

*Novelette Prequel To
DO ANGELS SING THE BLUES?*

“JUST



SAY...”

by A.C. LeMieux

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A Prequel Novelette to
DO ANGELS SING THE BLUES?

Also by A.C. LeMieux

THE T.V. GUIDANCE COUNSELOR
DO ANGELS SING THE BLUES?

Writing as Anne C. LeMieux

FRUIT FLIES, FISH AND FORTUNE COOKIES
SUPER SNOOP SAM SNOUT AND THE CASE OF THE YOGURT POKER
SUPER SNOOP SAM SNOUT AND THE CASE OF THE STOLEN SNOWMAN
SUPER SNOOP SAM SNOUT AND THE CASE OF THE MISSING MARBLE
DARE TO BE, M.E.!
ALL THE ANSWERS
THE FAIRY LAIR TRILOGY:
A SPECIAL PLACE
A HIDDEN PLACE
A MAGIC PLACE

Praise for *Do Angels Sing The Blues?*

Publishers Weekly Starred Review

Surpassing LeMieux's first novel, *The T.V. Guidance Counselor*, in its power and sensitivity, this new drama focuses on relationships among a trio of teenagers—Boog, an accomplished guitarist; Carey, a talented but disturbed girl struggling with her father's alcoholism; and self-assured, charismatic Theo. Boog and Theo have been best friends since childhood, even before they discovered blues music and formed a band of their own. Their strong bond begins to unravel when, during their senior year at Yardley High, Carey Harrigan enters the scene, dressed like a "walking tag sale," and sweeps Theo off his feet. Theo's attempts to help Carey put together the pieces of her shattered self-image lead to a series of ugly confrontations and a chilling climax readers will not soon forget. This absorbing exploration of adolescent hopes, dreams and vulnerability contains undertones as resonant and melancholy as a blues melody.

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Dedicated with All Love & Admiration to

Brendan Wolfe LeMieux

"The Best Drummer In The Room."



"CHORES: KEITH," I READ OFF THE YELLOW LEGAL PAD that my mother, Leslie Finklestein, attorney and senior partner in the firm Finklestein, Finklestein, and O' Brian, has just plopped on top of the December issue of *Modern Drummer*, which I'm reading at the kitchen table. I take a sip of my breakfast—a highest blend of moo juice, nutritional supplements, and flat, yet not unpleasant flavorings, courtesy of modern culinary chemistry.

Even though it's Saturday, I've been up since 8:59, exactly one minute before my alarm was set to buzz. My bio-clock is as reliable as a Rolex, my sense of time impeccable, if I say so myself, an essential credential for a "noise man," aka drummer, which is what I am. I've already done my daily body-sculpting routine—not that I'm into pumping iron big time, but the men in my family tend to run toward beefy, so I try to keep my beef lean as opposed to marbled with lard—and put in my first hour of drum practice.

"Please, Mom? Pulll-eezze??? Don't make me do it."

My sister Amy, woman-child who gives new meaning to the word sophomoric, is ragging on Mom, a last-ditch pitch to escape from the parental clutches.

"I don't want to go. I hate skiing. Why can't I stay with Keith and Marcus? I could go to the gig with you on New Year's Eve, couldn't I, Keith? I'll be your roadie-and get to drool over Theo Stone, instead of being stuck in a stupid ski lodge, listening to geeky guys in suede shorts play geeky accordion music, and watching a bunch of giddy grownups acting like toddlers doing the 'Chicken Dance.'"

Theo, the lead singer in my band, Blues Thing, is one of my closest friends, but the day I promote my kid sister joining the ranks of the harem of groupies who've succumbed to his prodigious charm is the day I forget to floss my teeth—that's to say—it ain't gonna happen.

Arguments are over without a sidebar.

"All objections overruled," Mom says mildly. "Go get your coat on."

Scowling, Amy flounces out of the room, and I'm glad I have a legit excuse to excuse myself from this trip, especially the five-hour drive in the backseat with Amy when she's in snit mode.

Back to the legal pad, on which, below the standard emergency phone numbers and particulars of the Vermont ski resort where Mom, her marital and legal partner Robert Finklestein, alias the Popster, and their youngest bundle of joy, Amy, will be

spending the New Year's holidays, the page is divided into two columns, one for me, one for my brother Marcus.

"Chores: Keith," I repeat. "'1) Dishes; 2) Put out garbage; 3) Keep refrigerator free of botulism-producing leftovers; 4) Feed the Odd Couple.'" That would be Felix and Oscar, so-named by the Popster, whose humor, if squeezed, would yield pure Mazola corn oil. Felix is our walking Persian hairball, and Oscar is a fish. I note that this chore was originally on Marcus's side of the task list but was crossed out—reality must have bitten Mom on the butt—and awarded to me. What a surprise.

Fish, by the way, used to be plural—a tankful of oscars whose diet consisted of a daily ration of live goldfish. Last time my parents went away, they entrusted Marcus with the care and feeding of the family menagerie. He modified the menu, not, you understand, out of any squeamishness at the aquatic gladiatorial scene, or sympathy for the underfish. He just didn't feel like hoofing it to the pet store when the supply of fresh seafood ran out. The result: an extremely localized fish kill, three out of four oscars belly-up; presumed cause of death: acute hotdog overdose.

Marcus's show of remorse was limited to this comment:

"Hey, that makes him the sole survivor. Get it? Sole survivor?"

Picture a six-foot-two, two-hundred-twenty pound, eighteen-year-old Howdy Doody/ Incredible Hulk hybrid howling like a gargantuan hyena. Not a pretty sight. Anyway, with that little escapade, he made sure he'd never get stuck feeding the pets again. In effect, he got rewarded for screwing up.

"Keith," I continue reading out loud. "'(Do at least once, please!) 5) Bathrooms; 6) Vacuum; 7) Laundry your own.' Hmmm."

I move over to Marcus's side of the list. "'Marcus: 1) Water plants if needed.'"

I reach behind me to the bay window shelf upon which sit all the resident houseplants, i.e., my mother's cactus collection, and poke a finger into the sandy soil of one of the clay pots. Moist to the touch, which means they should be good till, oh, say, Groundhog Day or so.

"'2) Shovel walks and driveway if it snows.'" I glance out the window, scanning the sky for any sign of imminent precipitation. It's as blue as the cover of an exam booklet. I bite my lip, nod and look at Mom.

"They're predicting a blizzard, maybe," she says, a touch of apology in her tone.

"I see," I say. "'Marcus: 3) Laundry-your own.' Mom, you're stretching credulity here. My big brother, who could snag the Guinness World Record for consecutive number of days wearing the same pair of socks, who's leaving a legacy for a future geologist in the form of petrified jockey shorts, do laundry?"

Now she looks downright sheepish. "I thought it was worth a try."

Here's the thing about Marcus: the senior Finklestein sibling is and has been for as far back as I can remember, a slacker to the nth power. Look up the definition for slack—a lot of nuances but they all boil down to the same pudding: LAZY.

I, on the other hand, am a slack-taker-upper. Can't help it. It's a compulsion to see things done right, with maximum efficiency. I read somewhere that the oldest kid usually turns out to be the highly motivated, overly responsible one.

According to this theory, the kid was weighted down like Atlas with a major ball of psychological wax, formed of all the new parents' expectations and Utopian child-rearing notions. The blissful couple blew their whole wad on the first bud to sprout off their branch of the family tree, vowing not to make the same mistakes their parents did, investing all their best in the first rug rat. Stuff like imparting the particularities of differential calculus to it before it was potty-trained, slipping Japanese language tapes into its Fisher Price cassette player, etcetera. Then when the next kid came along, the parents were so beat from the first go-around, they eased waaay off, predisposing their second spawn to a laid-back mellow disposition.

I don't know what my parents did with Marcus during the two years before I made my entrance, but I've been observing the results for the past sixteen years. If the firstborn, going by that theory, is a glorified guinea pig, my conclusion about the experiment is this: all data indicates gross failure of the scientific method. Number One Finklestein Son is a born bum.

But here's the thing that slays me: the King of Slackers has his own version of the Midas Touch. He elevates laziness to an art form. People pull their half of any given load and his, too, and wind up thanking him for the opportunity! He makes a three-toed sloth look like the Little Red Hen on Black Eye coffee with two extra shots of espresso.

Mom's starting to look guilty now. I pat her on the arm.

"I'll say this for you, Mom. I admire your eternal optimism."

She smiles wryly as the Popster comes into the kitchen trying to button his overcoat, but running into difficulty because he already has his gloves on. He frowns, then the "Aha!" neurons fire, and he removes one glove and buttons away. In the parental partnership, work and domestic, Mom is the detail person, the nuts-and-bolts, dot-the-i's and cross-the-t's person. The Popster is the abstract idea man, the creative strategist.

Marcus and I both take after Pop, looks-wise, though Marcus's hair is more carrot to my tarnished copper, and he outweighs my one-hundred-eighty by a good forty pounds. But when it comes to mental operations and temperament, I'm my mother's son. Marcus has more of Pop's creative genes, but he subverts them to his own purposes.

"Car's gassed up, daughter's stowed in the back and plugged into her music," Pop reports. "If we leave now, we should make Stratton by dark."

"Are the suitcases in the trunk?" Mom asks. Pop snaps his fingers. "I knew there was something else!" He heads for the stairs while Mom goes into her final briefing.

"The freezer's stocked with casseroles, fridge and pantry are full. Oh—and emergency money." She digs in her purse, pulls out a bank envelope, and sticks it in the cookie jar on the counter. "E-*MER*-gency," she repeats for emphasis.

"Gotcha." I give her a snappy salute.

"What else ... " she murmurs, casting one more anxious look at the legal pad.

"Just go and have a good time." She works hard. I figure she deserves a worry-free vacation. "Me and Marcus"—I pause to let the irony float for a moment—"will take care of everything."

"Marcus and I," she corrects automatically as she leans down to kiss me good-bye. "Thanks, sweetie. It's so good to know I can count on you. Early Happy New Year."

Pop gives a "Shave and a haircut two bits" honk on the horn, and Mom's out the door. I swig down the last of my shake, rinse the blender glass, and stick it in the dishwasher, then add the few coffee mugs, juice glasses, and pancake plates sitting in the sink. I don't like leaving tasks unfinished.

Dishwasher loaded, I feel a twinge of curiosity about the amount of the emergency funds mom deposited in the cookie jar bank. I lift the lid off it.

This cookie jar was a housewarming gift from Chloe Lang's mom, when we moved here ten years ago. It's a vintage-looking Civil War era rope-tension field snare drum, with the shell glazed a deep crimson, the ceramic rope ties and the drumhead a golden-wheat brown, and the rims gold-leafed. The lid is the rimmed drumhead, with a knotted rope ceramic handle. I remember imagining in my head the sound it might make if someone played it, the first time I saw it. I sometimes wonder if this cookie jar was the inspiration that made me take up drums in the third grade.

I pull out the bank envelope and count the cash. Ten twenty-dollar bills, a solid emergency fund. Replacing the cash in the envelope, the envelope in the cookie jar, and the lid on top, I do a little finger-drumroll on it, an old ritual of mine. Then, anxious to get rolling on the day, I head for my room, taking the stairs two at a time. I park at my desk to set my agenda down in my Daily Planner, another ritual of mine, and grab a black ink fine point pen from a mug-sized replica of the cookie jar, minus the lid. It's not as perfectly crafted, but it's even more special to me.

Sitting back in my chair, I stare at it, pondering, not for the first time, the puzzle of Chloe Lang.



Chloe and my sister Amy were Best Friends Forever, starting our first day in the neighborhood when Mrs. Lang came over with her two kids to say howdy and welcome, and ending when two things happened: Tracey Newman and sixth grade. When Tracey moved into the house next door to us, all of a sudden Chloe wasn't

cool enough anymore. As the cliques started coagulating in the first year of middle school, when kids get sifted into strata, defined by levels of acceptability according to suburban America's youth culture propaganda machine, Chloe didn't make the cut.

I remember when Amy turned traitor, balking at inviting Chloe to her sixth-grade birthday slumber party.

"You can't invite Tracey, and exclude Chloe," my mother argued. "It's just not right."

"But Mom, I don't want to invite her," Amy protested. "She always has dirty fingernails, and she chews her hair, and she still plays making mud pies. And she has weird eyes."

"She has the eyes God gave her," Mom said severely. Chloe's eyes were kind of startling; one was hazel, the other grayish blue, and she wore strong prescription glasses, which made them appear huge in her round face. "And making pottery isn't making mud pies, and if I recall correctly, that used to be one of your favorite things to do. Look, Amy, Mrs. Lang and the kids have been going through a very rough time since the divorce."

Mr. Lang had traded his wife in for a newer, sleeker model a year and a half before, divorcing his wife and marrying his legal secretary. I personally thought they were better off without him, a conclusion I came to after overhearing a remark he made to Mrs. Lang. My parents were hosting a backyard barbecue for a few of our neighbors. As the designated burger-flipper, I was stationed at the grill next to the picnic table, where Mrs. Lang was helping herself to a healthy mound of my mother's potato salad, when her husband came over and said in a low and fairly ugly tone, "For God's sake, Tina, can't you finish a normal first helping before piling on seconds? You're going to wind up just like your mother."

The thing that really got me, though, was that Mrs. Lang looked ashamed of herself, as if she were the one who was out of line. She actually threw her paper plate away without touching the food.

"Either you invite Chloe, or there's no party." Mom pronounced the edict, which reigned in terms of the party invitations, but backfired as an attempt to impart a sense of empathy to Amy.

The party was the weekend before Halloween and a gaggle of giggling girls had taken over the first floor. My parents were upstairs, having promised not to put in an appearance unless the need for an authoritative presence arose. I myself escaped to the movies with some friends, getting back home about 9:30.

As I opened the kitchen door, a charred odor assaulted my nostrils, and Amy and her New Best Friend Tracey, one of those miniature siren women, who at twelve wasn't just going on twenty-two, she was going at warp speed, were both standing in front of the sink. They spun around as if caught in non-fragrant delicto.

"What's cooking? Or should I say overcooking?" I asked.

"Nothing," Amy said with the faux-innocence that hollers "Guilty As Hell."

But Tracey batted her mascara-coated eyelashes at me, and held up a piece of burnt cork.

"We're gonna play Pinchie-Winchie. See, everyone sits in a circle and you pinch the person next to you on the face and say 'Pinchie-Winchie.' Then they have to pinch the person next to them in the exact same spot, and it goes all the way around the circle and you have to keep going faster and faster."

"What's the point of that?" I asked.

Tracey twiddled the cork between her fingers and held up her sooty fingertips.

"This," she said. "Wanna play with us?" She wiggled them at me.

I still didn't get it, but I knew one thing, I wasn't up to getting involved in any game with this budding Spider Woman, not to mention a dozen of my kid sister's pajamaed friends, whom I could hear whooping it up like a crane convention in the living room, where they were camped. Fortunately good old sibling rivalry came to the rescue.

"No way! Mommy and Poppy said we could have the whole first floor to ourselves. No boys allowed. That means you, Keith!"

Tracey put on a coy pout. Right then, Chloe came into the kitchen, looking kind of ill at ease, considering how much time she'd spent at our house over the years. She pulled a wisp of her caramel-colored hair out of her mouth.

"What are you guys doing?" she asked and sniffed the air. "Did you burn the Bagel Bites?"

Tracey hid the cork behind her back.

"No, Chloe, don't worry, there's plenty of food left," she said, a dig, I presumed, at the fact that Chloe wasn't, at that point in time, what you'd call svelte.

Chloe turned red.

"Go back and tell the other kids we're going to play a game. Turn out all the lights, and sit in a circle," Tracey ordered bossily.

Her attitude rubbed me way the wrong way.

"Who died and left you in charge?" I asked.

Chloe gave me a grateful look.

Tracey stuck out her tongue at me and shot me a glare.

"Chloe, could you go get them set up for the game? We'll be right out," Amy said in kind of a mollifying tone.

Chloe went back to the living room, and I opened the door to the basement, to make my escape to go down and practice for a while. I closed the door behind me, but my inner radar was cluing me in to something not being right, so I hung on the top step, in optimum eavesdropping position.

"Okay, you sit next to her, so she won't suspect," Tracey said in a low voice.

"I don't know, Tracey. Maybe it's too mean ... " It sounded like Amy's conscience was poking her.

"No it's not. It's just a game. Anyway, your mother made you invite her. She wasn't even supposed to be here."

I thought it was pretty treacherous of Amy to have shared that tidbit with Tracey. Maybe she and Chloe didn't hang around together anymore, but they had for years, and it seemed like a really lousy way to treat an old friend. Listening in on it was starting to make me feel like a snake, like by knowing about it, but not stopping it, I was colluding in malicious mischief.

But I didn't have the guts to go in and tell off the brat brigade, so I slithered down to the basement to pound out my mental discomfort on my drums. Half an hour later, having worked up a decent sweat with the late great John Bonham, as well as an appetite for a snack, I walked in on the aftermath of my apathy.

Chloe, still in her plaid flannel nightgown, and with her face covered with dark sooty smudges, was struggling into her jacket, making a beeline for the door.

Amy was tugging on her backpack, saying, "No, Chloe, wait."

And Tracey was standing in the doorway to the front hall with their other friends, all looking, I swear, like a flock of baby vultures ready to eat one of their own wounded. Chloe was the only one with Pinchie-Winchie prints, clearly the unwitting victim of the party game.

She wrenched her backpack free, yanked the back door open and went out.

There was a moment of silence, then Tracey shrugged. "Let her go. What a baby! Chloe, Chloe, Marsh-mellow-y."

Amy didn't respond. And I could tell this wasn't a party she'd ever forget. Too bad it was too late. I looked at Tracey, who was giggling kind of nervously.

"Congratulations," I said. "Chalk up a victory for viciousness."

Then I bolted after Chloe, not even stopping to put my coat on, and caught up with her at the head of our driveway. I didn't say anything, because I didn't know what to say. I just fell into step beside her.

Our feet shuffled through the fallen leaves on the sidewalk, with the rhythmic muffled crispness of slow wire brush strokes on a snare drum. It was a weird moment for me, one of those viewpoint expansions my mother calls "paradigm shifts." For the first time I wasn't seeing Chloe as one of my little sister's friends or the chubby girl who lived down the street. Not to get too New Age about it, but I was seeing a fellow human being who'd gotten solidly slugged in the soul.

When we got to her house, none of the lights were on. I followed her around to the backdoor' where she plucked a house key from under a loose brick on the patio, unlocked the door, flicked on the kitchen lights, then turned to me, expressionless, holding the door as if she had no idea what the proper protocol was for a situation like this.

"Where's your mother and Robert?" I asked.

"Robert's at our father's for the weekend. My mother's at an overnight conference on 'Getting in Touch with your Inner Totem,'" she said, kind of dryly.

For the first time since the showdown at the Not-OK Finklestein Corral, Chloe looked at me, and I picked up a flicker of amusement.

"Mom's inner totem is the beaver. She stays busy with projects," Chloe said, looking over her shoulder into the kitchen.

The kitchen looked like a layout for Domestic Anarchy magazine. A sewing machine and project that looked like half a quilt covered half the kitchen table, untidy stacks of newsletters and magazines the other. The beginnings of what looked to be an indoor winter herb garden, including gardening tools, seed packs, and a sack of potting soil were laid out on the counter next to the sink, which was full of dishes. The vacuum cleaner was taken apart, all the parts spread out on a newspaper on the floor, along with a screwdriver and some pliers. The computer on the built-in desk was almost completely hidden by messy piles of paper.

"Looks like a lot of projects," I said with a little smile. We just stood still for a moment. Then I blurted out, "Chloe, listen, I don't think you should stay here by yourself. Come on back to our house. I'll clue my mother in and she'll keep Tracey in line."

Chloe shook her head.

"Well, how 'bout calling your dad? Couldn't he come over and—"

"No!"

She said with this sudden fierce vehemence I'd never seen in the six years I'd known her.

"No, I won't," she said more quietly, and went inside, leaving the door open. Something in me felt compelled to follow, to make sure she was okay. She hung her coat on the back of a chair and put her backpack on a not-too high pile of papers on the counter, attempting, it seemed to me, to at least not make the chaos any worse.

Wetting a paper towel at the sink, she wiped the cork smudges off her face, then went through the living room, turning on lights as she went out to the small sunporch. I followed her, not sure what else to do.

The sunporch was where Mrs. Lang had her pottery studio set up. Next to a dusty slab of slate set on top of an old end table was a shallow steel utility sink that had been built into a plywood stand, with a thing that looked like an old LP record player covered with dried mud in the middle.

There was a kiln the size of a small safe in one corner, and board and cinderblock shelves stacked against the wall almost to the ceiling. Some of them held supplies, some plastic bags of putty-colored and terra-cotta clay, cans of glazes, and dusty tools, and others were filled with an amazing array of pots and bowls, and mugs and vases.

Chloe picked up a plastic bucket, stepped over to the utility sink, and turned on the water. While she filled the bucket, I took a closer look at some of the finished pieces. The range of textures and forms, and at the rainbow spectrum of colors was pretty impressive.

Some were so solid-looking they seemed to have a visible gravitational field around them; others so delicate, they seemed they might break if you breathed on them. Some were extremely plain, but the form was so perfect that looking at them felt like having your eyeballs massaged; others were ornamented with all kinds of decorations, natural designs, vines and shells, or abstract and geometric shapes.

And some you could only call playful, like our cookie jar, or like a set of four round white mugs standing on sturdy chubby little legs with striped socks and red sneakers that looked like they jumped out of a cartoon. Looking at them, you had to smile.

"Your mother made all these?" I asked. I'd never realized Mrs. Lang had the imagination, much less the artistic talent, to create all this.

"Most of them," Chloe said. "I did some." Taking a wad of light clay the size of a grapefruit, she sat in front of the slate slab and threw it down with a thud.

She began kneading the clay, twisting it, pushing it, and turning it over on itself in a rhythmic motion, occasionally wetting her hands in the bucket of water on the floor next to her. As I watched, her hands almost hypnotized me. They didn't seem to go with the rest of her. Not that they were physically out of proportion or anything—it was just that there was such concentrated strength and dexterity in her fingers—grace, you'd almost call it—and confidence in her motions.

The drummer in me keyed right into it.

"You have great hands," I blurted out.

She glanced at me, as if surprised I'd noticed, shrugged, and kind of nodded, as if she had to admit it was true. She centered the lump of kneaded clay in the middle of the wheel, turned it on, and after wetting her hands, began molding it, evenly, smoothly.

She smiled again then, without looking at me, a self-contained smile, as if at that moment she knew who she was and was happy with it.

"What I like," she said, stopping for a moment, but not making eye contact, "is that I can make it any shape I want."

Then she focused back on her work and after a few minutes, I had the feeling that my presence was intrusive, so I got up.

"I'll lock the back door behind me," I said and turned to exit.

"Thanks, Keith," her voice, sounding a little quivery, floated behind me. I didn't think she'd want me to see her cry, so I just nodded without looking back.

"Take care, Chloe," I said, and left.



The following summer, Mrs. Lang and the two kids moved across town. It was a different middle school district; but she and Amy hadn't been friends after that party anyway.

The day they moved, I found a package wrapped in layers of newspaper inside a brown grocery bag, with my name on it. The small drum. I didn't see Chloe again until my sophomore year, her and Amy's freshman year, at Yardley High, and the metamorphosis in her was amazing.

In the two-and-some-odd years since I'd last seen her, she'd gotten taller, and lost some weight, to the point that when she walked down the hall, she magnetically drew guys' eyeballs after her like they were iron ball bearings. And somewhere along the way, she'd learned to walk the walk, and talk the talk. No more Coke-bottle glasses. And in fact, she must have gotten tinted contacts, because when I passed her in the hall one day, our eyes met, and both of hers were hazel.

I couldn't believe someone could make herself over so completely. She immediately made it onto the A-list of the high school social hierarchy, at least as far as guys were concerned; among members of her own gender, she seemed to be kind of a loner.

Every time I run into her now, which isn't all that often because she hangs around in the jock circles, I get this feeling that her perfect surface now isn't any truer an image of who she really is than Amy and Tracey's sixth-grade view of her had been.

When I see her, I sense something behind the facade, like a rhythm pulsing in a very layered soundtrack, one you can't quite pick out with your ears, but you know it's there because of the resonant thrum inside you, the response it tugs from you.

I check my watch and realize I've spent almost twenty minutes daydreaming, rolling my pen through my fingers, over index, catch with middle, roll over, catch with ring, roll over, catch with pinky, flip my hand palm side up, then roll it back to ready-to-drumroll position, a habit of mine when I'm in a pensive mood.

Pulling myself back to the present, I open my Daily Planner to today's date, where there's one entry for today: "Eastfield Congregational—Youth Group Dance—Church hall 6:00 P.M. Setup; 7:00 P.M. Sound check." Below that I write:

"1) Call Theo to remind him to remind pastor to open the hall early." Last time we had a gig at Theo's church, the hall was locked, which set the whole thing back an hour and a half.

"2) Feed F & O.

"3) Yardley Stationers—printer paper." We're out and I have an American Studies term paper due the Monday we get back to school. I always try to think ahead. Come to think of it, that'll be next year. "New Daily Planner," I add.

"4) Pro Music Center—pick up pair of ProMark 5A woodtip sticks—buy cowbell and mount." That's the next item on my percussion wish list, the gradual upgrade of my drum kit.

"5) Afternoon practice session"

"6) Shower, dress, eat, split."

I close the Planner, slip the pen into the leather loop on the side, and sit back, staring at Chloe's drum mug, remembering her hands shaping the clay.



Come 5:00 P.M., I'm right on glide slope for the day, slapping together some slices of pickle and pimento loaf on pumpernickel, hold the mayo, extra mustard.

Marcus, aka SuperSlug, has finally surfaced. He's got his feet up on the table and is breaking his fast with a large bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and canned bean dip, the phone cradled between his ear and shoulder.

"Sounds good, babe," he's saying while stifling a yawn. "So, I'll bring my laundry over, say about eightish-" "

"I've got the car tonight," I interrupt. "Gig."

Marcus and I share the Cherokee. House automotive rules: School comes first and depending on our schedules—Marcus is a freshman at Newbridge U, where's he's majoring in shirking and women's studies—a lotta field work there—one of us gives the other a ride. Work commitments take precedence over pleasure. And although we're supposed to split the tab on gas, needless to say, I end up forking over a lot more for fuel than Marcus does.

Now he raises his eyebrows languidly.

"Oops, plan change, Angie. BamBam has the wheels tonight. Hey, how 'bout you come over here?"

He scoops up a monster blob of bean dip, half of which falls on the table before it makes it to his mouth.

"Seven's perfect. That'll give me time to hatch ... Kiss kiss to you, too."

I snort, clean up my sandwich stuff, grab the sponge, and wipe the table, including the blob of bean dip, which, if left to Marcus, would stay there long enough to be considered an antique. He hangs up the phone and watches me.

"BamBam, you're disobeying one of the basic laws of nature," he drawls.

"Oh yeah? Which one is that?"

I ask.

"Conservation of energy, kid, conservation of energy."

Ha. Ha. Ha.



After the gig, the band, minus Danny, our bassman, who was a little ragged tonight trying to stave off a major bout of the flu that's making the winter rounds, goes to the Silver Comet. Affectionately dubbed the Silver Vomit, it's the post-date/pre-home-going Yardley High hangout, the place where all adolescent roads lead on Friday and Saturday nights around here. The decor, someone's idea of neo-space-age, is a mix of mirrors, formica, and vinyl, in shades of fake carnation pink and the faded purple of a fungus ridden grape.

We snag the last available large booth. Theo, Peter McGrath, our rhythm guitarist, and I are on one side. Boog Buglioni, our lead guitarist; and his ball and chain Sharon, whom Peter and I secretly call the boa constrictor because of the way she puts the squeeze on Boog, are on the other.

Through the plexiglass partition between our booth and the one in the corner, I can see Tom Mitchell, a Yardley High high-profile basketball jock, whose impressive statistics include league high scorer, as well as most technical fouls racked up for the season to date. His ego is the size of a cement mixer. And in the mirror, next to the back of Tom's blond buzz-cut Neanderthal skull, I can see the reflection of his current female arm piece. Chloe Lang.

"Okay, guys, things were a little sloppy tonight, but that was probably because Danny was under the weather," Boog says. "What do we want to work on?"

"Might be time to revamp the play list," Theo puts in. "I'm ready to eighty-six 'Badge' off the menu for a while. It's feeling a little stale."

A frenzied waitress slaps some menus down, splashes our water glasses full, and scurries on down the line, where I can see her biting her tongue as Tom Mitchell tells her with his typical lack of finesse that he wants his eggs sunnyside, not over easy, and rye, not whole wheat toast.

"Got another Clapton tune in mind?" Boog asks.

The two of them start tossing out possibilities, but I'm not really listening. I'm tuned into the next booth, watching Chloe, though she hasn't noticed me yet. I don't know what Tom's saying to her, but whatever it is, I hate the way it's making her shrink into her seat.

Natalie Stewart, Yardley High's Queen of Conceit, and one of Sharon's close cronies, is sauntering down the aisle on her way back from the restrooms. She pauses at Tom and Chloe's booth, and his expression changes from top-pitbull to wolf-on-the-prowl. Natalie ignores Chloe totally, playing Tom like a sterling silver kazoo.

"Anybody got a pen?" Theo asks after our harried server-person skids in, scribbles down our orders, then peels out, burning the rubber soles of her white shoes.

I pull my Daily Planner out of my parka pocket and slip the pen out of its leather loop.

"Play list update," Boog says. "'Badge' and 'Goin' Down' in mothballs for now, 'After Midnight,' and 'Pride and Joy,' and 'Sunshine of your Love' up on deck. Wanna schedule an extra practice tomorrow so we can have 'em ready for Thursday? Say, seven to ten?"

Peter and Theo nod agreement. Theo hands me back my pen and I jot down the tunes in my Planner notebook section, then turn to tomorrow's date and write "Band practice—7-10 P.M.—Boog's garage."

Natalie's moved up the line.

"Hi, Shar, hey, Boog."

Then she zooms in on Theo, casually running her manicured claws over his hair.

"You said you'd give me a call, Theo; I'm wondering when..." Her voice switches from slightly put-out to ooze so smoothly, I'm almost impressed.

"Oh, soon..." Theo says, fielding the come-on like he fields all the offers he gets from women, with a grin you need Ray-Bans to block, and completely noncommittal charm.

"How soon?" Natalie says.

"How 'bout... hmmm..." He pretends to think. "Next year?" He smiles brightly.

"Why don't you make it your New Year's resolution?" She rubs his shoulder.

She's pressing the outside of the smarmy envelope in my book, but Theo doesn't fall for the bait. He shakes his head.

"Sorry, Nat, already got my New Year's resolution," he says.

"Oh yeah? Tell me about it," she says in a dusky voice, like some nineteen forties black and white movie femme fatale.

"I resolve not to make any resolutions," Theo says with another blinding grin.

Natalie gives his hair a tug that makes him wince, pretending to take the teasing lightly but underneath, definitely steamed to be blown off so nonchalantly.

She lets go of Theo's shoulder and shifts her attention as our waitress huffs up and edges around her to set down two burger plates, a Western omelet, a BLT on white toast, and a strawberry sundae.

"So, Sharon, are you two going on the junior ski trip?" she asks. "I didn't see your names on the list. Deposit's due right after we go back to school, you know."

"I can't go," Boog puts in before Sharon can reply. "Valentine's gig at North Newbridge High."

"Can you believe we're going to miss it, because he was dumb enough to line up a gig that night?" Sharon voice isn't masking some fairly venomous resentment. She nudges Boog. "I think you should make a New Year's resolution to put that guitar down once in a while and pay some attention to more important things. Like me, for example!"

"Ooops!" Natalie puts her hand over her lips in feigned regret. "Didn't mean to start anything." She gives a phony little laugh, as light and airy as a wind chime. "Later, all."

Having sewn the seed of discord, she moves on. Boog puts an arm around Sharon's shoulder and pops a soggy strawberry into her mouth.

"See? I'm paying some attention to you now."

Sharon pulls a pout. "I may just go without you, you know."

Boog shrugs. "That's fine. Whatever."

I detect a touch of the passive aggressive in Boog's response. Sharon frowns but doesn't say anything.

Peter breaks the tension with one out of left field.

"My New Year's resolution is to learn to like shrimp. Last year it was mushrooms, year before, garbanzo beans. Next year I'll try for sushi, and maybe after that, even take a stab at blue cheese."

The whole table cracks up.

"Hey, what's so funny? I'm trying to acquire new tastes," Peter says. "What's wrong with that? The way I figure, you never know what's gonna happen. The greenhouse effect could kill off all the vegetation. Or a nuclear war could blow the world to smithereens, and all that'd be left to eat would be cockroaches. If it does, I'll be ready. That's the key to survival. You gotta be able to adapt to circumstances. You gotta be flexible."

"You're so flexible you make Gumby look like he's in rigor mortis, Peter," Theo says, and we're all still laughing, but I'm thinking Peter's mother's on her third husband, and his old man's on his bazillionth girlfriend. To him, it probably seems like his world got blown to smithereens a long time ago.

"Good plan, Peter," Boog says. "Go with the cockroach du jour."

"Cockroaches! Eeewwwl Don't make me gag!" Sharon squeals.

"You could write the gourmet cockroach cook- book, Peter," Boog goes on. The gleam in his eye tips me off to the fact that he's stoking the chat to get back at Sharon. "Page one— Creamed Chipped Roach on Toast."

Sharon looks down at her half-eaten sundae, lets her spoon drop, and pushes the dish away from her. I don't like the way she treats Boog, so I'm game.

"Cockroach Pot Pie," I offer.

"Cut it out, you guys," Sharon whines.

Boog grins an evil grin.

"Bar-B-Qued Cockroach Kebabs. Mmm mmm mmmmm. Nice and crunchy."

"Stop it!" Sharon shrieks. "I said stop!" She punches Boog in the ribs, too hard to be considered a love tap. "Or I'm leaving!"

Boog pulls his arm away from her shoulders and rubs his ribs.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" he says.

As I'm wondering how long these two are going to last as a couple, my attention's distracted by Chloe rising abruptly from her seat and sprinting for the exit. The lack of expression on her face, in contrast to her hasty and apparently impromptu departure is more than a little disturbing to me.

Tom slams his fist on the table, shoves his arms into his Yardley letter jacket, throws down some cash which lands on a half-eaten plate of ketchup-covered fries, and strides toward the door with enough rage pouring off him to intimidate the whole World Wrestling Federation.

"There goes another pair of lovebirds," Boog says. "Must be something in the air tonight."

I'm looking out the window at the parking lot, where Tom's caught up with Chloe. He grabs her by the arm, and I start to get up, but then he lets go, and I sink back down on my seat, watching while she walks around his Camaro and gets in the passenger side.

And I'm wondering why she'd want to go out with a guy who treats her like dirt, and then I'm remembering Mr. Lang and his attitude toward Chloe's mother and how long she took it, and I'm thinking maybe you can psychologically inherit stuff like that. It's a scary thought.

"Ground Control to Keith," Theo's saying.

"Huh?" I tune back in to my immediate surroundings.

"Your New Year's resolution," he says. "Got one?"

"I haven't thought much about it," I say.



Saturday morning, I roll over at precisely 8:59 A.M., look out the window, and see that the weatherman was spot on with his blizzard prediction. At least eight inches so far of wet white stuff and it looks like it's still going strong. I give a silent cheer, thinking of Marcus's side of the chore list. Maybe there is some justice in the universe after all.

After my morning exercise/practice session, I'm in the kitchen, drinking my breakfast and setting the day's plan down in ink. The old Daily Planner's almost filled for the year. Feeling slightly reflective, I turn back to January 1 and look at the old year's resolutions.

"1) Keep a regular practice schedule."

I put a satisfied check next to that. Seven days a week, two hour-long sessions a day, the first third drills and patterns, the second third, Blues Thing material, and the third third jamming with whatever I want. My archive of cassettes and CDs, in

addition to lots of blues and rock, has a major miscellaneous section to expand my percussive imagination.

This morning it was the bloodboiling soundtrack from an old movie, *Black Orpheus*—Rio de Janeiro during carnival—and an African field recording of Master Drummers of Dagbon. This resolution has paid off in spades, in terms of my chops coming together.

"2) Put \$10 a week in savings account." Another check; I've pretty much stuck to that one, too; when I skipped a week, I doubled up the next.

"3) Improve love life."

I smile, recalling what prompted that one, a rebound reaction to being dumped by Nola Kennedy. Nola was a magnet for messes. Example: she couldn't not litter, usually on the floor of my car. She had this habit that made me cringe, of brushing her hair anywhere and everywhere, then cleaning the brush and dropping the hair wad wherever we happened to be, class, movies, the cafeteria, basketball games, restaurants.

And she never tied her sneaker laces, which drove me bananas. All stupid little things, but they added up to terminal incompatibility of personal habits.

The straw that really busted my stones was when she left a cup of fruit punch on my bass tom between sets at the Homecoming Dance, and I didn't notice it till it spilled all over my kit. I admit I was less than diplomatic in pointing this out to her, but she erupted with a temper tantrum that would have made Joan Crawford look like Tinkerbell.

We're actually good friends now, without the romantic element interfering. Improve love life. Hmmm. I'd followed a few promising leads, but they'd turned out to be cul-de-sacs. No check. I guess two out of three ain't bad. Back to the present. To my last night's note about the extra band practice, I add:

"1) Library—work on term paper."

Then the usuals, "2) Dishes, 3) Feed beasts, 4) Trash out." I sit back, roll my pen, look out the window, grin, then make my last entry. "5) Boot Marcus's butt out of bed to shovel the driveway, so I can get the car out of the garage."

I stick the dishes in the dishwasher, then head upstairs and sound the wakeup call, four bars of bassy eighth-note triplets pounded on his door with my fists. I stop and listen. Not a murmur. I open the door. His room would make a junkyard look neater than a gunny sergeant's footlocker. I scan for suitable projectiles, stoop to enlist a balled-up sock and a crumpled Coke can and hurl them gently at the lump in the bed. No response. I try a size 13 EEE sneaker next. Another bull's-eye. As Marcus groans and rolls over, I make a bullhorn with my hands.

"Rise and shine and get ready to shovel."

I'll confess to a note of satisfied glee.

"Mmmph," comes the vague response.

I crank up the vocal volume. "Yo! Carcass! Move the machine, man, it's time to get up. Snow is falling, the driveway's calling."

Still no response, and peevishness is overtaking me.

"Hey, you! Get up! You're holding up my day. I've got places to go and things to do, and I can't do 'em till you shovel the driveway!"

I launch some heavier ammo, a thick paperback anthology for the freshman expository writing course he took last semester. The book hits the target.

"Cut it out," the lump growls.

I see I've made a dent in the sleep shield, so I follow up with a Basic Statistics text. The pillow goes over his head. I pick my way through the minefield of debris, looking for implements to enlist as—Aaah, perfect! A fork stuck in a Chinese food carton, and an oversize purple souvenir pencil with an outspread-arms troll doll where the eraser should be, and I LOVE YOU THIS MUCH! engraved on the side in neon pink.

I seize it and the fork, and start rolling out some Led Zep on his pillow. He swipes a paw out from under the covers, snags both improvised drum-sticks, and chucks them toward the window. A second paw pass finds me in a headlock. I swear, for someone whose closest brush with anything resembling exercise is running the football pool at his frat or channel-surfing with the remote, he's got reflexes quicker than a hungry bullfrog's tongue, not to mention power reserves of astonishing magnitude.

I decide a quick and sincere admission of defeat is in my best interest.

"Okay, okay," I say. Gasp, actually.

He loosens his grip, punches me on the arm to show there's no hard feelings, punches the pillow into shape, rolls over, and within ten seconds he's sawing wood again. Three hours later, after digging out the driveway so my whole agenda doesn't unravel, I come into the kitchen where the Sultan of Slobdom is cutting his toenails, with my Swiss Army knife, right onto the floor, while crooning sweet nothings into the ear of his latest victim.

"Okay snookums, I'll be here... Your call, babe, I'm easy to please... Thai food? Thairiffic. Smooch to you, too." He hangs up and looks out the window.

"Nice job on the driveway."

"It was your job," I point out, glaring.

He scrutinizes me for a moment, faking a thoughtful frown. "Let me tell you a story, kid. One day, the Lone Ranger started to get worried about his buddy Tonto. Tonto stops talking, except for two sentences. "'I'm a teepee, I'm a wigwam. I'm a teepee, I'm a wigwam.'" The Lone Ranger thinks Tonto may be having an identity crisis, so he sends him to a shrink. Tonto goes in, lies down on the couch. The shrink says, 'Why are you here?' Tonto says, 'I'm a teepee, I'm a wigwam. I'm a teepee, I'm

a wigwam.' 'Ah ha!' the shrink says. 'I know what your problem is.' He reaches for his pad and jots down the cure."

Marcus pulls a page from the yellow post-it pad by the phone, scrawls something, then hands it to me.

I read it.

"RELAX. YOU'RE TWO TENTS."

I crumple the paper and throw it at him as he collapses in guffaws at his own sick humor. It bounces off him and lands on the floor.

He points, almost choking. "Better pick that up, BamBam," he wheezes. "Trash is on your side of the chore list."

Hardy. Har. Har.



It's nearly 6:00 p.m. by the time I get home from the library, having roughed out my outline and started gathering critical source material for my paper.

The Fairfax County curriculum for all high school juniors is a combination literature/history program called American Studies. Our assignment was to choose one of the short stories we'd read and one historical or political science document and do a compare and contrast deal. I'd honed my topic down to: passive-aggressive resistance in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience."

Bartleby is narrated by this pompous Wall Street lawyer, and takes place in the pre-electronic revolution days when all those reams and reams of paper documents—the ones that say stuff like "the party of the first part shall not party, or otherwise celebrate in any manner without the express consent of the party of the second part, or the party of the first part shall be deemed liable in the event of the party of the second part, hereinafter referred to as 'the party pooper' etcetera"—were written out by hand, pen, and ink, not toner cartridges, by human copy machines called scriveners. Bartleby reached a point when he couldn't take things—life, work, anything—anymore. He basically staged a sit-down strike, opting out of any action, and swatting back every ball tossed into his court with one line:

"I would prefer not to."

A brilliant maneuver, in my opinion. It drove his boss absolutely bonkers. I think the reason the topic strikes a chord with me is because it deals with the part of justice that balances the rights of the individual against the rights of the society as a whole, which necessarily means curtailing at least some of the individual's rights for the good of the group. It's a tricky balance and way out of whack in the society of the Finklestein household.

As I'm nuking one of Mom's casseroles for dinner, Angie's red Toyota pulls into the driveway. Through the window, I can see her struggling with some grocery bags. Basic courtesy prompts me to give her an assist.

"Thanks, Keith," she says after we've brought in the load, seven bags in all.

"Hungry?" I ask, by way of gentle teasing.

Angie's built like a bonsai willow tree, extremely petite any way you measure. She smiles happily, oblivious to the subtext. Not to say she's unintelligent. It's just that her sarcasm meter isn't highly sensitive. Probably a good thing when dating a guy like my brother.

"I'm making a genuine Thai dinner for Marcus. He loves my cooking. Bobby and Eileen are coming over, too. And we're going to watch Rodney Dangerfield movies."

Whoop-dee-doo, I think. A perfect evening, Marcus Finklestein style. He won't have to move a muscle other than his mouth for eating and reciting his idol's gag lines, which he knows by heart. As she starts unpacking the bags, I can see the trouble she's planning to go to, and I'm not mean enough to burst her bubble by telling her that Marcus would eat a raw rhinoceros if he could hold it down long enough to squirt some ketchup on it.

"Bon Appetit," I say, and leave to head over to Boog's for band practice.



It's almost midnight when I coast in, and stop short, just inside the kitchen door. It looks like a troop of rabid orangutans have romped through a thirteen-course baboon banquet and had the food fight to end all food fights on the way. Clear wormy-looking noodles are stuck to the wall over the stove, cooked way past al dente, almost to glue. The counter is strewn with cracked coconut shells, potato peels, tofu cartons, snow pea pod ends, scraggly clumps of some kind of grass, and shrimp skins with the little legs still attached.

The microwave window is mottled with the remains of some exploded something. And the stove itself looks like Julia Child had a major meltdown in midshow. Every single dish we own appears to have been impressed into service for the making and serving of Angie's genuine Thai dinner.

And as I stand there, I'm seeing my half of the chore list. "Keith: Dishes."

From the living room, I hear girl-voice whispers, then the voice of The Supreme Slacker himself.

"Not to worry, babe. BamBam'll clean it up. He can't help himself. He's so anal he needs a proctologist not a psychiatrist."

I feel a shirt-swelling rage rising up from my solar plexus. I take a long stride and my foot lands in a puddle of something slippery, probably sesame oil from the bottle

lying sideways on the edge of the table which I catch out of the corner of my eye just before the edge of the table catches my cranium as I go down.

"Hey, BamBam, keep the decibel level down while you do your chores, wouldya?" Marcus hollers from the other room.

My brains are sloshing back and forth with the echo of the skull knock, and through it, I hear my New Year's resolution calling out to me. It's so simple, I start to laugh.

What would Bartleby do in a situation like this? Just say no! Next morning I'm up, exercised, practiced, showered, dressed in my new tan corduroys and plaid flannel shirt, and ready to roll by 11:00. I mix up my breakfast shake in the blender. That and the waffle iron happen to be the only two small appliances that escaped the Great Thai Food Massacre.

The table is as disgusting as it was the night before, with the addition of a few clumps of cat hair, courtesy of Felix. This New Year's resolution may need some practice. Cohabiting with this degree of debris isn't gonna come naturally. I have to practically force myself not to sprint for the sponge and the Fantastic.

I clear an area just big enough to set down my drink and work out my schedule for the day. It takes an enormous amount of mental discipline to hold the chaos at bay, like a force field. But the urge for justice is stronger than the urge for order.

Daily Planner:

"1) Dishes: NOT."

"2) Trash: NOT."

"3) Feed beasts." All right, I'll do that.

"4) Band practice: 12:00 p.m.—Boog's garage."

The new material needs more work to be ready for Wednesday night, so we scheduled another extra practice, after which we're all invited over to Theo's for a Three Stooges' Fest on the tube. Marcus has the car today, but Boog's going to swing by to give me a ride.

My thoughts sorted, my agenda rolled out in front of me like a red carpet, I close my Planner and start to stand. The chair starts to stand with me, then drops with a thud.

Whuttha—?

I reach around and feel a sticky patch the size of an oven mitt on the seat of my tan corduroy pants. At the same time, the phone rings, startling me into swinging the other way, so my elbow side swipes what's left of my shake into what's left of my lap. Chaos begets chaos. I answer the phone with less than my customary courtesy. "Who is it and whadaya want?"

"Keith?" It's Mom, from Vermont. "Is everything okay?"

"Is everything okay?" I repeat the question through gritted teeth.

"Oh, everything's peachy, Mom. Couldn't be peachier. If it were any more peachy around here, it'd be an orchard!"

"Keith, what's the matter?" Mom says hesitantly. "Any problems I should know about?"

I take a deep breath, and force a note of reassurance into my voice. "No, no. I'll deal with it. No biggie. Really. It's fine. You all having a good time?"

"Wonderful," she says, sounding like she wants to quiz me further but is giving me the benefit of the doubt. After reminding me to turn the thermostat down at night, she wishes me Happy New Year again and hangs up.

I've calmed down some, but my resolve not to be my brother's zookeeper has hardened. I go upstairs to change. The stain is soy-sauce-colored, and I don't want it to set, so I grab the light stuff from my hamper, figuring I may as well do half a load. In our second-floor laundry room, I spray the pants liberally with some kind of miracle muck-off solution and toss the load in.

I hear Marcus padding back from the bathroom, yawning and stretching, sounding like an elephant with a sinus condition. As I'm adding detergent, he pokes his head in and throws a wadded-up wool sweater at me, cableknit in crimson and white, the Newbridge U colors. Angie knit it for his birthday.

"Hey, as long as you're doing wash, throw this in, willya? Thanks," he says, and starts to turn away.

I pitch it back at him. It's the moment I've been waiting for.

"I prefer not to," I say. "And you're not welcome."

He looks at me like I've grown another head, which in a way I have.

"You're already doing a load—it's no skin off your teeth. Come on, kid. I wanna wear it to the frat party tonight."

"No," I say pleasantly.

His expression reveals puzzled irritation, so I feel compelled to add, "Which part of the word no don't you understand, the n or the o?"

"What the hell is your problem?" he says.

"You're my problem." I set the water temp for warm and start the cycle. "Do your own damn laundry," I say, then push past him.



It's about 11 :30 when Boog drops me off. As I pass the laundry room on my way to the sack, I'm reminded to go in and switch the load from the washer to the dryer. The first thing I pull out is a pair of rose-and-tan-dappled corduroys. Next item, a pair of pretty pink jockey shorts. Third item, in all its newly washed and bleeding glory, Marcus's crimson sweater.

"Son of a—" I catch myself, seethe for a minute, then decide to fight fire with fire. I take Angie's handiwork, put it in the dryer, set the temperature for cotton, heavy, and turn it on to extra-long dry time.



NEWS FLASH DAY 2. THE FINKLESTEIN STRIKE: The effects of the strike protesting the unfair labor practices of the Finklestein family are beginning to be felt.

In an unprecedented nonegocentric outburst, Marcus Finklestein was heard to say, "Do you have any idea how much work Angie put into this?" Waving a crimson-and-pinkstriped cableknit sweater, formerly size XX Large, now size XX Petite, the ire of the Master of Messes was revealed in his pallor, roughly the hue of the shrunken sweater itself.

In a cool retort, Keith Finklestein replied, "Yep. I sure do. You shoulda thought of that before you sabotaged my load of light laundry."

NEWS FLASH DAY 3. THE FINKLESTEIN CONFLICT: In an uncanny display of mind over matter, Keith Finklestein was able to coax the Cherokee into the gas station, coasting on mere fumes. Refusing to be bested in this Battle of the Brothers, he calculated the amount of fuel needed to propel the vehicle over to Boog's house, to the library, and back home, in his ever-prudent fashion adding 10 percent for margin of error, which would be \$1.82 regular.

Asked for a comment, he said, "I prefer not to fuel Marcus's pathologically lazy habits."

NEWS FLASH-EXTRA! THE FINKLESTEIN CIVIL WAR: In a move designed to put economic pressure on the striker Keith Finklestein, Marcus Finklestein seized all the emergency funds from the cookie jar, citing the necessity to dine out, the kitchen being shut down due to numerous health and safety violations. The scuffle nearly came to fisticuffs, but Angie declared a 24-hour cease-fire, and arbitrated a settlement to the dispute, persuading the feuding Finklesteins to split the dough.



New Year's Eve morning I oversleep, extremely rare for me. I have to chalk it up to a reluctance to get up and wade through the dump that the house has become, just to get to the basement to do my morning routine. I'm beginning to wonder if the

price I'm paying is worth what I'm buying, pushing the point I'm trying to make to Marcus into seriously backfiring territory.

As I stand there and contemplate the task of tackling the Aegean Kitchen, Marcus comes tumbling in, after spending the night at the frat house, because even he can't take it anymore. We assume faceoff position, warily eyeballing each other.

I win the staring match.

"So," he says.

"So," I say.

"So okay," he says. "You win. I get the message. Think if we pooled what's left of the cookie jar money we'd have enough to hire a cleaning service?"

I shake my head. "I don't think we can afford what a cleaning service would charge. I mean, we're not talking a little light housekeeping, we're talking excavation."

He checks the clock on the stove which reads 11:37, and his shoulders sag in defeat.

"Mom and Dad'll be home tomorrow night. And I've got Angie and some people coming over for a little celebration tonight. Think we could make a dent in this if we worked together?"

Can the leopard really change his spots? I suss him out for a minute, try and gauge the level of sincerity operating here.

"What's in it for me?" I ask.

He seems to toy with a flippant response, but opts not to spew it. "Your brother's appreciation," he says. On a sincerity scale of one to ten, maybe a 7.2. Given his previous domestic employment history, he's a bad risk. But he is blood.

"Okay," I say. "You're on. But under two conditions. One, I give the work orders. Two, the nanosecond you slack off, I'm outta here. And if tonight is a repeat performance of—"

"Pizza, paper plates, and drinks straight from the can," he says, palms up. "No silverware, even. Swear."

Five hours, four loads of laundry, and three full cycles of the dishwasher later, and I'm feeling like Hercules. And to give credit where credit is due, Marcus didn't dog it once.

"Okay, run that last cycle of the dishwasher," I say. "I gotta shower and get outta here for my gig."

"Thanks, bro," he says, and sounds like he means it. "I'm gonna pop out and get some munchies."

I open my mouth to protest but he heads me off at the pass.

"And more trash bags and I'll have the car back, I know you've gotta get to your gig." He searches his pockets, then raises his eyebrows.

"Uh—can I borrow your keys?"

In light of the valiant effort he displayed, I cut the reformed slacker a little slack and hand them over. Then I race for the shower, do a two-minute hosedown, a quick shave, a Houdini-quick change, not forgetting to put my dirty clothes in my hamper, and head downstairs to pack my drums and go.

Exactly thirteen minutes later, after racing through the backroads of Yardley Hills to get over to the Eastfield Country Club, where we're playing the Junior New Year's Eve bash, I'm cussing myself out for my terminal and obscenely naive faith in human nature.

I take a few deep breaths so whoever answers the door of the fairly ritzy estate I've run out of gas alongside won't assume I've just escaped from the upstate facility for the criminally insane. A middle-aged woman, all decked out for celebrating the occasion, answers the door.

"We take deliveries in the back of the house," she informs me, impeccably polite, but with ever so small a hint of a frown.

"Please forgive me for disturbing you, ma'am," I say, pulling out as much polish as I can muster, "especially on a holiday, but I find myself in circumstances of a rather dire nature. An employment emergency, as it were. I've had the ill fortune to run out of gas, and I'm expected at Eastfield Country Club ten minutes ago, to provide the entertainment. Might there be a possibility of me availing myself of your telephone—local call—to arrange for alternative transportation?"

She visibly relaxes as I say Eastfield Country Club, and smiles.

"Of course. Right through the foyer, down the hall in the butler's pantry there's a phone."

She points in the direction and I nod my gratitude, and try to put a genteel confidence in my stride. I dial home, and Marcus picks up.

"Finklestein's Bakery, which crumb would you like to speak to?"

"There's only one person there who'd be crumbly enough to strand the brother who bailed him out of a sinking house—and left him with an empty gas tank!"

"Bam—Keith—I'm sorry, really—I didn't—okay, listen, where are you?"

"One of the Xanadu mansions on North Avenue, number six fifty-nine."

"Okay, stay put. Don't go anywhere." "

"Brilliant advice, Marcus. How can I go anywhere with no gas in the car?"

"Hang tight." He hangs up.

And I'm thinking I'd like to hang him from the nearest chandelier.

Recovering my surface aplomb, I walk back through the foyer and thank the woman, who's eyeing me a tad more suspiciously this time, probably from having heard me vent my spleen. I go outside and stand against the car, figuring I'll try to hitch a ride up to the club, then get Boog to drive me back in the van to pick up my kit. It'll cut into our setup time, but we should be okay.

Twenty minutes goes by before a pair of headlights slows down as I stick my thumb out. Angie's car pulls over. She jumps out, and I see she's wearing a familiar-looking red-and-pink sweater under her jacket, which relieves a little of the guilt I wasn't admitting I owned.

"Hey, Keith, Angie's Auto Service to the rescue," she says cheerfully, trotting around to the trunk and opening it. She starts to struggle with a five-gallon red plastic jerry jug of gasoline, and I can't believe what I'm seeing. Marcus, in the passenger seat, set at lounging angle. I step up to Angie and put a hand on her arm.

"No," I say, then walk around Marcus's side of the car, open the door, and wait. He has the grace to look ashamed. He sighs, lumbers out of the seat, goes and gets the can, and makes the fuel transfusion.

"There. Satisfied?"

"Yeah, till the next time," I say, and I can't help feeling some of the years of accumulated resentment have maybe solidified into something that'll never quite go away.

He eyeballs me for a long moment.

"Keith, someday, when your picture's on the cover of Rolling Stone for collecting your tenth Grammy Award, the same week it's on the cover of TIME magazine for being the youngest Supreme Court Justice ever appointed, some interviewer's gonna ask you to what do you attribute your incredible accomplishments, and you're gonna think for a minute, and then say, 'My big brother Marcus. He motivated me to do it all.'"

I shake my head. Not good enough.

"And I'll be first in line to get your autograph, kid," he says, and he lets something I haven't heard from him before come through in his voice.

Hard to pinpoint but it almost sounds like respect. He holds out his hand. I hesitate a second, then shake it.

"Happy New Year, bro," he says, his grin lacking the usual trace of smirk. He gets in the car, and they take off.



Being late throws my gig-pace slightly askew, but by the third tune of the first set, I'm in the groove. From where I sit behind the band, I have my own space carved out, a kind of sphere defined by the radius of my reach with stick in hand, centered in the music, laying layers of beats on top of the solid pulse of Danny's bass lines.

The place is packed pretty tight and divided roughly into two types: the budding heirs to CEO-ships, and the long-haired spawn of those mega-corporate types, whose rebellion against the establishment might take the form of publishing anarchist

newsletters out of their wing of their parents' cozy million-dollar digs in Yardley Hills and Eastfield.

Tom Mitchell's there, blinded by the glare of his own glorious ego, and totally ignoring Chloe as he flirts with Natalie Stewart. I make up my mind to chat Chloe up during the first break, but she disappears.

Next time I see her midway through the second set, her face looks blotchy, as if she's been crying, and she's wearing her glasses. Last number of the set is a Clapton medley, "Sunshine of Your Love" into "Crossroad Blues."

By this time, a segment of the crowd is fairly well lubricated. Theoretically there's no booze at this function, but there's a whole golf course worth of places to stash six-packs, or chill down some champagne. And being a private club, with most of these kids' parents inside doing their own partying to some Guy Lombardo clone band, there's no chaperon patrol ready to bust kids for drinking. But the head of the entertainment committee requested we make the following public service announcement.

"Speakin' of crossroads, people," Theo says into the mike, "we wanna help keep the roads safe tonight, for everyone. So if you or someone you care about is partyin' a little too hearty, do yourself a favor and make sure this New Year isn't your last year. Safe rides are available—no charge, and no questions asked."

He steps back, wipes his face with a towel, checks his watch, and flicks on the canned music we play between sets, this one timed to go into a drumroll countdown to the New Year. Theo and the other guys step off the platform, but I stay sitting behind my drums, feeling a little removed from the scene; usually by this time of the night I'm fairly mellow, but there's a tense edge to my mood tonight.

I've been watching Tom and Natalie do a tantalize-with-the-eyes thing all night, and now he slips his arms around her waist and the two of them start swaying to Stevie Ray and Double Trouble's version of "The Sky Is Crying", dancing in place. Chloe is hanging back, standing alone, and I can see she's fighting some internal battle.

Come on, Chloe, I'm silently rooting for her. Where's that sixth-grader who was gutsy enough to walk out on a slumber party when she got dissed beyond endurance?

Yes! I almost cheer out loud when she gives a sharp tug on Tom's sleeve. He shrugs her off, and she tugs again, this time hard enough to yank him out of step, and the look he turns on her is scary, almost feral.

It's as if his mask of cool slipped out of place for a second, and I'm thinking this guy has major rage problems, and is very bad news. He recovers his cool, and it's icy.

"You don't like it, take a hike." He turns his back on her.

Chloe looks like she's gonna fold, and I'm gripping my drumsticks so hard my knuckles are white, on the verge of furious at her myself, but for a completely different reason.

And I'm realizing the reason I feel so invested in the outcome of this affair is that it's connected to my take on the principle of justice and the fact that being fair involves respect, not just for another person, but for yourself. If you don't wanna be wall-to-wall carpet, you gotta get up off the floor.

I step out from behind my drums still holding my sticks, walk over to the edge of the platform we're performing on, and watch. Chloe's scanning the room, as if seeking an escape hatch, and her eyes, hazel and blue, stop at me.

On impulse, I do a two-handed stick-through-the-fingers roll. She looks down at her own hands, one of which is holding a large plastic cup of red punch, then stands on tiptoe, and dumps it over Tom's head.

Natalie jumps back but doesn't escape the deluge. She stands there for a second dripping with disgust, then shakes her head at Tom, turns on her heel, and stalks off.

Tom erupts like a volcano, spinning around and grabbing Chloe's arm like he did in the diner parking lot that night. This time I don't hesitate. I bound over, and I'm right there, bringing my forearm up inside his elbow. In a single swift rotation, I knock his arm away.

He looks momentarily nonplussed, then more enraged than a bull who's just gotten nudged by a cattle prod. The crowd edges back, providing a clearing. Peter's suddenly right behind me, and I know he's there for backup.

"Butt out, butthead," Tom growls.

"I prefer not to," I say.

You don't grow up as the younger brother of Marcus Finklestein without picking up a few survival tips. One of them is that most tyrants are, at the core, cowards, counting heavily on intimidation to make things go their way. Tom does the predictable thing and opts for the path of least resistance.

"We're outta here," he growls, and grabs Chloe by the arm again.

I knock it away again, and this time he turns, like he's ready to go toe-to-toe. I stand my ground, looking at Chloe, not at him. In the background, I hear Theo up at the mike, trying to keep the crowd under control by starting the one-minute countdown to midnight over the taped drumroll.

"FORTY-EIGHT... FORTY-SEVEN... "

"You have a New Year's resolution yet, Chloe?" I ask.

"No," she says.

"FORTY... THIRTY-NINE... "

"I have an extra one I don't need any more. It's yours if you want it."

An intrigued smile is tugging at the corners of her mouth and she lifts one eyebrow.

"Hey, scumwad, she's with me!"

"I don't think so." I look at Tom just long enough to make him start feeling like the idiot he is, then back to Chloe.

"About that resolution," I say. "There's only one catch. You have to use it before midnight. Deal?"

She considers, looking into my eyes, like she's searching for something, while the crowd chants on.

"TWENTY-SIX... TWENTY-FIVE... "

"Deal," she says, with a faint nod.

"Can I give you a lift home?" I ask.

"THIRTEEN... TWELVE... ELEVEN... "

"And by the way, your resolution? JUST SAY..."

I let it hang in the air.

"I'm outta here," Tom blusters. "You comin' or what?"

Chloe smiles at me.

"Yes," she says. "I'd like that."

Then she looks Tom straight in the eye.

"NO!"

"THREE... TWO... ONE... HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

As the tape goes into our Blues Thing rendition of "Auld Lang Syne," I hold out my arms and Chloe steps into them, and that hidden rhythm I've sensed before is right out front, and we're both dancing to it. I intertwine the fingers of my left hand with the fingers of her right. The fit feels perfect.

"You have great hands, too," she says.

And I'm feeling a Top-of-the-World feeling, at the top of a New Year, closing the old year out right. I picture last year's Daily Planner, and the last one on my old list of resolutions.

"Improve love life."

Check and Double-Check!!

