



Rolling One-Handed Loretta Stinson

Raycene and I can see the front of the Stop-n-Shop from where we sit by the apartment complex's dirty pool. Nobody is in the pool even though it's nearing ninety and school has been out for over a month. The water has a greasy skin on its surface, kind of like the water in a pan full of hot dogs after you cook them, but we aren't here to swim. We're waiting for Duane to get to work so we can score some beers to take down to the river. Raycene found a jar of Tylenol 3's at the Danskys' house when she babysat last night, and she's had a couple already. Her eyes look glazed over like a lizard's from not blinking.

Raycene will take anything, anywhere. She looks all on the straight and narrow with her Covergirl face, blunt-cut blond hair, and ironed clothes. Me? I'm not ironed or made up. I'm the opposite. I mostly look and act like I feel, and that makes most people nervous in a 15-year old girl. We met the summer before sixth grade, when both our moms moved into these Section 8 apartments between the prison and the state mental hospital. We got to be best friends fast because of where we live and what we know. Sometimes we talk about moving to San Francisco when we turn eighteen. Sometimes we fight and then don't speak to each other for days.

My eyes are shut tight against the sun. Little white dots sparkle on the insides of my eyelids. They hum along like a bad outlet. I'm practicing not grinching up my face for wrinkle prevention later. Not that I care about wrinkles yet. I mean, how many wrinkly 15-years olds are there?

Raycene says, "Marvel, wake up. I think it's beer-thirty."

I stretch and open my eyes, blinking hard against the glare of sun. For a second it looks like snow, and then the screen clears. Duane comes into focus, ambling into the store across the street. He moves like a fat guy in a bear costume. Duane, the Dancing Bear.

"Let's go," I say. "I want to get out of here before the moms get back." Our moms drove out to the state prison together to see their new boyfriends. It's like a double date with guards, cavity checks, and razor wire.

When I sit up from the plastic lounge chair, my skin sticks to the webbing, and sweat trickles down my back. I slip on my sandals and my sunglasses, and we cross the apartment parking lot to the Stop-n-Shop across the street.

The door makes an electric doorbell sound—ding-dong, ding-dong—when we push it open, and a blast of stale, refrigerated air raises goose bumps on my arms. I'm glad I have my dad's faded work shirt on over my swimsuit and cut offs. Raycene doesn't, and her nipples look like Chiclets under her turquoise bikini top. There's one other customer, Mrs. Janoff from apartment B-9. She's in her usual outfit, a stained blue housedress and slippers. You can smell her from fifty feet away—cat pee and cigarettes. She's buying three cans of Tyrell's cat food for the cats she's not supposed to have. We had to get rid of our cat when we moved here. Sometimes I hope Mrs. Janoff gets evicted, and sometimes I'm glad she gets to keep her cats.

I look through the magazine rack while Mrs.

Janoff shuffles out the store into the heat—ding-dong, ding-dong.

"Hi, girls," Duane says to us. "What can I do you for today?" He says that every time we come in like it's something new he invented. Duane's old, probably about forty-five. His red-and-white uniform shirt is stretched tight against his big belly and stained where it bumps the counters.

"Hey, Duane." Raycene pushes her sunglasses onto the top of her head like a hair band. She smiles. The contrast between her white teeth and her tan skin is nearly blinding. "It's hot out today. Must be over a hundred." She lifts her hair from the back of her neck. Duane stares at her, smiling and not blinking. Raycene works him like a snake handler.

She drops her hair and it falls down her back like in a shampoo commercial. "You think we could snag us a couple beers?"

"As long as she," he points at me, "stays out here to watch the front."

"Right," I say, like I say every time we do this. "I'll whistle if somebody comes in. Just in case you don't hear the bell or whatever." I pull my paperback copy of Franny and Zooey from the back pocket of my cut-offs and start reading where I left off.

Duane looks over at Raycene and nods toward the back. She goes in first, and he follows her. If he could get his nose up her ass, he would. I watch the front, read my book, and wait.

I've never gone back there with Duane, but Raycene has for two years, since she turned 13 and got her first bra. She says all she does is flash Duane a good look at her tits, and he hands over a few beers. Easy. Simple. But a drag just the same.

The thing I don't understand is we can always get beer from home. Neither of our moms care if we drink. There's usually a half case of whatever's on sale in one of the fridges. Me? I don't really like beer. It's Raycene who always wants to get loaded, but she doesn't want her mom knowing all her business.

Raycene comes out from the back a few minutes later carrying a brown bag with a six-pack of tall boys and a pack of Kool menthols. She's grabbing matches from the counter and smiling like Wonder Woman.

Duane follows her, adjusting himself in his shirt like he's trying to align the planets. "Raycene, honey, you come on back and see me real soon."

"You bet, Duane." Raycene looks like she means it, but that's just her face. She always seems to mean what she says.

When we walk out of the store, two men in a pickup truck pull up. The driver gets out and goes in the store. He's about twenty. His dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and he's built like a roofer. I know about roofers from my mom. She thinks all construction workers are cute, but especially roofers 'cause they get those skin-cancer tans. This guy is definitely a roofer. He's slim and ultra-brown. His buddy on the passenger side stays in the truck and looks over at us—or at Raycene, anyway. I just happen to be close by, a smaller planet in her orbit.

"Where are you ladies headed?" He asks through the open window. His voice is gravely and rough like the stubble on his extra-tan cheeks. His eyes are an uncommon blue of things not found in nature. I find myself staring and then looking away before I might blush or blow it. I'm not like Raycene. I never know what to say to men. I don't get much practice.

Raycene says, "We're going down to the river. Give us a ride?"

He looks at her and smiles. Not only are his eyes spooky blue, but his teeth are as white as the centerline on a freeway headed out of here. He opens the door and says to her, "Climb in."

His name is Neil, and his friend's name is Mick. They really are roofers. We sit like this in the front seat of the truck: Mick, Raycene, me, Neil. Mick pulls out of the parking lot, past the strip malls and the Oregon State Penitentiary.

Raycene leans across Mick and yells out his window, "Hey, Dad! Hey, Uncle Ramon!" Raycene's dad and both our moms' boyfriends are currently incarcerated

for various amounts of time and different crimes against the State of Oregon.

Mick and Neil laugh as she tells the story, but I've heard her tell it before. I don't laugh. She always leaves out the bad parts, like the fights leading up to her dad stabbing to death some guy her mom was sleeping with, and how her mom got wasted and came home with yet another man when they couldn't make the rent, or the part when her mom hooked up with her most recent boyfriend, but didn't know he was cooking crank in the garage until the cops busted up the house they used to live in. I'm not laughing at this abbreviated version of her life.

Raycene wants all the attention always. She's the flirty one with the blond hair and the effortless eyes. It's not like I'm deformed or hideously ugly, but I'm no Raycene. I like to read, and I do well in school. I want to go to college far away from here when I graduate. If I were to list my best physical assets, they would be my mouth (porn star), and hair (long and witchy-wavy black). But right now sitting next to Neil in the truck, I want to be as brightly stacked as the gift boxes at Zales.

Mick takes a joint out of the ashtray and lights it, passes it to Raycene.

She takes a hit, holds her breath, and squinches up her eyes. "This tastes like that 'omegrown." She exhales and coughs before handing me the joint. "Harsh. I've got some bud if you've got papers."

"How'd you get connected?" Mick is definitely checking her out now. Different pot comes and goes in town. For a while this summer it's only been homegrown leaf, but Raycene's mom got hooked up with her prison boyfriend's connection. It's kind of like she has a paper route. She throws a bag of dope over the east end of the fence at the prison once a week, and he picks it up when he's in the yard on some work detail and sells matchboxes of pot to other inmates for a lot of money.

"Where we live, it's hard not to be connected." Raycene is doing her woman-of-the-world thing. We're driving through farmland now. The windows are rolled down, and the smell of hay fills me up with summer.

Neil scrounges in the crowded glove compartment and pulls out a package of extra-wide rolling papers. "Want me to roll?"

We slow down and turn off the paved county road to the dirt road that goes down to the Pudding River and the trestle. The narrow road winds along the back edge of hay fields. The scrub oak and blackberry vines grow thick as we get close to the river. A few cars and trucks are pulled onto the non-existent shoulder.

Raycene hands me a matchbox full of pot and a rolling tray from her bag. Her mom's going to kick her ass later. "Marvel rolls great. Show them, Marvel."

The road is bumpy, and we're bouncing around. "Wait till we park," I say. "I don't want to lose any."

I don't get high too often, but I prefer getting high to getting drunk. I learned to roll joints from my dad. He even taught me to roll one-handed. I think I must have been seven. I was like the trained monkey for some stoner's circus. I'm still pretty good at it, though I don't get as much practice as I used to.

This abandoned train trestle on the Pudding River is our hangout place. It's not too crowded yet, but by sundown this place will be hopping. All the kids—high school, middle school, all the hip young stoners and dealers from the valley—come out here in the summer to party. Mick parks the truck in the first wide, shady spot he sees. They both open their doors. We stay in the cab while I empty the matchbox on the tray and start to bust up the pot. It smells good and green, mingling with the smells of the river and blackberry bushes and the tang of dried sweat. It's quiet, and Mick and Neil are watching me roll. The pot crumbles easily. It's not too sticky or too dry. There aren't any seeds so I don't have to use my library card to sift it. I take two papers, lick the seam, and stick them together. I put the pot in the center and rock my fingers and thumb together, gently spreading it from the center to the ends. I lick the edge, press it closed,

and twist the end off. It looks perfect. Almost like one of my dad's Camel straights.

Mick whistles low under his breath. "That's a nice-looking fatty."

Neil says, "I know grown men who can't roll as good as you just did."

Raycene laughs like she's the one who taught me, like I'm some pet dog. "See? I told you Marvel's good."

We all get out of the truck, and I stick the joint behind my ear like I've seen my dad's friends do. Neil grabs the cooler from the back of the truck, Mick brings a dirty Mexican-style blanket from the back, and Raycene brings the bag with our six-pack. I follow her.

They're all talking and laughing, but for some reason I'm crashing into blue.

We climb down the bank of the river through

small bushes and under the arms of bending trees. Mick spreads the blanket out on a level spot of shaded ground. Neil tosses us each a beer and sits down

next to me.

I pop my can of beer, pointing it away so the foam drops to the ground, staining the dirt where it falls.

Neil nods at me. "Let's smoke that joint."

I lift it from behind my ear, and he catches a glimpse of my tattoo. He leans in and touches it like he thinks it will wipe off. "What's this?"

I pull away and shake my hair over it. "A tattoo."

"Let me see it." Mick comes across the blanket, so I pull my hair back and he looks at the place behind my right ear that I can never see too well. Now that I have all the attention, I don't want it.

He leans over me, holding my hair back and looking closely at the tattoo. "You're kind of young, aren't you?"

"I guess." I cover it up with my hair and hand him the joint.

Raycene looks pissed off at me. Like it's my fault she's not the sun in this little universe anymore. She stands up, and they both watch as she unzips her jeans and pulls them down over her hips. She's got her swimsuit bottoms on, but it's still like she's stripping. She downs the rest of her beer in one long gulp and says, "I'm going for a swim."

Mick lights the joint, taking a hit and narrowing his eyes. He holds it up to her. "Let's smoke this first, and then we'll go in. Okay, baby?"

Raycene smiles and sits down in the V of his lap. She drapes her hand across his thigh, staking out her territory. If she could pee on him, she would.

"So where'd you get the tattoo?" Neil asks me.

I'm not like Raycene where I can make a story funny. No matter how much of it I change or leave out, this is not a funny story.

"I'm going in the water," I say. I stand and peel off my jeans, but I don't look behind me as I walk away. I don't care if they're watching or not.

Boys my age yell to each other before jumping from the top of the trestle. They war-whoop and crash into the deep part of the river. The girls they show off or work on their tans on blankets in the late afternoon sun. I step into the cool, chocolate-colored water and try to let my thoughts go drifting away with the slow-moving current. My feet sink into the river bottom and mud smooshes up soft as silk between my toes. I swim toward the opposite shoreline, where there aren't any people because the bank is too steep to spread a blanket. With my head underwater, the noise from the world above sinks down, replaced by the slow beating of my heart until I surface on the other side and climb out. I pull myself up the bank and climb into the crotch of a tree where I can see everything. My mind is like a scab I'm always picking at. I am always and forever trying not to think of the one thing I'm thinking about.

My dad said he became a tattoo artist because he liked to draw. He never had a license—not for marriage or driving or even for what he liked best, inking up bodies with his tattoos. The tattoos he drew on skin seemed to almost breathe. He didn't use much color, but the way he used black made it look like color. Sometimes, when my mom gets drunk, she says that she suspected my dad had a small-time drug habit, but she didn't know he was crazy, too. She says by the time she figured it out, she had me to worry about. Sometimes my dad heard voices inside his head that nobody else heard. That could be explained by all the drugs he did. There were always used syringes in our bathroom, and most of our spoons were bent, too. I thought my dad was how all dads must be. I loved him. He used to carry me on his shoulders when we went to the store. He would always buy me Fruit Loops or Honeycomb cereal, and we'd eat a whole box, dry by the handfuls, while we walked. He's the one who chose my name—Marvel. He always liked their comics.

My mom cleaned rooms at the Nextime Motel. My dad sold a little pot now and then and didn't work except at home, tattooing men, and occasionally women, who came over in the afternoons or evenings. My dad would let me watch as long as I was quiet and stayed out of the way. My favorite spot to watch from was the floor. I could look up and see my dad's face concentrating—his eyes slits, the comma of a dimple in his cheek, a cigarette stuck to his lips, smoke around his face as if he wore a halo. The machine he used as he made the tattoo buzzed along like a fly trapped in an empty mayonnaise jar, and the needle reminded me of the tools a dentist uses. Sometimes he would send me to

the kitchen to get him a beer or

ask me to roll a joint for him and his friends.

After I started kindergarten, my dad freaked out more regularly, or maybe I just noticed it more. He'd get wired and stay up all night. He wouldn't sleep for days or eat more than a bite of food. He didn't like me going to school. He didn't like my mom going to work or the store or anywhere. He thought something bad would happen if we weren't together. Then he started thinking my mom was trying to leave him. Maybe she was. I don't know. He would scream and punch holes in the walls when my mom took me to school in the mornings, and some days they would fight so much she'd give up and let me stay home. I was in fourth grade the year a girl from my school went missing on her way home. I didn't know her. The police found her body the next day.

The day after, my dad kept me home. He kept my mom home, too. He said it was like a snow day. He said he loved us too much to let us go out in this dangerous world. My mom said she'd lose her job if she didn't call in, and he said that was okay with him. He said, "None of us are leaving. None of us are going anywhere." He said, "Sit your ass down." My mom said, "Let me call my boss so I don't

get fired.” She said, “Why can’t I just call?” He said, “No. No phone calls.” He said, “Don’t you get it? You ain’t going nowhere. Why can’t you just be happy where you’re at?”

When the phone rang later, we couldn’t answer it. It rang until he pulled it out of the wall. He closed the blinds. We had to sit on the couch in the living room with him across from us. I don’t know when he got his gun out, but I remember the gun in his lap. I remember I could hear the faucet drip in the kitchen. I remember the room got dark, and I peed my pants. My mom got him to let me go change, and when I came back he had turned on a light and was giving my mom a tattoo on the back of her neck. The light made a circle around them, and I could imagine everything would be all right. He seemed more relaxed. He smiled and asked me to get him a beer. I did. My parents took turns drinking from the bottle. He tattooed our address on my mother. So she’d never get lost, he said. So she could find her way home.

He said he wanted us to be safe. He said he wanted us to always be together. He said it was my turn.

I didn’t cry. At least I don’t think I cried, and I don’t remember that it hurt much until later. He tattooed my name, Marvel, in fancy letters behind my right ear. So I wouldn’t forget who I was. It took a long time. I held still, and I didn’t cry. He said I was brave. He said he was proud of me. He said my tattoo was the best he had to offer. The best he could do. He said I was just like my name.

Then he put the gun in his mouth, tipped back his head and pulled the trigger.

Across the river more people were showing up with more beer. The sun sat on the tops of the trees and slowly slipped down, mellowing out the shadows and the pink-blue sky. I saw a couple of boys I knew from school on the trestle drinking beers. Across the river, Raycene stood at the edge of the water yelling and waving her arms for me to come back over. I stood up.

Right then I could see Raycene’s life spread out just like the moms’, in the opposite direction of mine. There’d be lots of men. Maybe she’d get knocked up young and drop out of school. Maybe there’d be husbands and boyfriends in prison later and crappy jobs cleaning motel rooms. She’d drink more and use more until her loveliness left her. She’d dye her hair. Her skin would wrinkle and sag. For a minute, I thought I should swim back over. I thought about how the water would feel, and what Raycene and I would say to each other. It seemed like the river got wider then, and moved much too far away from me. I didn’t want to go back. I waved her away and sat back down.

Across the river, Raycene threw her hands up like a pissed-off mom and walked away from the river, disappearing up the bank with Mick and Neil behind her. She walked without looking back.

I touched the place where my dad inked my skin. My mom had her tattoo removed last year. It left an ugly scar. I’ve never seen my tattoo very well because of its location, but I can still feel the pressure of my dad’s hand, and the buzz of the needle as he etched the letters slowly and carefully, one by one, a part of me forever. If I could see my tattoo, I think it might look like some kind of love. Like some kind of wonder.

Loretta Stinson

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1960, Loretta Stinson

ran away at 14 to go find the hippies in San Francisco. By the time she arrived, they’d been replaced by speed queens and acid freaks. Returning to Oregon’s rural Willamette Valley, she lived through the first wave of methamphetamine production and addiction. In the mid-’90s Stinson left that life with a restraining order and a financial aid application in hand. She went back to school, receiving a bachelor of science degree and a master’s degree in writing from Portland State University. She is at work revising her first novel, Little Green.