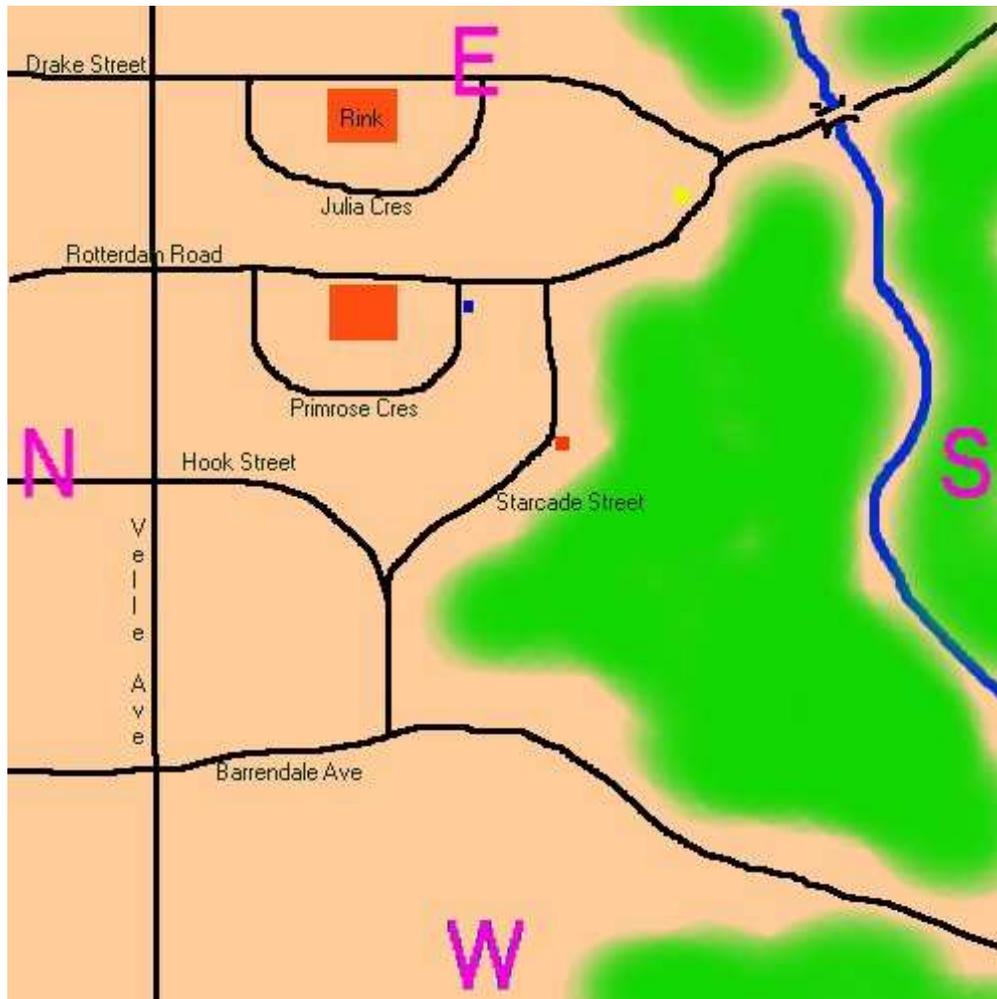


A Sunset Over

By Jordy Fujiwara



We had a date! I was practically skipping up Velle Avenue, the last thing on my mind being the twenty minute walk. My bike was down a chain since a particularly rough night involving beer and skate parks, but that was okay. It gave my heart time to relish. Autumn had set in firmly, but I was warm despite the flimsy red and green windbreaker I wore. There was a spring in my step and poem in my pocket that day, yessiree.

She was the daughter of a friend of my father's. She lived alone with her mother at 56 Starcade Street, an address burned into my memory so permanently I accidentally wrote it down on a letter I was suppose to mail to Grandma last week. I suppose it's foolish, but Hell, it's fun.

A dirty blonde with a dyed black streak to appease some demand of fashion, she was lean and fit and funny and suave. These thoughts danced around my head, hand in hand, as I made the turn onto Barrendale Avenue; only two more streets! The only thing that was pulling on my mind was that feeling somewhere at the back of my tongue, that skittish little rat that lived upstairs. It wasn't so bad now, and I was hoping the feeling would vanish and go away as soon as I caught sight of her plain off white house. She hated the taste of cigarettes anyway, and if she wanted a kiss... Nonetheless my pack was nestled safely in my back jeans pocket, a counterweight for my wallet. It seemed these days change jumped from the left pocket and reappeared in the right as delicious tubes of tobacco. Every day. But my teeth were freshly brushed and the fantasy of a kiss that lasted for more than half a second calmed my little rat down.

Barrendale looped lazily off to the west in the distance, and I hung a left onto Hook Street. One more!

A breeze that was striving to become a gust blew down the street, enhanced by the tall duplexes on either side. The sun was going down behind me in what was likely an incredible coffin of reds and oranges, but my sights were set dead ahead. I chased the head of my shadow and the purpling sky up above. Yes, now I was actually jogging. It felt like time was about to run out, like if I didn't hurry, she wouldn't be there! The feeling was incredible. My gut was twisting in that *good* way; I almost laughed out loud.

There it was! A fork in Hook street, the right road continuing the march of duplexes that was Hook, and the left road with its squat little houses and plush forest in behind. Starcade Street. Full run now. The houses started, on this end, at 100. I knew that one off by heart. Ninety eight, ninety six, ninety four. Now the gentle bend to take the road slightly more left, to the south. My lungs started to point out that they were not pleased with this sudden burst of activity, and my rat agreed. So at Seventy two I killed the run and forced myself to walk. She couldn't see me tearing down the street like the lovesick loser I must've been anyway.

From sixty eight I could see the off white siding. No red Civic sitting in the driveway: momma wasn't home. As I drew closer my happiness grew exponentially. It wasn't our first date, per se, but our first time to be spent alone together for an extended period of time.

I quickened my pace, at risk of appearing out of breath. Maybe she'd find that cute? Maybe desperate? Shit, now I really wanted a puff. Then a sight on the door wiped any nagging thoughts clean. There was a note. And the windows were all dark. How could I not notice that? I ran then. Right across the lawn, brave and final dandelions kicked aside, their little doomed pods twirling and spiralling in the breeze, right over a chewed blue rubber ball, right past the little bare spot on the grass I always noticed. It was definitely a note, it was her handwriting. As I pounded up the concrete steps, a flurry of yips greeted me from the dark living room window. I paid no attention to Scruffy as I tore the yellow paper from the screen door.

Brett, so sorry, I know we were supposed to hang out tonight. Something came up, I'll tell you about it later. Don't call me, my cell phone is dead and I left it charging at home. Unless you want to leave me a romantic message, ha! I'm sorry again! Just think when the sky was pink and you broke the ink by the skating rink, and maybe we will see each other tonight, even if I can't be there.

Talk to you later,

Love Tam.

I read it about four times, despite the distant disapproving yaps and yips from the Almighty Scruffy. My gut had decided to go skinny dipping in some sort of pool filled to the brim with ice cubes, and that was about all I knew. We had had this planned for about a week now, and there was nothing that was supposed to stop it. Nothing. I didn't know whether to be pissed off or worried about what might have 'come up'. The only course of action now seemed to be, well, go home, flop on my bed and maybe put on some music. And cigarettes. Fuck yes. No kissing tonight.

The rat rejoiced as I reached for my pocket and retrieved the pack. It was going to be a long ass walk home and I'd probably smoke all seven cancer sticks left in there. And it would feel good. It would keep me from punching every stop sign or little kid I saw. Her cell was never dead. NEVER. Gahhhhh.

Walking back up Starcade, I glanced up at the dying day's light while fumbling for my lighter. It wasn't a coffin of red like I thought it would be, but a rather brilliant pink. I stopped fumbling for my lighter and dug out her note from the windbreaker's pocket. "*Just think when the sky was pink and you broke the ink by the skating rink, and maybe we will see each other tonight.*" I thought that had sounded funny: Think, pink, ink, rink. Was she a poet 'n' never, uh, knowed it? Walking slower now, I realized that that was pretty damn weird thing to put on a "so sorry I ditched you" note.

Looking back up at the sky, a circuit closed in my mind and I realized what she meant. Grade five, sunset, summertime. We were playing out at the park on Drake Street,

the one that's surrounded by the half moon road called Julia Crescent. In the wintertime Old Man Farley used to flood a flat spot on in the park where the old swing sets used to be and make a rink. Everyone called it the rink; we still do now, though Old Man Farley's been gone for five years now and no one floods it. Anyway, I had my pen with me that day because I carried them with me everywhere when I was little. I suppose I loved to draw then as much as I do now. Except Tam thought it was would be a good idea to play swords, her armed with a stick and me with nothing but the pen. Even though I didn't know that the pen was mightier than the sword back then, I had wielded it bravely. Long story short, I was a wee bit too aggressive with the pen and while it bests the sword, I guess it wasn't as fibrous as the stick. Ink went everywhere, all over Tam, all over the ground.

I smiled, thinking back, and realized I had come to the fork where Hook gives birth to Starcade. I stood there a moment, remembering how Tam had been massively sorry and she took me to the store on the corner of Drake and Velle and bought me a whole pack of new pens. Years later I learned she had been grounded for a week for getting her new dress full of ink.

My smile deepened and I looked down the hall of tall houses that was Hook and made a split decision right there. I made the long turn and went up the right side of the fork. Hook veers apart from Starcade and crosses Velle Avenue, you follow Velle east and turn south onto Drake, then the park comes up of the right, after the first turn that is Julia. It was a fifteen minute walk if you go slow, and right now it seemed that the rink was a better place than facedown on my bed.

Along the way I tried to follow the course Tam and I took going through the school grades, but they were blurred with memories of biking and drawing and soccer and other girls and things like my buddy Sandy getting a hornet's nest thrown at him.

Before long, I was there. The sun hadn't left as quickly as I thought, and there was till plenty of light left. There was still a bit of kick left in the length of the day, it seemed. I wasn't sure what to do, so I found a bench that wasn't far from the grey expanse of the rink and plopped down.

It was nice out. The chill had been kept at bay by my walking and the park was well sheltered from the houses that made up Julia Crescent. I sat for about three minutes, not thinking of anything in particular when my rat politely squeaked. No breeze, a calm moment, perfect time for a puff. I went through the age old procedure and got a cigarette in my mouth, and I was just about expertly click my cheap little bic lighter when nature protested my impending pollution and snuck a powerful cross breeze into the park. To save the flint, I hesitated and waited for this intrusion to pass. The gust (no wannabe breeze this time) made it a bit of a challenge to keep the cigarette in my mouth. My windbreaker started cracking like mad... or was it my windbreaker? I thought it was my jacket for a split second, until I realized the crack-crack-crack was coming from far away and to my left.

Turning my head cost me my beloved treat; the wind took full advantage of the torque and tore it from my lips. I cursed audibly and cast my hateful gaze upon the culprit. It was a long pink ribbon tied to a pole on the new swing sets. A long pink ribbon, snapping and flapping in the breeze. Now who the hell would tie a... *Think pink...*

That *was* sort of weird, wasn't it? I got up and headed over to the swings. No one else was around except for some girls across the park. I think I knew one of them from school. They looked at me then looked away. I reached the mad flapping pink ribbon. As I got close the gust died abruptly and the ribbon floated down as gently as a snowflake. There was a plethora of scribblings on the pole, from *Cathie m is a slut* to *raisins look like small poo*, but one message caught my eye. It was clearly new, drawn out in thick black permanent marker. It read:

THIS SAME SPOT. JUST A SUNSET OVER. QUICK!

I noticed the Q's tail had a curious downward jut. Like it suddenly decided to burst straight down instead of continuing a graceful journey out of the circle. A Tam trademark. I understood at that moment. It was a game. Clues. I'd seen stuff like this in movies and TV shows... one clue leads to the next.

I was filled with a bit of delirious excitement. The girls across the park must have thought I was nuts, because I tore out of that park fast, right through someone's backyard on Julia and out onto the street.

See, I had figured out the clue instantly. There was another nearly identical park just west of the one with the rink; just a sunset over, so to speak. It even had a crescent street surrounding it on one side and a straight street on the other. Except instead of Drake Street it was Rotterdam Road and Julia had Primrose Crescent for a counterpart. The Rotterdam park wasn't frequented as much as the one on Drake because it was a bit run down, but right now I wanted to frequent it. Frequent it fast and see if there was another clue or if it were just some sick sort of coincidence.

I cut across two lawns after crossing Julia; one on the other side of the half moon street and one that was backyard of someone who lived on Rotterdam. I was spared angry shouts and biting dogs, much to my liking. My rat was starting to get pissed but it stayed quiet. The excitement was mounting like it had been when I was flying down Starcade not a half hour ago, and it did not have time for rats.

The park was dark and abandoned as I jogged into it. I tried to think of where the rink would be if this were the one on Drake and where the new swings were in relation to that. Turns out I didn't have to do too much mental geography, because there was another pink ribbon poking out of the earth beside the park's only set of swings. Setting loose thousands of equally doomed dandelion pods, I barrelled through the weedy undergrowth to the ribbon. I was on a treasure hunt! And to think I was considering picking a fight with a stop sign a while ago.

I reached the ribbon and gave it a tug. It came out without a fuss. There was something written on it! Directions? Another clue for sure, it was- ...three words. And they made no sense: **Mr. Davidson Knows.**

Who in God's name was Mister Davidson? And what did he know? Did he know what came up with Tam? My excitement momentarily halted, I took the ribbon to a slightly rustier bench and sat down.

My mind opened its filing system and started looking for Davidson. I had a friend David in... grade something. There was a Mrs Davis who taught English. No teachers, no friends that were Davidson. The longer I sat, the more frustrated I got. And the more frustrated I got the more it heated the ground under the rat. Eventually it squeaked its discomfort and I popped out one my six remaining soldiers in my mouth.

Mr. Davidson... Mr. Davidson...

My lighter came to life and as the flame spouted into existence I saw a mailbox. Three or four years ago... the name Davidson across it, the little flag popped down. I leaned my head back and shouted "HAH!" to the dulling sky, and in doing so lost another brave soldier. I tried to catch him but he fell through the cracks of the bench. I took a moment to reflect on the terrible cigarette luck I'd be having, then I switched back to my revelation.

Scummy Ed! The janitor at the school. I had been sneaking a smoke out behind the dumpster and he came around with a big bag of trash and saw me there. I recall the look a triumph in his eye as he slung the bag into the green receptacle and darted away before I had a chance to protest or explain or anything. I remember how I always used to defend him, telling my friends to stop poking fun at poor Ed, poor Edward Davidson. They told me he was a no-good scumbag and hated everything and everyone. I was nice to him, I tried to talk to him in the halls. Then he ratted me out. Suspension, three days for smoking on school grounds. My parents were livid. It was a rough month. And Tam, she orchestrated the revenge.

I sat on the bench, lighter in hand, and chuckled at the memory that had been buried for so long.

Imagine six kids, dressed in dark hooded sweatshirts and armed with a dozen eggs each, moving in a hushed yet giggly and terrified line down a street at two in the morning. Moving towards an address obtained by a certain dirty-blonde who faked a fainting spell to get into the sick room, where she then snuck into the school office and brought up the staff payroll information. Imagine the better part of seventy two eggs exploding over the windows and siding of a squat little brown house, and the lights slamming on and an old man yelling and the kids scattering in crazed, overexcited fright. A dozen eggs disappear quickly, let me tell you. Grab throw grab throw grab throw! I remember following Tam and that her hood flew off and I got her hair in my mouth and we all met back at the rink and laughed and laughed and laughed.

A car somewhere off in the distance hit its brakes too fast and jolted me from my reverie. I looked at my lighter in one hand and the ribbon in the other. Mr. Davidson

Knows. Was I supposed to go and confront the old man? Apologize? I did sort of feel bad afterwards; he quit a month later, after being verbally attacked about the great egg bombardment.

It took me a few moments to remember where he lived. It was actually close by, on Primrose Crescent behind me. I put away my lighter and got up and headed towards Rotterdam. Scummy Ed's house was right near where Primrose joined Rotterdam (the street after Primrose was the other end of Starcade). It was a short walk, but for the first time I felt the sting of the evening chill defeat my windbreaker. A chill paraded itself up and down my body and somehow made it so my ears were frigid. I was wondering how many little clues were left in this game when I came upon the house.

It was brown and eggless. The windows were boarded shut and the paint was peeling. A hole in the porch, and the lawn made Tam's weed ridden one look like a golf course fairway. I saw the mailbox, the letters spelled out DAVI and then faded. But the flag was up. And I thought I saw a pinprick of pink on the little red rectangle. Coming closer, I saw that it was indeed a piece of pink material, the same stuff the ribbons were made out of. Self conscious about rooting through someone else's mailbox, I opened it quick and nabbed the contents quickly. It wasn't a letter; it was an egg carton. Grinning, I popped it open. There was a single pink plastic egg. "Think pink," I whispered, and cracked it open. Two words: **Go inside.**

My grin discovered it had somewhere else to be. I looked up at the quiet and seemingly desolate brown house, over-aware that my ears were cold. I fumbled for my cigarettes and lighter after setting the egg carton down on the street: this wasn't going to be easy. I plucked one the five out and was again grabbing for my lighter (the pockets of the windbreaker were deep, okay?) when I thought of Scummy Ed looking at me like he'd just found a twenty on the ground the day he caught me smoking. If I came to the door smelling like cigarettes... I could picture him snorting and making a remark about still smoking, and slamming the door. And then the hunt would be over. I wanted one so badly, but I also wanted whatever was at the end of this game. My rat was making quite din about the tease, and my hands shook as I made to reinsert the tube back with its friends. But I guess I was shaking more than I thought, because it bounced off the edge of the pack and cart wheeled cleanly to the ground and into a drain. Christ, what were the odds? Three down, four to go, I thought bitterly. My disbelief concerning my smokes seemed to overshadow the trepidation concerning approaching and confronting Scummy Ed, so I took advantage of my fear's temporary absence and moved hastily to the front door.

I knocked and held my breath.

Nothing.

I rapped again, louder this time.

Someone stirred! Footsteps...

I braced myself for a confused and angry face staring up at me, but when the door swung open, there was tall, friendly looking man of about forty or so. He was shaven and

build solid, wearing a plaid shirt and worn jeans, a work belt wrapped unevenly around his waist. Had been wearing a yellow construction hat and carrying a steel lunch box, he'd be a perfectly stereotypical construction worker.

"Yes?" he inquired.

"Uh, I'm looking for Mister Davidson," I said, completely and totally unsure of how I was going to explain myself.

"That's me! Can I help you?" he said, and smiled. He looked like he was waiting for me give him some sort of password. He looked like he was... expecting me? Puzzle pieces clicked together in my head and I extrapolated the purpose quickly and, I hoped, accurately.

"I knew your father, sir. I uh, came to make a confession."

"I see. Come in," he stood aside and gestured. I went in. The house was without furniture. The walls were stripped and there were no carpets. Sawhorses and planks of wood were hanging out in the biggest room, bare bulbs acted like sentries over the little piles of sawdust in the corners.

"This was dad's house, I've been fixing it up. He's been gone for a year or so now."

"Sc--" I coughed, "Mister Davidson passed away?"

"Yep. Heart attack. Quickly and completely."

"I'm sorry. I..."

"That's okay son. You said you knew him?"

I stood there in the strangely dark room with its sawhorses and planks. There was a sheet of plastic draped over what might have been a chair. It looked like a squat, fat ghost. Light suddenly flooded the room. The man, Scummy Ed's son, had flicked on the bulb.

"Sorry, I had all the lights off because I was takin' a nap, hah."

I nodded my acknowledgment and tried to find where to begin. "He was the janitor at my school." Good a place as any, I guess.

"Yes, Drewfield Junior High."

"Yeah. He uh. He caught me smoking this one time and told the principal. I got suspended and then my friends and I threw eggs at his house... this house. He never caught us but everyone knew about it and he quit after like a month because everyone was making fun of him and..." I paused, unsure of what my next words were supposed to be.

Davidson regarded me patiently. And then it was obvious.

"I'm really sorry. I was a stupid kid and, and I felt bad after, but at the time it--"

He interrupted me with a roar of laughter only a burly and construction worker-esque guy like him could muster. To be honest, it made me flinch a bit. He got control of himself and looked at me. My expression must've been pretty damn funny, because it set him off again. I stood there awkwardly and waited for him to finish. When he did, he put

his bear paw hand on my shoulder and said: “He told me about that! Ha! That was you, eh? And probably the girl too? Hahaha! Oh man, we both thought it was hilarious!”

“Yeah, I’m so sor- hilarious?” I was baffled.

“Yes! Of course, he was pissed at first, and he had to clean it all, but he always loved a good prank. Old man was bitter, but he had a strange sense of humour.”

“But he quit, he-“

“He left because of his heart problems, son, not because of the ribbing you kids were giving him. He didn’t give a rat’s ass about what you kids thought! Ha!”

I was a little dumbfounded what with all this new information. I couldn’t think of much to say, except “why did he rat me out the principle then?” Like his son would know.

“I don’t know. He never cared about what you kids were up to. Are you sure it was him?”

The idea was extremely simple, and it stuck a dart of ice in my gut. I never really found out if it had been Scummy Ed who sold me out. I just knew that the principal knew the same day he saw me... Seventy two eggs, maybe for nothing? Davidson saw the look on my face and guessed what I was thinking.

“You aren’t, are you? Heh, I guess that’s a lesson in assumption for you! Ah well. We all do stupid shit as kids, now don’t we? Me? I took up smoking. Terrible habit. Speaking of which, you wouldn’t happen to have one I could bum off of you, do you? I never learned.”

Wordlessly, I obtained my pack and handed over a cigarette. He put it his front pocket. “I’ll enjoy that later, thanks.” There was a moment of awkward silence, and I remembered that I was on a sort of quest. And if I was supposed to draw a clue from *that* conversation, I’d need a few hours to mull it over.

“I’m going to get a beer! Want one? Or are you even old enough?”

I shook my head, whether he took it as ‘no thanks’ or ‘no I’m not,’ I didn’t care. He shrugged and left me alone for a moment. What was next? Was the whole quest to try and make me realize we were wrong about Scummy Ed? A strange sort of thing to do to a guy instead of cuddling and watching half a movie. I tried to replay our exchange, but all I could remember well was his braying laughter. He was laughing at the fact that *I* was the man behind the egg assault... and...

I almost gasped out loud. *And probably the girl too!* he had said. She’d been here, she’d met him. Davidson came back, a can of beer in his hand. He was about to say something but I spoke before he could: “Was there a girl named Tam here earlier?” He grinned enormously.

“She said not to give you these unless you asked. Hold on.”

He left again and I was alone with the sawdust and the single glaring bulb once more. My heart was knocking against my ribs. She’d been pretty elaborate in this game so far. I wondered what could be at the end. Would I get to the end? I was starting to get excited.

Davidson returned with a fuzzy wool hat and a jacket. *My jacket.* I had left it at Tam's house a week ago and never bothered to get it. The cap was going to make my ears happy. I put on the hat and jacket, now wondering if the whole thing was to get my jacket back to me. Again, a terrible substitute for an evening on a plush couch and a television making noise you didn't care about. As I swung the jacket on, I left something heavy in one of the pockets slap against my hip.

"I guess you'll be off then. From what I've heard you've got quite the little adventure going on here," Davidson remarked. I looked at him with a cocked eyebrow, and he laughed his bear laugh again. "I've said too much! Hah! Get on now, it's getting dark!"

I smiled and went out the door. "Thanks!" I called back.

"No problem, come by anytime, Brett!"

"I will, if you need any help fixing up the place, maybe on weekends I might be able to..."

"I'd appreciate it. Seeya!"

I walked back out onto Primrose, feeling strange and lighthearted. I was heading back to the dingy park on Rotterdam and toying the object in my pocket (which had to be a book, I figured) when I realized that I didn't ever tell him my name. Oh Tam, you're crafty one, I thought.

By now the day was on its last legs, and the only light in the sky was a hazy and angry dark red in the west. The eastern sky was starting get very dark, and there were a few adventurous stars trying to make themselves seen on the horizon. But it wasn't dark enough for the big halogen lights over the park to burst to life yet. Upon arriving I sat on the same bench and pulled the object out of my pocket. It was indeed a book. A thick, old book about insects. It boldly proclaimed itself as 'A Complete Guide to Modern Entomology'. I opened it up and found a pink post it note adhered to the inside cover. In the waning light I had squint just a little bit to make out the words:

Your number, my number: multiply and then take away the papers you burned.

Okay. So the clue was a number. Probably a page number. *My number* was always 39. I don't know why, but ever since I was little I sort of decided that 39 was an underrated number. There's never 39 of anything. I used to make drawings with thirty-nine of things. That was easy. But what was *her* number? The book was only so many pages long and 39 was a hefty number.

The light above my bench made a clicking noise and it started to hum. A light had literally come on above my head, and I felt foolishly guilty that I had not figured it out. Almost subconsciously I took out my smokes. Only three left... didn't I start off with seven? I... Seven. Lucky number seven. Tam always said she wasn't superstitious, except when it came to seven. She told me that it's healthy to have a little blind faith in some things; that we needed to let fate take our hand every now and then. I put away the

smoke and tried some mental math. Math was *her* thing. Hmmm 39 was close to forty, and seven times four was twenty eight, so 280 less seven, 273. I flipped to page 273. It was lines and lines of text about some sort of beetle. I was puzzled for a moment before I recalled the second part of the note. *Take away the papers you burned.* More math? The only burning paper memories I had took place a year or so ago, when Tam was showing me how to... how to use citrus as invisible ink!

“Girl, you’re a genius,” I breathed out loud.

It’s a simple trick. You use lemon juice and write words on paper with a swab. It dries clear, and if you want to read it, you bake the paper and the words will come out browner than the paper. When she showed it to me I had used my lighter to try and bake the pages, but I held it too close and everything went up in flames. We had laughed and I had thrown her entire binder into a bush and stomped it. It had been a new binder, but all 180 pages had been a lost cause.

273 subtract 180. Uh, 173 minus 80 is like 103 minus 10. 93?

Flipping to page 93, there was only a picture. A strange looking stick bug. Lots of blank space for a citrus message. I took out my lighter and ignited it. The light from the little flame would have been a wicked contrast to the coming night, but the lamp above me had powered up and was bathing me in a circle of white light. Wary of the age in the already yellowed pages, I patiently cooked the page. The angle was difficult at first, so I tore the sheet out. I’m pretty sure Tam wasn’t a huge fan of insects or the study thereof. The book had to be expendable. With the page ripped out, it was easy to roast. I left the book on the bench and promptly forgot about it, absorbed with my task. Like magic, browner portions started to appear in the shape of letters. I felt my heart knocking again. I was actually in some sort of little quest here. A part of it. My God, she was smart.

Breathless, I waited until all the letters were clear. The paper was crisp, and I stopped before it might go up in flames like her binder once did. I put away my lighter and read the paper:

*a girl, a pigtail
this house sleeps at night
adore a jar*

That was certainly cryptic. It was time to engage the ol’ memory machine once again. Pigtailed and girls. I knew lots of girls with pigtailed. But there was only I one once knew with *one pigtail*. Claire Summerthorn used to wear her chestnut brown hair in an offset pigtail, she was Tam’s good friend back in the day. And if I recalled correctly, her property had a greenhouse... *this house sleeps at night*.

I got up and started walking fast. Leaving the light of the lamp plunged me into a temporary darkness, and I felt so alive. Claire’s house was right where Rotterdam fused with Drake street, past Starcade and close to the bridge that spanned the brook. I didn’t jog; I didn’t want to further aggravate my rat, who was pretty upset at that point in time.

There was just wasn't a moment to spare for a smoke, this was far too exciting, I didn't want calm.

My memory had served me well. In the final light of day I could make out Claire's dark house and the greenhouse sitting there beside the garage. There was a soft glow coming from within. "Adore a jar," I whispered out loud. A door ajar. The greenhouse door was outlined on one side by a stripe of light.

Currently caring not about what the Summerthorns might think about me blatantly trespassing, I risked a short jog to the greenhouse. I knew Tam was inside, there waiting for me, sitting there, impressed as Hell that I followed everything right up to this point. Not wanting to scare her needlessly, I opened the door softly and called out, "hello?"

No answer. The greenhouse was empty except for a few rows of greenery. One of the fluorescent lights hummed up above. She wasn't hiding in here, that was for sure. Unless she was buried in one of the sacks of fertilizer I saw in the corner. I looked for something pink. Sure enough, sitting beside a pot on a table in back was a pink flashlight with a pink post-it note attached to it. Seems my night wasn't over at all.

I gathered up the flashlight and read the note: **Take Me Fishing.**

I immediately thought of the bridge that was not a ten minute walk from where I stood, when I heard a car pull into the driveway right outside. For some instinctual reason, I felt it was necessary to hide. All I could do was sit down by one of the tables with my back against it, and hope no one investigated the greenhouse.

Doors slammed, and I heard people talking.

"Honey, did you leave the greenhouse light on?"

"Ah, I think so Dad, sorry!"

"What have I told you about doing that? It costs money to use the lights you know!"

"I'm sorry Dad, I'll get it."

"No, you get inside and feed Molly."

"Dad, I –"

"Now!"

Another door opened and slammed, and footsteps crunched outside. They were coming to the greenhouse door. The greenhouse door creaked open and I held my breath. Mr. Summerthorn didn't sound like the type to take my intrusion kindly. He stepped inside and sighed. He wasn't turning off the light and leaving! What was he doing, marvelling at the way the light reflected off of the plastic walls? I heard him leave, much to my relief, but he left the light on. Which had to mean he was coming back. Maybe he'd go inside the house and I could bolt out then? God, I wanted a smoke.

"CLAIRE!"

I froze, if it was possible to freeze even more than I was.

"CLLLAIRE!!!"

From somewhere up high (a bedroom window?): "What dad?"

"Did your mother need some of that fertilizer moved into the shed?"

Now my blood joined in with the freezing. The bags of fertilizer that I had seen earlier were about four feet away, in the corner nearest to me. If he went to get those...

“No Dad, she said it was fine!”

Oh sweet Claire, thank you.

“I’m going to grab them anyway, we have enough in the greenhouse as it is!”

Oh fuck.

“No Dad! She said she wants them in there!”

Claire, an angel. A voice from Heaven.

“Don’t argue with me Claire, if she wanted them to stay in there she would have told me! Did you feed Molly?”

“Yes, but Da-”

“But nothing Claire! I’ll be in in a second!”

The greenhouse door creaked again. Footsteps approaching from the left side of the table thing I was hiding behind. I could hear him breathing and muttering. The ice that was my blood had gotten even colder, and I was quite terrified. He would see me. He couldn’t not see me. Unless...

As soon as he was practically upon me I tucked into a neat little roll to my right, and clumsily flopped into the little path between the table I was hiding behind and the table against the wall. My roll wasn’t perfect, as my feet were still sort of poking out where he could see them. I was on my back, so I pulled my knees up to my chest and prayed that he took that same way back. My roll was quiet, but not quiet enough. I sensed him pausing, I sensed him looking around. He said “hmp” and then I heard the sack of fertilizer shifting. He grunted, then walked back the same way he had come. It was over so quickly: he was gone from the greenhouse. I realized I was holding my breath, and let it out slowly. I guess the fact that I had survived a potential mauling delayed my desire to get *out* of there ASAP. I could hear Claire’s dad walking around the greenhouse and out to where I supposed the shed was. I was up and out and bolting down Rotterdam before he had the chance to come back.

I ran until the house was far behind me. It was dark now; there was only a dim purplish tint in the western sky now. The stars had pushed through the veil of light and they were sparkling nicely. I still had the flashlight, but now I really, really needed a cigarette. So I put the light into my jacket pocket, walked towards the bridge and got out my pack... to find it was flattened from the roll. My rat cried out in terror as I carefully flipped it open. Two were unsalvageable. Tobacco spilled out of the pack dusted the street. One had rolled to the edge of pack where the damage was less severe. It looked bent and like it was about fall apart. There was no way I could light it while walking. So I tossed the pack after lovingly extracting my last remaining solid. He went into the shallow front pocket of my windbreaker, and I zipped the jacket up over it. The cold was more pronounced now.

The houses on Rotterdam stopped a minute from the bridge, so I only had the streetlamps for company. I was very thankful for the hat and jacket, as the wind was starting to pick up now.

The bridge was simple in design. The brook wasn't very deep or wide, so a few reinforced planks of wood and guardrails sufficed. Her clue, *Take me fishing*, had to be a reference to the bridge, because I remembered promising her to take her fishing off of it one day, but we never got around to it. What else happened that day? She made a suggestive remark about fishing from underneath it, "if I knew what she meant." Back then I had let the comment flow right over me. Now, the thought induced a tickling sensation all over my body.

I reached the bridge and stood on the last bit of asphalt before the road briefly became wood. I couldn't light the cigarette in this wind. Underneath the bridge was right. And underneath had to be the next clue. Or the prize.

The banks of the brook weren't steep, they were sort of like a ditch. In fact, the whole brook was more like a big ditch than anything else. It widened out as it made its way into the forest to my right, however. Under the bridge was dark and damp smelling. There wasn't much earth between the cramped side of the bank and the water. But there wasn't much wind. With care, I got the last cigarette into my mouth; it really was about to crumble. I wondered if it was smokeable as I somehow clutched my lighter on the first grab. It took at least six flicks and lots of body positioning to get a steady flame going. Touching the fire to end of the cancer stick for the first time in hours and hours got my rat all nice and excited. I could feel my body welcoming the nicotine even before it got into me. I sucked back, and got nothing. Well, barely anything, I should say. There was a rip or something in it, gah.

I took it out of my mouth and it promptly broke in half, the lit end dive bombing to the damp earth below like a shooting star. Anger, fuelled by my rat's thundering impatience, coursed into my veins and I nearly threw my remaining half smoke into the brook. Half was better than none though. Reasoning prevailed! I tried to get the lighter going again, but the fuel was extremely low from all the paper cooking I had been doing earlier. After twenty or so attempts, it seemed my lighter was kaput. I could hear butane swishing around inside, so I pocketed the half smoke and got out the flashlight. Perhaps I could fiddle with the adjuster or something.

The light from my electric torch illuminated a cave like scene. The underside of the bridge was overrun with strange growth, and the wall of earth in front of me was a maze of dirt and roots. And a box. The clue!

Forgetting my self destructive task, I pulled it from where it had wedged in between two stones. It was a sort of jewellery case, short and rectangular, with a little latch. I put it on the ground, flipped it up and shone the light down. Inside: a pack of watermelon gum and what looked like a joint. I picked up the handmade smoke and discovered it was only tobacco. And that was it. Wait! There was writing on the inside top of the box:

Logic? Gum AND a smoke?

That meant little to me. I put the smoke into my pocket with its injured, factory produced counterpart and picked up the gum package. Inside, all twelve of the little gum chambers were popped, save one. A pink piece of watermelon gum looked up at me just as the full silliness of my position hit me. Here I was, crouched under a bridge at night with a flashlight, following pink clues. If the timber above me collapsed no one would know what had happened to me. Well, save one. She'd know. I thought of the trouble she had to go through to set this all up. She had to have been at it all day. How long had she been planning it? What if it wasn't her, but some psychopath? The same psychopath that had kidnapped her and was watching me ever so slowly sink deeper into his mind game? I shivered, and it wasn't just because of the trickle of wind getting under the bridge.

I looked back down at the gum package. I put the plastic containing the gum into my cigarette pocket and tilted the cardboard box this way and that. *Think pink*. Yes, there was writing inside the package. Looking closer, I could see where she had reglued the package together. It was strong stuff too. I had tug and rip carefully in order to keep the message safe. It turned out to be a bit of a poem:

*The place where a fish jumped,
A girl screamed,
Our water was warm,
We shared what we dreamed.*

This memory wasn't too hard to figure out. Last summer, we had walked down the brook and found a little clearing beside the water. I had brought food for our so-called picnic, except the meal didn't go exactly as planned: my lunch pail had been stuck, and when we forced it open, fish sticks exploded everywhere and she screamed. The water bottles had been in the pail long enough to heat up; the only real food we had were some granola bars. Then we sat there and watched the water and discussed each others dreams and what kind of silly Freudian things they could have meant.

The challenge with this clue, however, was finding the clearing again. A year had gone by, and it was night. My thoughts about the psychopath returned... the woods at night were an ideal place to make a kid disappear. Eh, curiosity killed the cat, but the satisfaction brought him back. I started walking south down the riverbank, letting the flashlight lead the way.

The night was a nice one, actually. The stars seemed clearer out in the forest, and the wind had ceased. I knew the clearing was a little ways down yet, so I just watched the solar nightshow. It was perfect in its stillness: not a single coloured dot traced its way across the dome, not a single cloud blocked the view. I was comfortably warm, and the rat was being oddly quiet. Eventually I passed a group of boulders which served as a

vague landmark, so I started paying attention to the brook. The clearing was on the other side, so I'd have to hope the stepping stones were still around.

I found the clearing easier than I thought I would. There was an old giant oak tree that had tilted half over the brook right after the place. I had forgotten about it until I saw its branches hanging over the water like strange frozen lightning bolts. Fresh summer memories flooded back into me as I looked at the tree. There was something about how its roots were exposed and gaping that demanded some kind of tribal respect. I felt like I was standing at place where something very ritualistic had occurred. The feeling was eerie and brief, but I won't ever forget it. I made a mental note to draw a picture sometime.

The force of the brook hadn't yet dislodged the stepping stones; they were exactly where they'd been when I held her hand so she could get across without incident. I came upon the clearing to discover her most elaborate set up thus far. If I had been impressed with her before, this was nothing short of jaw dropping. The flashlight's beam revealed a chest with a thick steel lock on it. Beside it, a small wooden crate. Above the crate there were two poles rigged up with a string run between them, so it looked like a mini clothesline type thing. Hanging from the string with clothespins were four playing cards. The cards had holes punched in their bottoms, through which a key chain loop was inserted. On the keychain loop were none other than keys. But it wasn't that simple. Each key was submerged in a small vial. These vials were atop the crate. I got closer, shaking my head slowly. This looked like some set up for 'Survivor Eight-Six, trapped in the Suburban Forest'. I could see that each vial was filled with a clear liquid, and that they have been sealed over with tinfoil. The keys had been put in first, with the foil fitted around the head of the key. And there was a pink post it note with a piece of paper stapled on it. The post it said:

You drew a two. I never laughed so hard.

The paper was an information slip. It read:

UltraBond Super Paste! Stays in liquid form as long kept in bottle and exposure to air is minimized. Dries to an UNBREAKABLE bond in only seconds after application! Keep out of reach of small children. Do not ingest or apply to skin.

I looked back to the rig. It was so clever. Clearly only one of the keys would open the lock. If I picked the wrong one and tried it, the glue would gum up the lock and I'd be screwed. If I hesitated after I chose a key, the glue would dry and screw up the teeth on the key. No chance to try and take out all the keys and wipe them off or something. I recognized the brand name on the lock itself... it wasn't cheap. The tumblers would be very picky. Damn, was she ever good.

And I knew what the clue was talking about.

It was recently, actually. A few months ago, upstairs in her room, playing Crazy Eights. You know, the one where putting down a two causes the other person to pick up two cards. And another two on top of that is four, and on and on. Well, anyone who's played Crazy Eights long enough has had it happen back and forth all the way up to eight. It happened to us, but for reason it was terribly funny. I guess you had to be there. I don't know, it must have been the way she warned me that I dare NOT draw the last two and make her pick up eight. The way I acted all disappointed as I picked up my sixth card and then loudly slammed the two onto the pile, scattering cards. It's impossible to describe the way it was so funny. Everyone has had that kind of moment. That was ours. One of our many, one of our true first.

But which suit did I draw? Indeed, the four cards with their odd attachments were all the twos from your standard deck. Loving hearts, fearsome spades, enticing diamonds and industrious spades. Which one did I draw? Why was she testing that aspect of my memory? There had to be some significance. It was a black card. I knew that much. She had hit me with the red ones. I focussed on the moment. I saw my hand pluck out the two (I had drawn it on the second card) out and slam it down on the pile. On top of her two of diamonds, my previous black card hidden under it.

I couldn't do it. There are times when you just know you're not going to get it. I could be there two minutes or two decades. Didn't matter. The suit was lost forever. This sucked. I had come all this way just to be possibly disappointed by a damned coin toss. And not only would I be disappointed, but so would she. No psychopath would make it too hard to follow (unless he was just waiting for me to feel like crap before he leap out of the bushes and hacked me into pieces).

It was getting colder and I made the decision quickly. Without thinking much, I tore the key from the two of spades, pulled it out of the goop and before the glue could start to set, slammed it into the lock and turned.

The lock popped easily and simply, as if I had just willed it to happen by not thinking about it. I was expecting a feeling of overwhelming joy or relief to flood me, but I was surprisingly placid. It just... happened, and my mind seemed to have skipped the part where it mattered. Whether or not it hit me later was not a question I was going to entertain. I lifted the chest open and looked inside and that was that. A post it note (pink) attached to a little box with a button and antenna on it. The note said: **turn around 'n' press.**

Obligingly, I took the box in one hand and turned around. I pressed the button, and somewhere in the woods on the other side of the brook a bright spotlight came on. I let go of the button and it died. Easy breezy.

I made it across the brook again, leaving behind her amazing gluey-keys set up and held down the button. The spotlight had been attached to an ordinary pine, and I reached it without disturbing anything but the plant life. At the base of the tree, there was a small lockbox with a combination lock guarding its contents. I looked for a post it note,

but instead found the same kind of ribbon that started everything off only an hour or so ago. There was, of course, writing:

Use the logic. Or it will all go up in smoke.

I sat down on a rock and let go of the spotlight button. My mind was tired from all this thinking. It felt like a day had passed since I was running up Starcade, dreaming of sweet kisses as a movie droned on. A cigarette, right now, would hit the damned spot. It would help me think. I put the little spotlight gadget face down and found a rock to depress it, so I had some steady light. I pulled the gum out my pocket first and tossed the package down. I discovered my half cigarette had disintegrated during its time in my pocket. Not a single soldier had survived. Not one. I flicked away the filter and fished out the homemade one I found the box under the bridge. Like the jacket and hat, she must've known I'd need some nicotine fuel. How thoughtful!

I thought about the latest puzzle piece as I tried to coax my spent lighter to life. It seemed completely random, like the clue in the box at the bridge. What did that one say? *Gum AND a smoke?* Yeah, with a question mark.

My lighter lit miraculously. I touched it to the tip of the cigarette.

What else? Something about... about...

LOGIC.

So these clues were related.

The nicotine touched my brain for the first time that night and I felt like some sort of bulldozer had begun to sweep away a neural pileup on my thought process highway. The rat was finally getting what it wanted, after all its exhausting efforts. I thought more about the clue. The box at the river had said something about logic. In fact, it was just '*Logic?*' if I remembered correctly. And the word 'AND' was capitalized. There was a flickering, guttering flame of recognition going on somewhere upstairs, and I tried to soothe and nurture it.

I took another delicious puff and felt more pathways opening. It felt damn good. The guttering was getting stronger. It was sort of pulsing now. A tip on the tongue feeling but without the frustration. It would all come in due time.

The pulse was now a pressure. I was seeing something. A math class. The word AND on the chalkboard, the word Logic above it. It was coming. I took another drag. The bulldozer went on its merry way. Growing pressure. Haha! It was almost there. AND... NOT ... OR... OR... *gum OR a smoke...* a choice a—

A choice.

I watched the smoke filtering up through steadfast beams of the spotlight. The wisps and curls unfurled in that completely random way that smoke does... a sort of playful and confused rising swirl. It was rising, rising up, going *up in smoke*. The pressure snapped and the answer came like a wall of water from a failed dam. It washed all over the poor bulldozer in my mind. It broke over the rat and carried him away. I

hoped it wasn't too late as I rapidly but carefully killed the fire on the cigarette against the rock. My heart was pounding before... this time it was fighting to get out of my chest. There was still a good three quarters of the smoke left. I slit the paper with my fingernail and popped it open. The tobacco fell out and I stared at her most elaborate trick. Four numbers written in faint pink on the inside of the paper, where it was doubled over and originally sealed: **8312**.

"A choice. God damn."

The box clicked open with the numbers rolled into their respective spots and I retrieved a compass. Along its edge there was a pink mark. I knew what to do. I gathered up the gum package and the thing that turned on the spotlight and pocketed them. Almost as an afterthought, I freed the pink piece of gum from its plastic prison and popped it in my mouth. I stood at the base of the tree and with the help of the flashlight, rotated my person until the red needle was aligned with the pink blot. Looking straight ahead, I plunged into the brush. This part of the woods wasn't too overgrown; soon I found what could have maybe been a path. We'll say a wannabe path. After about two minutes (and some realigning of the compass) I saw a pink ribbon tied to a tree branch. And beyond it, another. And possibly a third, off and to the right.

I drew closer. Yes, it was a trail. No need for the compass.

There were fourteen in all. As I passed the second to last one, I could see lights struggling to penetrate the tangle of nature. Upon making my way past the last one, I could see a house.

It was off white.

It was a backyard I had seen so many times, but never from this angle.

I came out of the woods slowly, and she looked up from her book. If I hadn't spit out the gum a while back, I would have choked. She was angelic on her brush green hammock. A picture right out of some timeless novel. No pencil I would ever hold could duplicate it. Behind those lovely grey eyes lived an incredible, incredible mind.

My legs acted upon their own accord and transported me closer to her. She rose and got up.

"Glad you made it, Brett." A smile that could devastate a nation.

"You're..."

"Hmmm?" A raised eyebrow that erased resolution and broke secrets.

"You're beautiful."

A hug that shamed any jacket or hat ever made.

I stammered, not knowing how or what to say to someone who just put me through what I had. Something spilled out, as random as a bingo ball as just as dizzy: "Those keys, they, I didn't know, I couldn't remember... I, they—"

"Brett?"

"Tam?"

"All those keys were the same."

There's a theory that when you die, your brain shuts down in such a way that you perceive things strangely. Such would account for those 'life flashing before your eyes' and 'light at the end of the tunnel' stories. The theory goes on to say that your perception of time stretches out and becomes infinite. Since you're dying, everything banks away and slides towards some impossible and divine asymptote. That's what Heaven is, or Hell: your perception's final and endless show.

Well, that's impossible to prove. But when she kissed me after speaking those words, I came pretty damn close. I wouldn't have been able to remember my own name. It was a moment that was lost entirely to my senses. Lost, and never-ending. I didn't even know what time it was when we stopped.

"Mmmm, watermelon," she noted, and everything slid back into place.

"Tam, I think I love you."

"I know I love *you*, Brett. But only when you walked out of that forest."

"I... I... how did you do, how..."

"Let me tell you about it! C'mon."

She led my tired and overjoyed body back to the house. I had expected a date, an evening together. I suppose she had been with me the whole time... *maybe we will see each other tonight, even if I can't be there.*

I unexpectedly remembered that I had a poem in my jeans pocket for her. The first thing I randomly noticed as I stepped inside, shaking my head slightly, was an object in the corner.

A rat trap.