

THE MOST GIRL PART OF YOU

Jack “Big Guy” Fitch is trying to crack his teeth. He swishes a mouthful of ice water, then straightaway throws back slugs of hot coffee.

“Like in Antarctica,” he says, where, if you believe what Big Guy tells you, the people are forever cracking their teeth when they come in from the cold and gulp their coffee down.

I believe what Big Guy tells you. I’m his partner in crime, so I’m chewing on the shaved ice, too. I mean, someone that good-looking tells you what to do, you pretty much do what he says.

Big Guy (he is so damn big!) can make you do anything. He made us become blood brothers—brothers, even though I am a girl—back when we were clumsy little dopes playing with jacks. He got a sewing needle and was going to stick our fingers, until I chickened out. I pointed to the sore on his elbow and the abrasions on my knee, and, in fact, what we became was scab brothers.

But this business with the teeth—I say Big Guy is asking for it. He hasn’t done something like this since the seventh grade when he ate a cigarette for a dollar. Now when he brushes his teeth at night, he says he treats the gums like the

cuticle of a nail. He says he pushes them back with the hard bristles of the brush, laying the enamel clear.

This is a new Big Guy, a bafflement to us all. The old one trimmed the perforated margins from sheets of stamps. He kept a chart posted beside his bed that showed how his water intake varied from day to day. The old Big Guy ate sandwiches with a knife and fork. He wore short-sleeved shirts!

That was before his mother died. She died eight days ago. She did it herself. Big Guy showed me the rope burns in the beam of the ceiling. He said, "Any place I hang myself is home." In the movie version, that is where his father would have slapped him.

But of course his father did not—didn't slap him, didn't even hear him. Although Big Guy's father has probably heard what Big Guy says about the Cubs. It's the funniest thing he can imagine; it's what he doesn't have to imagine, because his father really said it when he had to tell his son what the boy's mother had done.

"And what's more—" his father had said.

It may have been the sheer momentum of bad news, because in the vast thrilling silence after Big Guy heard the news, his father had added, "And what's more, the Cubs lost."

"So you see," Big Guy says these days about matters large and small, "it's not as if the Cubs lost."

Any minute now he could say it again—here, between the swishing and gulping, in the round red booth of the airport coffee shop, with his tired, traveling grandparents sitting across the table. They flew in for the services, and they are flying home today. Big Guy drove so fast that now we have time to kill. He thinks the posted speed limit is what you can't go *below*. He has just earned a learner's permit, so he drives every

chance he gets. I have six months on Big Guy; this makes me the adult in the eyes of the DMV.

The grandfather orders breakfast from the plastic menu. He says he will have "the ranch-fresh eggs, crisp bacon, and fresh-squeezed orange juice." Big Guy finds this excruciating. More so when his grandmother reads from the menu aloud.

"What about the golden French toast with maple syrup?" she says. "Jack, honey, how about the Belgian waffle?"

Before his grandmother can say "flapjacks" instead of "pancakes," Big Guy signals the waitress and points to what he wants on the menu.

The rest of us order. Then the grandfather addresses his grandson. "So," he says. He says, "So, what do you say?"

"What?" says Big Guy. "Oh. I don't know. I don't know what I say."

The past few days have seen us in many a bistro. It hasn't been easy for Big Guy. His grandfather is always trying to take waitresses into his confidence, believing they will tell him the truth about what is good that day. Big Guy finds this excruciating. He says, "Gramps, have some dignity—snub them."

But his grandfather goes on, asking, with equal gravity, for more coffee and what Big Guy plans to do after high school.

Big Guy heads for a glass of water. *Ice* water. Then his hand moves in slow motion (this for my benefit) toward the refilled cup of coffee.

"Like in Egypt," he says, an aside, a reference to my telling him how Egyptians used to split stone—how they tunneled under a boulder and chipped a narrow fissure in the underside of the rock. How they lit a fire there, let it slow-burn for several days. How, when they poured cold water on top of the rock, the thing cracked clean as lightning.

We will have to eat quickly if the grandparents are going

to make their flight. While we wait for the return of the grandfather's new best friend, he teases his grandson about something that happened yesterday, something that Big Guy found excruciating. The grandfather says, "Come on, Jack, what's wrong with talking in elevators?"

For that matter, *I* could say it. I could catch my friend's eye, and *I* could be the one to say, "He's right. Look here, it's not as if the Cubs lost."

Big Guy is the person I tell everything to. In exchange for my confessions, Big Guy tells me secrets which I can't say what they are or else they wouldn't be our secrets.

Sewing is one of the secrets between us. Only Big Guy knows how considerably I had to cheat to earn the Girl Scout merit badge in sewing. It's a fact that my seamstress badge is glued to the green cotton sash.

So it had to be a joke when Big Guy asked me to teach him to sew. I cannot baste a facing or tailor-tack a dart, but I can thread the goddamn needle and achieve a fairly even running stitch. It was the running stitch I taught Big Guy; he picked it up faster than I ever did. He practiced on a square of stiff blue denim, and by "practiced" I mean that Big Guy did it once.

That was a week ago today, or, to put it another way, it was the day after Mrs. Fitch did it. Now I am witness to her son's seamanship, to the use that he has put his skill to.

He met me at the door to his room with one hand held behind his back. I had to close my eyes to create suspense before he brought his hand forward. I opened my eyes, and that's when my stomach grabbed.

Where I think he has sewn two fingers together, I see that

it is both worse than that and not as bad. On the outer edge of his thumb, stitched into the very skin, my name is spelled out in small block print. It is spelled out in tight blue thread. My name is sewn into the skin of his hand!

Big Guy shows me that he still holds the threaded needle. In my presence, he completes the final stitch, guiding the needle slowly. I watch the blue thread that trails like a vein and turns milky as it tunnels through the bloodless calloused skin.

I can't sew, but my mother you would swear had majored in Home Ec. She favors a shirtwaist dress for at-home, and she calls clothes "garments." She makes desserts with names like Apple Brown Betty, and when she serves them, usually with a whipped topping product, she says, "M.I.K.," which abbreviation means, "More in Kitchen."

Big Guy is in thrall to her, to her tuna fish sandwiches on soft white bread, to her pink lemonade from frozen concentrate cans. He likes to horrify my mother by telling her what he would otherwise be eating: salt sandwiches, for example, or Fizzies and Space Food Sticks.

Big Guy is a welcome guest. At my house, he is the man of the house—the phrase my mother uses. My father's been dead for most of my life. We are more of a family at these lunches and dinners where, once again, the man of the house is at the head of the table.

Big Guy cooks corn by placing the opened can on the burner. For breakfast, he tells my mother, he pours milk into the cardboard boxes of Kellogg's miniature assortment. Since his mother died I have seen him steam a cucumber, thinking it was zucchini. That's the kind of thing that turns my heart right over.

One thing he *can* make is a melted cheese sandwich, open-faced and melted under the broiler. It's what he brought to his mother for lunch when she was sick. He brought her two months' worth of melted cheese.

Big Guy says he brought her one that day.

"The last thing I said to her," Big Guy remembers, "was, 'Mom, guess what kids at school have?' I told her, 'Sunglasses,' and she said, 'Save your money.'"

Big Guy wanted to know, What about me?

"You were there," I remind him. "Remember about her hair?"

The last thing I had said to Mrs. Fitch was that I liked her hair. Big Guy had accused me of trying to get in good, but it was true—I did like her hair.

Later—it's a long story how—Big Guy got a copy of the coroner's report. The coroner described Mrs. Fitch's auburn hair as being "worn in a female fashion."

I'm doing my homework in bed, drinking ginger ale, feeling a little woozy. I'm taking a look at a book on French grammar because is there anything cooler than talking in a foreign language? ("*Dites-moi*," Big Guy says to me whenever I have a problem.)

I turn the page and see that Big Guy has been there first. In addition to reading my mail, he writes in the margins of my books, usually the number of shopping days left until his birthday.

Here in the French grammar, there is no telling why, Big Guy has written, "Dots is spots up close. Spots is dots far away."

I read this, and then there he is in my room. Big Guy can

do that—walk into my bedroom when I am in the bed. Years ago, at school, the girls were forced to watch a film called *The Most Girl Part of You*. I had gone home and told my mother that Jack and I weren't doing anything. My mother, who hadn't asked if we *were*, had said, "More's the pity."

In other words, it is all my mother can do to keep from dimming the lights for us.

The truth is—it does something to me, seeing him in my bedroom.

Big Guy does the female thing in a mood—goes shopping, or changes the part in his hair. So when I see his hair is puffed and no doubt painful at the roots for being brushed in another direction, I am tipped off.

I don't have to ask.

"No need to go to Antarctica," he says, and smiles a phony smile so I can see where his front tooth has been broken off on the diagonal.

"From *ice* water?" I say.

Big Guy says his bike collided with a garbage truck. "Actually," he says, "it wasn't an accident.

"And speaking of Antarctica," he says, to change the subject, "did you know that no matter how hungry an Eskimo gets, he will never eat a penguin?"

"Why is that?"

Big Guy, triumphant: "Because Eskimos live at the North Pole, and penguins live at the *South* Pole!"

And then he is gone, gone downstairs to eat more funny food, to fix himself a glass of Fizzies, or, if they have stopped *making* Fizzies, powdered dry Kool-Aid on a wet licked finger.

I see his schoolbooks where he left them on my dresser; I see my chance.

I skip the texts and make for his spiral notebook, there to

leave searing commentary in the margins. I find handwriting which only after a moment becomes the words that I am reading.

Big Guy has written: "If we had trimmed the cat's claws before she snagged the bedspread? If we'd had French toast for breakfast instead of eggs? If we had gone to the movies instead of Dad being tired?"

The bottom half of the page is filled with inky abstract drawings. On the next page he continues: "Am I thinking the wrong things? Should I wonder, instead, what took you so long?"

I reason that if he left it here, he wanted me to see it.

Big Guy takes me to a party the same day he goes to the dentist. There are refreshments for an hour, then the lights go out in the basement and the records start to play.

Big Guy says, "May I challenge you to a dance?"

I move into his arms—it is the first time we have danced—and the hand that is at the small of my back catches as it slides across the silk of my good new dress. I don't have to look to know what it is. It's the dry, jagged skin from where he pulled my threaded name out of the place where he had sewn it.

Big Guy leads me to the side of the room where a black light turns our white clothes purple. The black light does something else, I notice. When Big Guy talks, it turns the capped tooth dingy gray. Another girl notices; she says that is why you never see a black light used in Hollywood.

"Get it?" she says.

This is the birth of vanity for my date. Big Guy says it's time to go, and if I want to go with him, I can. Of course I

do—it's so cheap to leave with someone who is not the person you came with!

To show that I can give it as well as I can take it, I say, "Big Guy, come on, it's not as if the Cubs lost."

He says, "Cut me some slack," and we get into Mr. Fitch's car. I tune in the Oldies station and mouth a Motown hit, the words of which clash ridiculously with Big Guy's and my frame of reference. When I stop knowing enough of the words, I hum along with the radio.

"We hum," Big Guy informs, "because people are evolved from insects. Humming, buzzing—you see what I mean?"

This is something he probably heard the same place he learned about the cracking teeth of Antarctica.

Big Guy drives me home. Nobody is there, not that it would matter if anybody was. I sit on the couch in the family room, in the dark. Big Guy finds the Oldies station on my mother's antique Zenith. The music comes in faintly; you would have to strain to hear the words if, unlike myself, you did not know the words already.

Then it's both of us sitting in the humid dark, Big Guy buzzing along with the radio, me scratching the mosquito bites I always get. A few minutes of this and Big Guy is off to the bathroom. He comes back with a small pink bottle. He sings, "You're gonna need an ocean / of calamine lotion" as he dabs it on the hot white bites.

I tell him he ought to chill it first, so he takes the bottle into the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, and calls me in to look.

He shows me where a moth has been drawn by the single light. Its wings beat madly in the cold air; they drag across the uncovered butter, dust the chocolate pudding, graze the lipstick smear on the open end of a milk carton.

We try to get the thing out, but it flaps behind a jar of wheat germ, and from there into the vegetable Humidrawer. At that point, Big Guy shuts the door.

"I've got another idea," he says. "Wait for me on the couch."

He comes back with a razor blade. He says, "This will take the itch out." He drags the blade twice across a bite on the back of my wrist; the tiny X turns red as blood comes up to the cut surface.

I am too amazed to say anything, so Big Guy continues, razoring Xs into bites on my legs and arms.

Now, I think—*now* we could become blood brothers.

But that is not what Big Guy is thinking, and finally I come to know it. I submit to his crude doctoring until he cuts an X into a bite on my shoulder. Suddenly he lowers his head until it isn't the blade but his mouth on my skin.

I had only been kissed once before. The fellow had made me think of those kids whose mouths cover the spigot when they drink from a fountain. When I had pulled away from him, this fellow had said, "B-plus."

Big Guy is going to kiss me.

And here is the thrill of my short life: He does.

And I see that not touching for so long was a drive to the beach with the windows rolled up so the waves feel that much colder.

When I can get my bearings, I make light of what could happen. I say the cool thing I've been saving up to say; I say, "Stop it, Big Guy. Stop it some more."

And then he says the cool thing *he* has been saving, or, being Big Guy, has made up on the spot. He says, "I always give a woman what she wants—whether she wants it or not."

And that is the end of the joking around; we get it out of

our systems. We take the length of the couch, squirming like maggots in ashes.

I'm not ready for this, but here is what I come up with: He's a boy without a mother.

I look beyond my own hesitation; I find my mother, Big Guy's father. We are on this couch for our newly and lastingly widowed parents as well.

Big Guy and I are still dressed. I am bleeding through my clothes from the razored bites when Big Guy pushes his knee up between my legs.

"If you have to get up," he says, "don't."

I play back everything that has happened to me before this. I want to ask Big Guy if he is doing this, too. I want him to know what it clearly seems to me: that if it's true your life flashes past your eyes before you die, then it is also the truth that your life rushes forth when you are ready to start to truly be alive.