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PROVOST'S PRIZE WINNER
ALL A PERSON REALLY NEEDS

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SHORT STORY

I am fourteen, scrawny, standing lookout for Garrett while he peels the bumper sticker off my neighbor's minivan. He is crouched, shirtless, his gold cross medallion slung over his back to keep out of his way. He throws down a hand to steady his balance and the sun glints off the tiny cruciform like it's winking at me, as a wedding ring might on the hand of an adulterer. The sticker tears into a tiger swipe of residue streaks, and Garrett uses his nail to scrape up a finger hold.

"Come on, man, just leave it. We're gonna get busted."

"Busted," he mocks. "I don't give a fuck."

I feel uneasy so I trot next door before he finishes. A minute later Garrett struts into my garage, throwing the crumple of sticker in the trash can. "Where it belongs," he says, "hopefully they'll get the message."

These neighbors just moved in last weekend.

I don't say anything, not the slightest acknowledgement. It's easier that way. Besides, in three months he's promised to get me a job working for one of his father's companies. Eight bucks an hour, nearly double minimum wage. Once the moment has passed I say, "So I'm gonna need that ten for the essay due next week."

"I won't have any cash 'til Monday. I'll drop it by then," he replies, nonchalantly, knowing he's in violation of our deal: half upfront and half when the assignment is

complete. I don't enjoy doing his work—it began when we had science class together in seventh grade. We were paired as lab partners and he struggled with cell biology. I tried to teach him but he kept getting distracted, changing the subject or making fun of someone, usually me. Eventually he slipped me a five to finish his lab report, which in turn led to other deals, mostly papers for history and language arts. Later he told me his father had threatened him with military school if his grades didn't improve. Now our symbiosis has carried into freshman year of high school.

He does another set of curls, kissing his bicep, throwing around my cement weights like toys whenever he stops by—we don't talk business at school—then stretches on his shirt and straddles his bike, saying, "Don't forget: B-minus this time. That A-plus about got us both busted." I nod as I get on my bike. I try to ride his tail but his bright yellow Cannondale quickly pulls away. Not that it matters—he's heading to his mansion for a home-cooked meal and I'm going to the store to steal chicken fingers and macaroni. It's the end of the month and the fridge is empty again; things haven't been easy since Mom's hours got cut, and anyone who says we can live on food stamps has never had to. He turns a corner far ahead and I trudge alone on my old Huffy, which I have aptly named Rusty. The chain gets jammed between gears but I have just enough momentum to coast to the grocery.

Garrett lives in the new country club

across the main highway. The one with the guard station at the entrance, and the stone wall that reads: Pruett Plantation – named after Garrett’s father, Percy Pruett, who developed the subdivision. I know this because Garrett told me, more than once. And because sometimes I heave my bike over the fence of Pruett Plantation and ride around looking at the mansions, and one night Garrett was outside so he waved me in because he had an assignment for me. He flaunted his talent at billiards in his enormous basement, then showed me his father’s arsenal—locked, cocked, and ready to rock. Then his mother called him up for dinner. She didn’t know they had a guest, she’d said, or she would have cooked enough lasagna. Their kitchen smelled like heaven as I left. I watched through the bay window from outside as they bowed their heads around a table billowing steam, my stomach howling for the rich fragrance still thick on my tongue.

I prop Rusty against the building, enter the store, and head straight for the milk. Carrying it makes me look innocent. I find the macaroni and stuff it down my pants, tucking it behind my beltline. The corner of the box digs into my nuts and I have to readjust, looking around to make sure nobody sees. Then I find the open bag of chicken fingers that I stashed under some frozen peas a few days ago. I hold the glass door open until it fogs up, giving me cover, then pull out four fingers and put two in each cargo pocket. Never take more than you need. At checkout

I only have the \$1.33 that I scrounged from my house. The milk is \$1.39, so I dig in my pockets frantically, looking all worried and childish. The cashier purses her lips and waves me through.

Outside I pedal away as fast as I can, shaking off the jitters, taking it out on Rusty. If only Garrett had given me my advance. I really don’t have the stomach for shoplifting, but I don’t much have the stomach for hunger either. My legs pump furiously, fueled by frustration; the handle bars jerk violently and the macaroni is a maraca in my pocket, the bungeed milk slushing and slogging on the cargo fender. I’ve asked everywhere in town for a job and they all say the same thing: come back when you’re fifteen. It’s illegal for me to earn money. Just three more months though. Three more months and they can keep their minimum wage. I’ll be making eight bucks an hour.

At home I find Audrey on the couch, lobotomized by television. She lifts the paperback off her chest when I walk in, stealing sheepish glances between me and the book. “Yeah, right,” I say. “What’s happening in that story?” Her eyes cross when she tries to focus on the page and I laugh, “Just come in here and help me with supper.”

It’s Friday night – Singles Service at the church and Mom never misses. A whole room full of lost Christians trying to get found in more ways than one. There’s

also a regular Wednesday Night Service and something on Tuesdays too. And Mom has a new therapy group on Saturdays. This all keeps her very busy and leaves me and Audrey alone most nights. And even when Mom is home, she does little more than study her Bible and watch televangelism. She was always religious, but became devout after Dad died. I think she believes that she'll see him again someday if she prays hard enough. I don't know about all that, but I'm glad it keeps her spirits up; things were really dark there for a while.

Audrey boils water while I warm the oven and find a pan. She's only nine but I taught her to cook the macaroni herself in case I'm not home. I put the milk in the fridge on the top shelf, empty but for Mom's diet milkshakes. There's one piece of ham left on the second shelf. A mustard packet falls from the door and I consider it for the ham, but I put it back and eat the lunchmeat straight. I'd offer half to Audrey, but all she'll eat is chicken fingers and macaroni, so we have it every night. Every single night. Unless I sell a paper; then I order pizza.

Our kitchen table is covered in advertisements and overdue bills so I clear it off. Usually we eat on the couch but lately I've insisted on proper dining. We sit, but the food isn't hot enough; there's no steam rising from it. So I microwave our plates. Once the steam is billowing in the light, we sit and bow our heads. Then we eat.

Saturday afternoon my new neighbor approaches me outside. He looks about my age, his face a scruffy patchwork of pubescent self-delusion.

"Was that you playing the guitar I heard last night?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, surprised. I play every night, but "I didn't think it carried outside."

"You got some nice licks. I play a little myself. Wanna jam sometime?" he asks.

"How 'bout right now?" I say, extending my hand. "I'm David."

"Evan," he says. "I gotta help my Dad unpack some shit. Maybe in a couple hours?"

"Yeah, hell yeah. I'll bring my guitar down and knock."

I go to my basement and play for two hours so that I'm good and warm to jam. I've only jammed a handful of times with other people so I can hardly contain myself. Exactly two hours later I knock on his door, ignoring the rectangle of residue on the bumper of his dad's minivan.

View the remainder of this prize-winning piece at www.oregonstate.edu/prismmagazine