

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Erin Jones

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tuckered out

On a Thursday in June, a boy went to Rowley's Convenience Store and stole exactly six pieces of candy and a carton of milk.

That summer, heat dripped from every corner of the town. A stale haze overshadowed everything we did: young girls sat on their porch swings together with facemasks pressed to their faces over dry evenings with nothing to talk about, the opinion columns in the paper had remained empty since mid-May, and in the afternoons most of us went to the beach and sat in the sand, not one of us willing to make the effort to go into the water. It wasn't that nothing was happening; we knew that Lisa Mae was sleeping with the high school geometry teacher and that the Kirschners had secretly divorced, that Max and Wendy had done too much heroin and were out of town for good, that Jean-Pierre Harrington had dropped out of college and was back in the Harrington mansion on the rich end of town.

Except we had all known these things were coming, that they were happening and would continue to happen, that Lisa Mae was not the first or the last, and that the geometry teacher was not the only one. We knew that Harriet would eventually follow in Wendy's footsteps, and were all awaiting the day when she would completely lose it. Nothing in town ever happened suddenly; everything took form in slow increments so that we had time to catch up on news and confer with each other.

Two Wednesdays before the boy stole exactly six pieces of candy and a carton of milk, my Uncle Jim was standing by my kitchen sink.

He had just returned from a trip in New York City, where he said he was doing scientific research. But what he was actually doing— he told me— was watching reruns of pretty girls on TV and living on his friend's couch. He was coming to stay with us for the summer, and he arrived in typical New York City fashion: a button-down and fancy shoes, the kind of pants you knew had been ironed by his mother before his trip to New York that he had not worn until his return, briefcase in hand. He seemed to be interested in willfully forgetting this town. Otherwise, he would know that no one ever wore button-downs unless they were going to church, and nobody ever went to church anymore.

Uncle Jim stood beside my kitchen sink and, without turning to face me, told me to tell my father to tell my mother to buy new dishwashing liquid.

Because it was the summer, my skin was a bright bloody color from all the time I was spending in the sun without sunscreen, not that anyone noticed. My kitchen was stuffy, the tile under my bare feet lukewarm. Sweat dribbled down the middle of my back, following the ridges of my spine. Snot hung onto the corner of my right nostril. I lifted a hand to wipe it off, smeared it on my swimsuit. It absorbed.

I had no time for Uncle Jim because we had just bought dishwashing liquid, but also because Miller was going to bring booze down to the beach and I was running late and hungry. My stomach gurgled.

"OK," I said, and slipped out of the kitchen and into the living room and out the door and down the porch steps before he could say anything else.

The asphalt that day was warm and sticky. It felt like little asphalt bits were embedding themselves into my feet, even as I hopped on my toes all the way across the street until I reached the grassy Kirschner lawn— praying Mr. Kirschner was not watching from his study window— and down the rocks to the beach.

Even with the sunlight beating down from above, the beach was dull. Maria and Frances lay on thin beach towels with facemasks on even though it was noon and seconds away from being sunburnt. Lisa Mae sat in the sand with a paperback turned upside down. Miller was shirtless, sharing a bottle of vodka with Drew. Everyone was silent and sufficiently pasty-faced.

“Guess what?” Maria mumbled, from her facemask-plastered face.

Frances grunted.

“Apparently Wendy is dead. Her mother was sobbing this morning. Like, on the phone.”

We grunted.

I sat myself down on a corner of Frances’s beach towel and stayed there for a minute, trying to keep my thighs from sticking to each other. My armpits slid, slick and sweaty against the tops of my kneecaps. I kept my head down, staring down at a beer that Miller had tossed me. I hooked my fingers between my toes and tried not to think. Time went by faster that way.

Maria continued, “Also, Max’s father is back in town. Crazy.”

No one made a sound. I felt mucus dripping down my nose again and reached up to intercept it. Lisa Mae started scratching her mosquito bite. Miller asked me if I wanted another beer. Drew was fishing in his own nose, picking at it with a dirty fingernail.

We sat like that for a very long time, twisting our bodies to grab another can of beer or asking nobody in particular if they wanted to go into the water. The sun set and my drying sweat stayed cool and slightly damp against my shorts. The asphalt was lukewarm on my way back.

Two days later, I was trying to get the TV to work for Uncle Jim. He was spread out over our tiny sofa, long bare feet hanging off the edges. His dress shirt was unbuttoned all the way down, wrinkled and stained with something brown. He burped. The house was empty. My parents had gone out to drink and dance over at Lisa Mae’s house, but Uncle Jim had stayed because he didn’t want to miss his football game.

It was broken. My back hurt from bending over the fat TV while pretending like I knew how to fix it.

Uncle Jim let out a soft snore before mumbling something incoherent. He dropped the bottle he’d been holding and alcohol leaked into my mother’s favorite rug. She would be livid.

At this point, my mouth tasted like piss. Everything in me ached from falling asleep the wrong way at the beach today, and my throat was dry even after having some of Miller’s gin. I needed to brush my teeth. Maria had told me today that they were turning yellow.

I leaned down to snatch tissues from the coffee table and pressed them to the rug, even though the liquid had already made a large, brown stain. It smelled putrid and rich.

“Uncle Jim,” I called from my place on the floor. “I can’t fix this.”

His body jerked in nine different directions as if being controlled by puppet strings. He grunted before opening his eyes, acknowledging me before a frown took over his face.

“Where’s my drink, kid?” Disoriented, he sat up, grabbing at his hairy chest as if he would find his bottle there. “Get me another one,” he ordered, before letting out a heavy breath and collapsing back on the couch.

He went through half of his new bottle in one go, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand and onto his crumpled dress pants. His body lay flipped onto one side, folded but loose-limbed. I wished I had the TV to drown out his snoring.

I went and brushed my teeth and envisioned the brush scraping off the yellows coating my teeth and the old food

stuck between everything. My gums bled.

On Saturday morning, I woke up with severe neck pain. The ache reached out from under the bone of my shoulder to the bottom of my right ear. I traced the pain and pressed my fingers against the skin, picked at the dead skin there and watched as white flakes disappeared off into space. I lifted my finger to my face and scraped off excess skin from under the nail, closed my morning-crusty eyes before opening them again.

I stumbled into the hallway and knew that my parents hadn't come back last night. There were no muddy tracks leading up to the master bedroom, only the familiar piss stains on the wall from when we had tried to foster dogs. I lifted my foot up and smelled it, decided it was OK, and went downstairs to the kitchen. My mouth tasted like an animal had died there, so I swiped a pack of gum from the kitchen counter. We kept stacks there; most mornings we were too worn-out to bother with the brushing.

Uncle Jim was still snoring on the couch, less of a roar and more of a Saturday-morning hum. I took a dirty mug and ran through it with water, opened the refrigerator, and sniffed the carton of milk before pouring it into the mug.

I heard Uncle Jim slam onto the coffee table. He was up, half draped across the coffee table. He massaged his limbs before shuffling to the kitchen table. He took a seat and stared at me. I handed him the mug of milk.

"Good morning," I said, trying to talk around fresh canker sores in two corners of my mouth. He grunted and, without looking at anything in particular, downed the entire mug of milk. He spat something black and spindly afterwards and tossed it to me.

I looked down at the mug. A spider, few limbs missing, lay in the middle of the mug. I wrinkled my nose. We never knew how the spiders made it into the food.

Uncle Jim was now asleep on the kitchen table.

I made myself a sandwich with the cheese that was a few days past the expiry date and picked out a spider leg sticking out the corner of the block.

Uncle Jim started snoring again, pausing in-between for a half-lucid burp. The air stank of something resembling beer and milk. I inhaled.

After, I tossed the cheese-coated knife into the sink and tried to pick out the white bits rotting in my teeth with a grimy mirror tacked to the wall.

My parents arrived at sunset, in a flurry of tiredness and mundane drunkenness. I had seen them from a distance, hopping home on one foot after slicing the bottom of my right foot on a sharp rock at the beach. They were slow enough that I reached home at the same time they did.

They had nursed hangovers with more alcohol, but weren't drunk enough yet to be Uncle Jim, who had stumbled off into a different part of the house. I pressed a hand against the damp wall and made my way to the bathroom.

My mother was laughing, soil spread over her face from the potted plant she had tripped over on her way in. My father swayed and sat down next to her. I took the dirty first-floor bathroom doorknob and turned.

Uncle Jim's face sagged against the toilet seat, legs at an awkward angle and hands loosely grasping the sides of the toilet. His eyes were open, bloodshot and vacant. The bathroom stank of something even I couldn't identify. I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, caked in fingerprints and dried blood and leftover mucus.

I propped my foot up against the grimy sink and reached into the medicine cabinet to find gauze. Of course, we had none, so I turned on the tap and watched the blood run out of the slit in my skin and swirl in the clogged sink. I tried to jam it open, but shut the tap before the sink could overflow when that didn't work.

The sink water was a curious mixture of pink and dirt and skin. I pressed the front of my shirt against my foot, winced.

Then I took Uncle Jim's armpit and helped him into a sitting position. His eyes, still unfocused, made an effort to center themselves. He murmured something and burped. I tried to get him to stand, but he was too heavy, landing both of us on the bathroom floor. The light in the bathroom burst.

My foot started bleeding again. Sweat trickled down my scalp and along my ears.

I swore. "Mom!"

One of my canker sores ripped, leaking blood into my gums and in between my molars.

Three teeth ached at the back of my mouth. Uncle Jim burped again.

Rowley's Convenience Store was one of the only places in town that had their AC running all day. Sometimes, when Mr. Rowley wasn't looking, me and Miller and Maria and Frances and Drew and Lisa Mae would sit with our butts against the cool window glass. We would take turns with our limbs, pressing hot arms or legs or cheeks to cool down.

Mr. Rowley was a scary kind of guy, the kind of scary that crossed his arms at the Sunday school brunches before they stopped being a thing and gave you big side-eye when he walked past you on the street, as if he expected the entire world to be against him.

He was fair, though, and we got it. Occasionally, if you were young and innocent-looking enough, he would give you some leftover candy. Me and Miller and all them had transcended into the age of not-young-enough-for-candy but not-old-enough-to-be-arrested, and I don't think he knew what to do with the lot of us. It was always us older kids that he suspected and never any of the smaller ones. The smaller ones always stuck to their mothers and even though they spread too much snot and tears around his store, it wasn't anything to be too worried about.

So when a boy walked into his store and picked out six pieces of candy from his candy bowl, he didn't think too much about it. Usually, kids liked picking out all the individual colors of candy to line them up in a neat little row.

I was there that Thursday. Uncle Jim had decided to nurse his hangover with gin and was stumbling around Rowley's Convenience Store. His eyes were bloodshot, pupils pinpoint tiny, and he had been dozing off all morning. I had finally found gauze to wrap my foot in, and was shuffling in his wake.

Mr. Rowley had just noticed us and I was positive we were both getting in loads of trouble; his mouth had thinned into a straight line and he was headed straight in our direction. I motioned for Uncle Jim to make his way to the glass doors, poking at his stained button-down and gently shoving him towards the exit.

Suddenly, as Uncle Jim took a big, loping step in the right direction, a blurry figure zipped past him and knocked his drink out of his hand.

"Hey!" he growled, catching the boy by the back of his shirt. "Mother—"

He took a heavy breath and swayed a little bit. He swung a fist at the boy. Six pieces of candy scattered over the tiles. The carton of milk burst and formed a puddle.

I made a needy grab towards Uncle Jim's shoulder.

"Stop that right now!" shouted Mr. Rowley, running to where Uncle Jim was now attacking the boy's stomach. Blood was leaking out of the boy's closed eyelid. Underneath him, the milk fanned out like wings, or a blood stain.

Mr. Rowley was on the telephone now, trying to reach the cops who probably weren't even at the station.

Then, Uncle Jim slumped on top of the boy, completely gone. His forehead shone in sunlight and summer sweat.

Mr. Rowley looked at me before frowning into the telephone.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, no, yes.” He glanced at me. “Get out and get your parents in here, kid.”

For the first time since mid-May, the opinion column was finally filled with a stretched-out image of Uncle Jim. It was black-and-white, printed on the cheap paper the newspaper used, and the shadows were in all the wrong places.

Uncle Jim had been found all coked-up and high on heroin, spread out on the floor of Rowley’s Convenience Store, which was both surprising and not, because we had already watched Max and Wendy descend that hell. It turned out that the boy had been Max’s father’s illegitimate son, who, adorably enough, Max’s father still cared a great deal about. Apparently, he had gone on and punched through his own TV. Eventually, I knew that we would all go back to picking at our hangnails and sweating through the rest of summer. For now, though, I cut up Uncle Jim’s photograph in the paper and taped it in front of our broken TV. His eyes looked washed out. It was fitting.

I guess most people had really thought he was doing scientific research instead of pretty girls in New York, though, which made it so much harder to believe. It had all happened too fast— two weeks ago, hadn’t he had those pants ironed?