody. I knew Mom and Dad were going to the Berry's party, but they usually didn't go out as early as me and Skinny. Mostly to kill time, I stopped up at Convenient to get some cokes and a snack to eat in front of the TV.

When I finished buying my stuff, I pushed open the door and, of all people, Dad walked in.

"Getting party supplies too?" Dad said, surprised.

"I guess so," I lied. "Where's Mom?"

"She's in the car."

"Welp, see you later."

"Talk to your Mom. She needs cheering up."

I couldn't understand why Mom needed cheering up because she seemed fine when I left. Plus, I was pretty sure she'd already drunk a Martini or two. I headed around the store to the parking lot.

"Boo!" I said when I got up to our car, but she didn't get scared.

"Looks like yours is B.Y.O.B. too," Mom said, rolling the window down and giving me hardly any smile. She definitely looked in a sad mood, but I saw she held our Tupperware pitcher filled with her special dry Martinis on her lap.

"Be why oh...what?" I asked her.

"It means bring your own — Oh— It's good you've got your party to go to tonight. Denny's date canceled at the last damn minute. She has the flu." Mom rolled her eyes. "He's...well, he's upset, and he's staying home instead of going to the mixer stag."

Mom gave me a look like *Home is the last place you want to be tonight*.

"Welp," I lied. "Blarney and them, they're waiting for me,"

"Okay Sweetie," Mom said. "Have a nice time. And oh —" she said, giving me a tiny smile and a bit of a wink. "Be home at ten-thirty. Sharp."

Walking down Dundee Road, I didn't know where I would go. It wasn't snowing, but the wind picked up the powder from the ground and rooftops and made like a crazy swirl. When I got up to the front of Spangler's Hardware, I saw Buzz and the Sir Poke-A-Lots standing in front of the Twig-and-Leaf.

"Where's Judy Jug-Jug, twit-twit?" Buzz yelled across Douglass.

"Suckabee," said Big House. "You sucking on them yet?"

When I crossed over to them, I planned on just walking on by and not saying much. I wasn't in the mood. But Gilly gave me a poke.

"Poke! You mean you're *suppose* to suck them?" Gilly said like the moron he is.

Then Buzz said, "I've been telling Suckabee that blowing them don't make them bigger and sucking them don't make them smaller."

"Yeah, well," I said. "I've got a party to go to."

Then Big House darted over and grabbed my bag from my arms. "What you got? Cokes and cheese popcorn. Man! Must be a wild fucking party!"

"Can I have it back, Big House?" I said, and then just took it back. "See you guys."

"You run into Marco," Buzz said, "you tell him we ain't got all night. We're going to a party at a Assumption girl's house."

“Marco?” I asked, walking on. “He’s supposed to be going to Violet’s party.”

“Man,” Buzz said. “Old news, where you been? Trapeze’s blowing that off, man. Hanging with us cocksman.”

“Welp,” I said, walking backward and conjuring a new plan. “If I run into him maybe we’ll catch up with you. Where’s the party?”

They gave each other looks.

“Yeah,” Buzz said. “Like I said, you run into him, tell him to hurry his ass up.”

“Okay,” I said. “But what if we miss you all? Can’t you just give me the address?”

They gave each other some more looks, and then Gilly said, “Not you, you douche bag. Don’t need your mother ratting us out.”

“Right,” I said, getting pissed off. “Anything you say, Gilly-Gimme-the-Willies. Guess, Buzz, you don’t even want to know about Molly’s dad since you dropped her like a rocket?”

“Like a *rock*. Dropped her like a *rock*, you say, gnat brain.” And here’s the next thing Buzz said: “I know he’s a major. A major asshole, that is.”

I just turned and walked off, furious as hell.

“Okay,” Buzz said from behind me. “I’ll bite. What about him?”

“Nothing,” I said, turning and walking fast backwards. “Oh, I remember now. He said he’s glad Molly agrees with him now...about what inbred Appalachian trash the Roaches are.”

Buzz started to run after me, but the boots he wore made him slip and slide on the icy sidewalk. By the time he got any traction, I’d made it close to the end of the block. I turned back, held my bag between my legs and gave them the peeling the banana flip-off. They hurled different names at me, and gave me all sorts of flip-offs back: the turn it upside down, the behind the head sideways, and Gilly’s, the scratch your head lice flip-off. But I didn’t care. When I got to the Marathon station on the next block, I circled around it and waited in the shadows between the filling station and the little stone Protestant church next door.

I didn’t have to wait long before he came into view. Marco crossed over Bardstown Road right where I figured he would.

“Hey Marco!” I shouted in a whisper.

Marco already saw them up at the Loop but waited for me to walk across to him.

“What’re you doing here?” he said. “I figured you to be at Violet’s house by now.”

The Pokes saw Marco, and they started yelling down to him.

“Trapeeze, man! Hurry up!”

“Yo, Marco! Us cocksman gots things to do, places to be!”

“Something happened to Judy’s dad,” I told Marco. “Like maybe he might’ve been killed.”

“*What?*” he said. “You’ve *got* to be goddamn kidding me!” He stared above me at the cross atop the St. John the Baptist Baptist Church, and then made a snappy sign of the cross. “How’s she taking it?”

“She’s scared to death is how.”

Marco nodded.

“Hey,” I said. “Maybe I’ll go where you guys are going.”

But Marco, he took a chrome flask out of his inside coat pocket and took a sip, and then made a twisted face like you do with cough formula. He then held it out for me. I gave a what-the-hell shrug, and took a swig of his Dad's Old Granddad. I made my own cough-formula face and my cheeks raced hot.

"Maybe that's not such a smart idea," Marco said. "Buzz and them got wind of your Mom calling around to some of the other Moms —"

"Got wind how?" I got my answer. I could see it on Marco's face. He'd told them, and maybe now he wished he didn't. But now was too late.

I don't know why, but seeing Marco catch up with them gave me an empty stomach sort of feeling. Maybe the whiskey helped, but the stirrings were like the butterflies you get before a basketball game, or how you feel if you see a dead rabbit in the street with all its guts spread around. But to limit it down further, it's like how I felt that one day in the school library when I didn't think Judy liked me anymore. I thought about Judy, and how she'd looked earlier tonight. She must've been feeling this same feeling, only worse. It's the way you feel when you've got something good going with someone, and all a sudden it goes the other way on you.

Where else could I go besides Violet's party? No place *to* go, what with Skinny being home, so I headed over in the Kirkpatrick's basic direction. When I passed near St. Francis, I thought about going in and saying a prayer for Judy's dad. Instead, I made long footsteps in the snow going up Napoleon Boulevard, and then all the while going down Princeton Drive. I began whispering to myself, praying actually, saying, "Please make Judy's dad okay." I said it over and over again. "I pray to you O God, please make Judy's dad okay. Okay?"

And then I thought of how pitiful a person I was. Pitiful and selfish because I knew I was more bothered about not having my date with Judy than I was for what might've happened to her dad. I couldn't begin to know what it must be like for her, for her mom and her sisters, sitting around in a dark living room, weeping and worrying about what they'd find out the next time the a phone call came in.

And then I began to weep and dammit, I didn't want to. I couldn't be seen crying my way down the middle of the Princeton. Luckily, I got to thinking about how angry I was at Marco, and the anger dried my tears. Only, the angrier I felt, the more it sunk me even lower, so low that I wanted to crawl inside a dempster dumpster, *would* in fact, and live there among the rats and raccoons.

That's when Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick came out on their front porch, dressed for a party.

"Chas?" Mrs. Kirkpatrick said. "Why are you walking in the middle of the street?"

I didn't have a good answer so I just walked out of it.

"We were just heading over to the Berry's party," Mrs. Kirkpatrick said. "Come on and I'll show you to the basement."

"That's all right, Mrs. Kirkpatrick," I said. "I know the way."

But she didn't listen, and so I followed Mrs. Kirkpatrick through their house all done up for Christmas. It smelled real good, like she'd just sprayed canned pine tree smell around their artificial tree.

Stepping down a few steps, Mrs. Kirkpatrick had to make a big deal about me arriving to her daughter's party. *Stag!*

“Violet!” she yelled down, trying to be heard over “The Age of Aquarius” playing on a stereo. “Cute ole Chas came after all.”

Violet stood at the bottom looking pretty damn spiffy.

“We’re down at the Berry’s,” Mrs. Kirkpatrick said. “I’ll be back to check on things, Babe.”

“Kay. ‘Bye!” Violet said, and then to me, she said, “Chas, I thought you weren’t coming. Marco called up with the flu and *gawd*, I just hope Judy’s dad’s okay.”

I wasn’t about to tell Violet that Marco’d faked it, but it would have served him right if I did. I handed her my bag. “Here. Thought it might be B.Y.O.B.”

“What’s B.Y.O.B.?” she asked, pulling the popcorn from it.

“Bring your own bag,” I said, shrugging.

Violet wore a green fuzz-sweater this time, and a red and green plaid skirt with gray what’s called *fishnet* tights. She had a tad of makeup on, too, though she hardly needed any. Her eyes sparkled like Christmas lights, the tiny new kind that blinked along the Kirkpatrick’s basement ceiling.

“All right!” Jockstrap said. “Chas brought cheesy popcorn!”

“Merry Christmas, Chas,” Rhonda Likens said. “Commie’s been waiting all night to show you something.”

Rhonda Likens you can liken to linebacker, she’s so tough and meaty for a girl. She’s one of our cheerleaders, too, and can do handsprings and flips like an Olympic gymnast. Hell, if they’d let her, she’d go out for the boy’s teams, and she’d probably start on most of them. She was wearing one of those umpire-wasted jumpers you see girls wear, a red one, but I looked down anyway to see if she was wearing her ankle weights. Nope, just frilly white socks and shiny patent-leather shoes and muscles that bulged. I don’t know what the girls were thinking, getting Rhonda and Commie together on a date. I knew it wouldn’t take for three seconds.

Commie held the Kirkpatrick’s basement storm door open and, running his sleeve across his nose, waved to just us guys. Being curious, we went into the Kirkpatrick’s backyard to see what was up. When we circled up, Commie reached into his army jacket pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. He gave it to me, and it read *ACLU* with a long distance phone number scribbled under it.

“What’s this for?”

“Man,” Commie said. “Didn’t I hear you got suspended for writing that subversive essay — or not?”

“Yeah, Chas,” Jockstrap said. “You’ve got some balls on you!”

“Hey, it’s not right,” Commie said. “They can’t suspend you because you write an essay. Didn’t you write it just how they explained it? Didn’t you? We’ve got free speech in this country.”

“Yeah, yeah, Commie,” Blarney said. “But this is like, you know, Parochial school.”

“Blarney, man,” said Commie, irritated. “Eh..nevermind.” Then Commie turned back to me. “Are you gonna call them?”

“Naw, what for? So I got suspended — the worst part’s having to altar-boy Midnight Mass.”

“Damn!” Jockstrap said. “That’s hard core.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “You get sleepy ‘cause it’s late and ‘cause it’s always

hot as hell in church, and you've got to smell that nasty incense ole Frankfrone swings."

"And babies pooping," Jockstrap said. "And little kids puking all over the place."

"That's why they call them pews," Blarney said holding his nose.

"Blarney," Jockstrap said. "Get your dad and them to raid Midnight Mass. F.B.I! This is a raid! Put down that nasty smelling incense, bub. Lady, you want to change that frigging diaper this quarter century?"

"Hey you, Blarney's dad," Commie said. "Grab that dude on the altar before he swallows the stash."

"If I ever," said Blarney. "*Ever* have to smell another third-grader's barfed up eggnog again, it'll be too soon."

"Man," I said, still swimming in a sea of funk. "You all ever feel like nothing's ever happened, hardly nothing, then everything's happening so fast, and stuff keeps getting weirder on you, and you feel...? I don't know" I couldn't think of a good finisher.

"Where's my hip waders?" Jockstrap said. "Shit's getting deep."

"I remember a time like that," Blarney said, helping me out. "Chas, you remember. When we worked on that paper maché King Kong together?"

I had to smile; I remembered that episode pretty well.

"Yeah, you guys. It was in firth-grade...firth?" Blarney asked himself. "I mean *fifth*-grade. For the art fair. Chas insisted, I mean *insisted*, we do it his way. Chas, you remember how we got in trouble 'cause of you?"

"Yeah, welp," I said, lightening up a little. "It was a King Kong, and it only made sense to give him King Kong sized balls."

"But they weren't to scale," Blarney said, snickering. "I wanted to give King Kong little testicles I made with my Thingmaker. But Chas, *no*, he insisted, I mean *insisted*, we use these ping-pong balls he'd brought in. All painted black."

"I remember your all's King Kong," said Jockstrap. "Funnier than hell. A foot or two high and looking more like a cow standing on its hind legs than a gorilla. It had these mammoth-sized nuts."

About this time Violet came out. We were laughing pretty good, and for some reason she yanked on my arm while I said, "Blarney, you still saying that's why we didn't even place in the art fair? 'Cause I gave King Kong ping-pong balls instead of Thingmaker balls?"

"Oh man!" Violet said, laughing. "You all are talking about King Kong's balls! Boys're *so* queer."

We all laughed along with Violet. She blew the bangs out of her eyes and gave me another tug on the arm. "Would you come on? I have to show you something in our garage."

The guys gave each other sideways looks when I followed Violet over to her garage. She kicked some snow out of the way in front of the door and, after a couple of our tugs, the door opened. When we stepped in I looked back to see if the guys were watching, but they weren't. They'd gone on discussing the King Kong's balls story. Violet closed the door and switched on the light, two naked bulbs mounted on the rafters.

I leaned against the Kirkpatrick's station wagon and watched while Violet knocked junk off a black footlocker and opened it. It was filled to the top with all her old kid's stuff — dollhouse furniture, Madeline books, various doll babies, and all sorts of

Barbie dolls, including a couple of Kens.

We heard Blarney yelling outside. “I still got him, Chas Man. You’ve got to come over to my place and check out our Kong, man!”

We cracked up at Blarney, and then heard the door slam when they went back into the basement.

Violet uncovered an old Buster Brown shoebox. There were some crayon bits and some art stuff rolling loose inside, but my eyes focused on a stack of cards, my old Beatles cards, wrapped tightly in a bunch of rubber bands. Violet pulled a folded piece of paper from under the rubber bands — the wide-ruled type you use in first-grade — and, handing the stack of cards to me, unfolded the note.

“I forgot all about my old Beatles cards,” I lied.

“If they do break up,” Violet said, “they’re going to be very valuable someday. Remember how we both liked Ringo the best?”

I guess my memory’s better because I remembered she liked Paul best, and I remembered telling her I did too.

Violet read my note. “*Dear Violet: To the best lookingest girl of class, Saint Francis of Assisi school, Louieville, The U.S.A., Globe, whole wide wrild.*”

“I thought it was Paul we both liked,” I said, trying to get her mind off my dumb first-grade scribbles. “Ringo?”

Violet didn’t answer that. She just said, “*Gawd*, I thought it was so cute that you gave me those.”

What she said about the cards being valuable wasn’t ever gonna be true. A stack of over a hundred, by the time I got all the rubber bands off, I saw the cards had gotten mauled and crimped and folded, and some were pinched on the sides from the rubber bands. And just about all of them looked dog-eared. They smelled musty too.

Violet read the rest of my note “*P.S. I love Violet K. Then you P.P.S’ed, only you wrote P.S.S., saying, Chas H. gave these.*”

“Wow,” I said. “You still have them after all these years. You know, Violet, I never heard a peep back. I wondered why.”

“Getting Beatles bubblegum cards from a boy? *Hello!* How scary is that for a first-grader? I’m suppose to smother you with kisses?”

Welp, on that note I fumbled the cards onto the garage floor, and man were our faces real close when we stooped to pick them up. Maybe I can’t read minds, but I’d a strong feeling that like me, Violet had certain thoughts racing through her head.

Huh? Violet thought when picking up a card. *I’d never put a swastika on Ringo’s forehead.*

Everybody on this street own Vista Cruisers? I thought reaching under the station wagon.

Judy’s been one of my best friends since second-grade.

Hmmm? Didn’t Violet say she’d smother me with kisses? That’s first tense.

No, since third-grade. Actually, me and Judy have been best friends since fourth-grade. Fifth, really.