Crush

Bonnie Burnard

It's Thursday morning and it's hot, hot, hot. The girl is painting the kitchen cupboards. The paint stinks up the room, stinks up the whole house. Her summer-blonde ponytail and her young brown shoulders are hidden in the cupboards, and a stranger coming into the kitchen, seeing only the rounded buttocks in the terrycloth shorts and the long well-formed legs, might think he was looking at part of a woman.

She's tired. She babysat last night. It's not the best job she can get; there are other kids, easier kids. She takes the job because of him, for the chance to ride alone with him in the dark on the way home. She thinks she's in love.

She remembers him at the beach, throwing his kids around in the water, teaching them not to be afraid. She doesn't try to imagine anything other than what she has seen, because it's already more than enough. His back and thighs she will remember when she is seventy and has forgotten others.

Her mother stands over the ironing board just inside the dining room door. Thunk, hiss, thunk, hiss. The kitchen table separates them. It has been piled impossibly high with dishes and can...
to the sink and turns the water on full, letting it run to cold. She
opens the freezer door, uses her thumbs to free the tray of ice-
cubes. She fills a peanut butter glass with ice and slows the tap,
watching the water cover the snapping cubes. She sips slowly,
with her jaw locked, the ice bumps cold against her teeth as she
drinks. She lifts a cube from the glass and holds it in her hand,
feels it begin to soften against the heat of her palm. She raises her
hand to her forehead and rubs the ice against her skin, back into
her hair, down her cheek, down over her throat. The ice-cube is
small now, just a round lump. Her hand is cold and wet.

His hand was wet when he danced with her at the Firemen’s
dance. Not the same wet though, not the same at all. His buddies
stood around and hollered things about him liking the young
stuff and everyone laughed, even the wives. She laughed too,
pretending she understood how funny it was, his touching her.
But she can still feel the pressure of his hand on her back, any
time she wants to she can remember how it steadied her, how it
moved her the way he wanted her to move. It should have been
hard to move together, but it was easy, like dreaming.

She wonders how close he is to their house. She dries her hand
on the tea towel hanging from the stove door. She undoes the top
button of her blouse, then the next, and the next, and the next. It
slips from her shoulders and lands in a heap on the floor. She
unfastens her bra, eased it down over her brown arms, drops it.

She climbs back up on the chair and begins to paint again.
Although the paint is thick and strong, she can’t smell it any
more. She works slowly, deliberately, the chair solid under her
feet. The stale green paint disappears beneath the blue.

She turns at his sudden, humming entrance, the bang of the
screen door no warning at all. He stands on the mat with the tray
of fresh baking slung round his neck, shifting his weight from
one foot to the other, suddenly quiet. She comes down from the
chair, steps over the heap of her clothes and stands in front of
him, as still as the surface of a hot summer lake.

“Jesus,” he says.

“I wanted to show you,” she says.

He backs out the door quickly, doesn’t leave Thursday’s two
loaves of white and one whole wheat.

The girl can hear her mother’s voice through the open back
door. It sounds uneasy and unnaturally loud. She bends down
and picks up her bra, although she knows there won’t be time.
She knows, too, that she will be punished, and in some new way.

He’s in the truck and he’s wishing he had farther to go than
the next block. Lord, he thinks. What the hell was that?

He checks his rearview mirror. Her mother could come roar-
ing out after him any minute. She could be forgiven for think-
ing there was something going on. He’s a sitting duck in this
damned truck. Just deliver your bread, he thinks. And then, Shit.
A drive. He’ll go for a drive. To clear his head.

He goes out past the gas station, past the beer store, out of the
town onto a side road bordered by fence-high corn. He drives a
few miles with the window down, letting the hot breeze pull the
sweat from his face and arms. He eases the truck over to the
shoulder.

He knows his only hope is that she tells her mother the truth.
Which could be unlikely. Shit. If her mother decides he was in
on it, there’ll be phone calls, there’ll be hell to pay. His wife
won’t believe it. He doesn’t believe it and he was there. Maybe
the smart thing to do is just lie low and hope, pray, that her
mother is embarrassed enough to keep her mouth shut. If it’s
going to come up, it’ll come up soon and he’ll just have to say it
was a surprise, a real big surprise, and they can give him a lie
detector on it if they want.

The girl has never given him even one small clue that she was
thinking in those terms. And he can certainly see a clue coming. When he picks her up and drives her home, she always hides herself behind a pile of schoolbooks hunched up tight against her sweater. She's a good sitter, the kids love her. He likes talking to her and he always makes a point of being nice to her. And she helped him teach the kids to swim because his wife wouldn't, and he didn't even look at her, can't even picture her in a bathing suit.

So damned hot. He leans back in the seat, unbuttons his shirt and lights a Player's. The sight of her drifts back through the smoke that hangs around him. It's been a long time since he's seen fresh, smooth, hard breasts. Not centrefold stuff, not even as nice as his wife before the kids, but nice just the same. Yeah. Nice. He shifts around in his seat. Damn.

It's like she just discovered them. Or maybe she got tired of being the only one who knew. Now he knows and what the hell's he supposed to do about it? Man, this is too complicated for a Thursday morning.

The picture drifts back again and this time he holds it for a while. He's sure they've never been touched. He thinks about dancing with her that once and how easy she was in his arms. Not sexy, just easy. Like she trusted him. He can't remember ever feeling that before. They sure didn't trust him when he was seventeen, had no business trusting him. And what he gets from his wife isn't trust, not exactly.

She could be crazy. She's the age to be crazy. But he remembers her eyes on him and whatever it was they were saying, it has sweet all to do with crazy.

Back the picture comes again, and he closes his eyes and the breasts stay with him, safe behind the lids of his eyes. He can see her narrow waist, and squared shoulders. He hears words, just a few, although he doesn't know what they are, and he feels a gentleness come into his hands, he feels his cupped hands lift toward her skin and then he hears a racket near his feet and he opens his eyes to see a wretched crow on the open floor of the truck beside the bread tray; it's already clawed its way through the waxed paper, it's already buried its beak. He kicks hard and waves his arms and yells the bird away and he throws the truck in gear and tells himself out loud, "You're crazy, man, that's who's crazy."

The mother stands watching the girl do up the top button of her blouse. She holds the package of meat in one hand, the bottle of pop in the other. The pale brown paper around the meat is dark and soft where blood has seeped through. She walks over to the fridge, puts the meat in the meat keeper and the pop beside the quarts of milk on the top shelf. She closes the fridge door with the same care she would use on the bedroom door of a sleeping child. When she turns the girl has climbed up on the chair in front of the cupboards and is lifting the brush.

"Get down from that chair," she says.

The girl rests the brush across the top of the paint can and steps down.

"I could slap you," the mother says, calmly. This is not a conversation she has prepared herself for. This is not a conversation she ever expected to have. She cannot stop herself from looking at the girl's young body, cannot stop the memory of her own body and the sudden remorse she feels knowing it will never come back to her. She longs to feel the sting of a slap on her hand and to imagine the sting on the girl's cheek. But she pushes the anger aside, out of the way. She pulls a chair from the table, away from the mess of cupboard things piled there, and sits down in the middle of the room, unprotected.

"Sit down," she says.

The girl sits where she is, on the floor, her brown legs tucked under her bum as they were tucked through all the years of listening to fairy tales. The mother can smell her fear.
“How much did you take off?”

The girl does not answer. She looks directly into her mother’s eyes and she does not answer.

The mother begins the only way she knows how.

“I had a crush on your father. That’s how it started with us, because I had a crush on him. He was only a little older than me but I think it’s the same. I don’t know why it should happen with you so young, but I’m sure it’s the same. The difference is I didn’t take my clothes off for him. And he wasn’t married. Do you understand? It’s wrong to feel that way about someone if he’s married and it’s wrong to take your clothes off.” She remembers other talks, remembers pulling the girl into her arms and carrying her up to bed.

The girl picks at a crusty scab on her ankle.

“The way you feel has got nothing to do with the way things are. You’ve embarrassed him. I could tell at the gate that he was embarrassed. You won’t be babysitting for them any more. He’ll tell his wife and they’ll have a good laugh about it. You’ve made a fool of yourself.” Oh, she thinks, don’t say that.

“You will feel this way from now on. Off and on from now on. You have to learn to live with it. I wish it hadn’t happened so soon. Now you just have to live with it longer. Do you understand?”

The girl shrugs her shoulders, lifts the scab from her skin.

“Women have this feeling so they will marry, so they will have children. It’s like a grand plan. And you’ve got to learn to live within that plan. There will be a young man for you, it won’t be long. Maybe five years. That’s all. You’ve got to learn to control this feeling, this feeling, until that young man is there for you.”

The mother gets up from the chair and goes to the fridge. She takes out the pop and opens it, dividing it between two clean glasses which she takes from a tray on top of the fridge. She hands one to the girl, insisting.

“If you don’t control it, you will waste it, bit by bit, and there won’t be a young man, not to marry. And they’ll take it from you, any of them, because they can’t stop themselves from taking it. It’s your responsibility not to offer it. You just have to wait, wait for the one young man and you be careful who he is, you think about it good and hard and then you marry him and then you offer it.”

The girl gets up from the floor and puts her glass, still almost full, on the counter by the sink.

“I’d like to go now,” she says.

The mother drains her glass. She feels barren. She is not a mother any more, not in the same way. It is as if the girl’s undressing has wiped them both off the face of the earth.

The girl has run away from the house, out past the gas station and the beer store, onto a grid road that divides the cornfields. She is sitting in a ditch, hidden, surrounded by long grass and thistles.

She knows she’s ruined it, knows the babysitting days are over. Not because he was embarrassed. He wasn’t embarrassed, he was afraid. It’s the first time she’s ever made anyone afraid. She will find a way to tell him that she didn’t mean to scare him.

She wishes her mother had just slapped her. She hears again the feelings her mother had about her father in some other time, some other century. She covers her ears. She hated having to hear it, it was awful, and that stuff about holding back and then getting married some day, she knows all about that. That’s what all the women do, and it’s likely what she’ll end up doing because there doesn’t seem to be any way to do anything else.

Except maybe once in a while. If she can learn not to scare people.

She feels absolutely alone and she likes it. She thinks about
his back and his dark thighs and about standing there in the kitchen facing him. It's the best feeling she's ever had. She won't give it up.

She crosses her arms in front of her, puts one hand over each small breast and she knows she isn't wrong about this feeling. It is something she will trust, from now on. She leans back into the grass, throws her arms up over her head and stares, for as long as she can, at the hot July sun.

Bonnie Burnard

Sandra Birdsall

The Midnight Hour

Christina prefers the direct approach. She would like to go into her mother's room, drop a book on the floor to wake her and say, For your information: I'm going suntanning in Assiniboine Park with Pam and Lisa. Not ask, just tell. But she knows what complications can arise from being face to face, and so she'll leave a note instead. Dear Unit. Have gone to the park to suntan with Pam and Lisa, she writes. She began calling her parents "my parental unit" when recently it became certain they were going to split up. They never caught the irony in it, never really listened to how she said it. Going to the park, Lorraine would say, you mean hang around, don't you? And so Christina picks up the felt marker and adds, and to hang around.

She flips a cassette into her Walkman, puts the earphones on, and sticks the note under a butterfly magnet on the refrigerator door just as Yo-Yo Ma begins bowing his cello. Lorraine is suspicious of Pam and Lisa. "They don't look me in the eye," she says. What do their parents do? Christina doesn't know because Grant Park isn't like junior high where everyone complains constantly about parents' bitching and curfews. At Grant Park