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The little town was too small to keep anything a secret, so Pete felt sure he could locate the watering hole easily enough. For some reason he felt he should not move. He was standing by a truck in the shadow of its Army Duck-covered back end when something caught his attention next to the building across the street. Barely visible in the shadows were two people clinging to one another. The man slid his hand down the woman's side and clutched at her thigh, bringing her leg up to his hip. His palm cupped and then massaged her smooth, nylon-covered leg. Pete felt his face flush red as he saw the man push his fingers beneath her bottom. She responded, and he did not see her slap the guy but heard the flat smack. Pete waited for angry words to follow, but there were none. The woman freed herself from the guy's grasp and pulled at her dress where he had gotten it caught in her garters.

"B-John!" she whined. "You're messin' my dress, you big ass!" Pete's fear redoubled at hearing the name she had called him. The only response he gave her was a wide grin that showed lurid even in the shadows. B-John demanded a cigarette from her and then told her to get lost. After the sound of her footsteps faded, the white noise silence grew as heavy as a thousand sand bags piling with dread. Pete watched with stupid curiosity as the space near the man's mouth glowed each time he took a drag from the cigarette. His ears were shocked when the silence was cut hard by B-John's voice.

"Get your eyes full, kid?" he asked. Pete's ears burned. His heart pounded at his temples. "Come on, kid. I can't bite you from here. Just as well come out." Pete was frozen. Then the thought flashed in his mind that maybe the

guy thought he was handling himself while he was watching and his face and body burned all over again in embarrassment, but he just couldn't move. He imagined he was running away, but a look down at his feet proved otherwise. The guy had said *kid*, so could he see him?

"Ya know you're the man of the hour around here," he told Pete. Pete's throat swelled and his chest grew tight. Then to his own surprise he heard his own voice break into the night.

"How do you see that?" he asked, cringing from how it sounded—so childish, so caught!

"You're the only new guy in town, that's how I see it," B-John continued. "Right now behind every closed door in this little dump the talk is all about you. Everyone here already thinks they know everything about everyone, everyone, but you."

Pete let that subject go and heard his own voice again. "Why did that girl hit you?" it asked. *Really?* thought Pete. *Does my mouth have absolutely no connection with my brain?* Pete felt like a little boy standing in his sandbox on this side of the street staring blankly at a man's world on the other.

"I think hiding has wore out its usefulness, kid," B-John said.

What he was saying made sense, and so Pete stepped out just enough to let the light show himself; then he quickly withdrew.

"Oh, I see. Huh. You got sense enough not to want to be seen," he said. It was that "huh" from B-John that piqued Pete's curiosity. Suddenly his panic, as well as his good sense, left him. That one little slip, that short high laugh that sounded so kidlike or unmanly, began melting away all of the frightful stories he had heard about this guy called B-John.

Now Pete stepped right out from his place behind the truck. B-John did not move in the shadows but checked his watch by passing his wrist into the light twice. Pete tried to avoid being asked why he was out like this and here by asking again, but with more manly purpose in his voice, "What is her name? Is she your girl?"

The higher pitched and simple "huh" laugh began B-John's reply. "Huh! My girl? No, not mine. No one's and everyone's, if you know what I mean,

## CHAPTER 1

kid.” His voice sounded bored, and he must have obviously been waiting for someone, or else he’d leave.

Pete looked up from standing at the roadside, just stupidly brushing at the gravel with his foot, when B-John asked, “Do you know what I mean, kid?” By his tone Pete knew it was not a question, so he stayed silent.

“Her name is Darla and I could . . . huh . . . maybe you want to—say, maybe that’s why you’re hanging round here.” He tossed the end off his cigarette. “So, kid, how old are you? No—that’s against rule number one, so don’t tell me.”

Pete bit. “What’s rule number one?”

“It’s the only rule, kid,” B-John answered.

The hot feeling of embarrassment was creeping over Pete again. Not just from the over-obvious fact that he had not been with a girl yet, but from his belief that girls did not find guys like himself the least bit attractive. Pete was tall and felt his arms and legs were gangly. He thought his ears too big and that his Adam’s apple stuck out as far as his chin. Pete felt childish and stupid, especially compared to the kind of guy who was standing out of sight across from him. He knew that girls looked right through him and would run blindly into that dark alley just from the sound of B-John’s voice. It just seemed to Pete that there were two kinds of guys: awkward and fumbling kids like himself and then the other like B-John, whom he could imagine were never kids at all.

Feeling embarrassed, Pete thought about turning and walking home. B-John came out into the light, folded his arms across his chest, and leaned up against the wall of the building. He propped a foot up behind himself on the wall and said, “Rule number one is: I don’t care. Who cares how old anyone is? It certainly won’t matter to Darla as long as the pay is the same. Do ya want me to get her round here for ya?”

“Girls don’t go for kids like me, and you know it,” Pete said with a quaky voice. “You’re just having fun teasing me ’cause you’re bored.”

“Well, you’re right there, kid,” B-John replied. “I mean about the bored part. I bet in just the short time that you have been here, you’re already bored as

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shit.” Pete listened but did not know what to say. “It’s been years, hell, a lifetime for me, so, yes, I’m bored as shit with this hellhole of a dry weed patch.”

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