

Picking

Winner of the Willow Springs Fiction Award

This is what I did to the lady with the polka-dot dog. It wasn't that she was a bitch or anything. I didn't know her really, though I think she was the one who called the cops on me that first time in the park when Alex and I were messing around, back by the river. I think maybe she saw me try to hide the BB gun under my shirt.

I saw her walk that dog every day, I bet sometimes twice a day. We'd be turning out of the woods along the river trail and there she'd be—crossing the bridge, walking pretty fast. It was like how in old movies they flip the calendar pages really fast, swirl them and kaleidoscope them to show that time has passed. Well, I could do it with her—walk her north, south, east, west, in sunshine, rain, and snow, her and that meek-looking mutt. She's in shorts, embroidered jacket, or black parka, with kids or without. I'm just coming out from behind the field house after a smoke, or Bill D. and me, we're by the fire pit, or we're looking at *Playboy*, or dividing up a quarter ounce.

I guess the first thing I did was set her garbage on fire. That was the night I think she called the police on me for the BB gun. It was real hot that night and the moon was full. We'd been hanging out all day, playing cards at Alex's in the afternoon when his mom was at work, swimming at Olsen Pool until closing, messing around with the BB gun after that. Before we split up we decided to sneak out later and meet up at 3:00 in the morning at the vacant lot down the block from me, then we rode to Forest Park right down the street from my house. It was exciting to sneak out and we all liked to tell how we'd managed it. Me—I could practically walk out and slam the door behind me, my mom was always that tired from either one of her two jackshit jobs. Though sometimes when she worked the late shift at the restaurant, she'd fall asleep sitting up in the chair across from the TV, her tips counted out on the table

in front of her, little towers of coins, and then I'd actually have to be sneaky or at least quiet to get out. Once we were down at the park, we played on the swings for a while after we made sure the cops weren't in the parking lot. Sean had stolen a bunch of Marlboros off his dad and we all sat up in the tower part of the jungle gym, smoking.

Sean showed us the Zippo he'd taken from his brother who'd stolen it from Tanehill Pharmacy. It was one of those old fashioned kinds where the cover slicked open fast and it made you feel cool when you did it right. We all practiced it. It was like drawing a gun. You'd open the cover with the side of your hand, strike your thumb just once on that little wheely part to light it, and swipe the cover down to close it in your hand. It would make that metallic thunk when you closed it good and solid. I liked just making the cover catch and swing, swing and catch. It could look so smooth if you did it right.

Then Alex took a stick and he tried lighting it on fire and he got it going just a little bit and then it went out but we pretended it was a torch—the weak ember, about as bright as a burnt-out sparkler, and we did like we were Olympic runners and we passed this thing. Then we started leaves on fire but that didn't work so good either so Sean found an old gum packet near the trash. It was one of those 15-pack kinds and all the white inner sleeves were still in the packet and they fanned out just enough to catch the fire. And while it was on fire Sean picked it up with a stick and put it in the garbage can near the bench and it lit some things in the can. There was a short inflammation, I think you'd call it that, and then the sogginess of the garbage just kind of put it out.

So that gives me an idea when we all look around for something else that'll burn good and I remember it's garbage night so we ride our bikes first down Simpson, then up Estes. We come to the polka-dot dog lady's house and it's all dark. Air conditioners are humming in this heat and I'm glad not to hear those cicadas that drone so much they give me a headache. And neat as could be, wouldn't you know, she has her recycling in two big blue bins and garbage galore in three of those big brown Rubbermaid containers. The last one has its cap off and a bag of Scot's fertilizer sticks out. We ride up there and I got the Zippo and I light the corner of the fertilizer bag at one end of the neat row of trash and I go back to the curb and light one newspaper in the recycling bin at the other end. And I get them both going good 'cause the other guys are far down the street by this time and I want them to see what I'm doing.

We go back to the park and we lay the bikes in the weeds and lie down in the bushes and stuff behind the backstop and we look down the street. And I'm pissed at Sean because he gave a little yelp as he rode away, like it isn't four in the morning and we didn't just do something bad. But no lights came on at any windows so we settled in at the park to watch. Wouldn't you know that bag of fertilizer lit like rocket fuel. We couldn't fucking believe it. The can next to it started on fire. The plastic lid just kind of ignited and Sean asks me what it was I lit and when I say an old bag of fertilizer he says, "Shit, Lee, don't you know that's what they used in the Oklahoma bombing?" Then I realize he's right and I look down at the two cans on the one end of the line of garbage and see them going and then the recycling bin on the far end is lit up too. I decide to leave before the cops come around or a neighbor calls the fire department.

I heard the next morning the lady found nothing there but burn spots on the lawn, the Rubbermaid plastic melted into the charred ground and some of the bottles and cans from the second recycling bin that didn't burn. It was a mess I guess but I only chanced riding by her house one time for the rest of the summer 'cause I didn't want her seeing me by her house. I still saw her every day walking that dumb dog but at least she didn't see me anywhere near her house.

That was the first time I picked on her. The next time Sean did it for me and really it was no big deal and not planned or anything. I guess I was just feeling like getting in trouble and she was the first person I thought of when I needed someone to do trouble to. After all, we hadn't gotten caught before. See, we were standing by the water fountain and over near the traffic island was a big pile of turd and we hadn't seen the polka-dot dog lady all day. First I try to push Sean into it so he'd step on it but when that didn't work he said, "Eat shit, Lee. Eat shit and die." And I told him I'd pick it up and fling it at him if he didn't shut up and somehow it got arranged that I'd pick it up with my bare hands if he'd ride it over to her house and put it on the welcome mat. And since we'd both feel like chickenshit if it didn't happen after we dared each other, I did it, I picked it up and put it on this old paper plate Sean had picked out of the garbage and then he rode it over and did it quick as he could. He just did it and he didn't look around when he did it. He just went as fast as he could like a bomber on a suicide mission or something. I ran my hand under the pump for a long time and he came back with the empty paper plate and threw it at me like a Frisbee. Then I got him

wet by putting my thumb on the pump nozzle and then we rode over to Steve's, a guy on the west end of town, to see if we could cop some weed. I forgot all about it really.

Then one day after that, I see the polka-dot dog lady over by the Catholic church and wouldn't you know she's picking up a turd from the grass in front of OLM, nonchalant as could be about picking up shit. I see her try to grab hold of it and then reverse the bag that's over her hand and tie it, and she walks down the street with the stuff dangling back and forth as she and that dog saunter—saunter, yeah that's the word for it—down to Randall Road where there's a garbage can. And it gets me thinking about her. So later when we're all the way at West Park and Sean is skateboarding holding onto the back of Matt's bike, and he wipes out, like we knew he would, and we go to the fountain to get a drink and sit and we see a pile of you-know-what and I point to it and say, "Too bad the polka-dot dog lady ain't here. She's the fastest shit picker upper," and we all crack up because it sounds so stupid, just like that commercial for paper towels. And when we're stoned we all manage to use it a couple of times, it's like a key phrase for us for a while. We'd refer to her as shit picker upper and once or twice we'd even cough, say it as she went by, but we'd usually do it when we were far enough away that she couldn't understand us. And for a while I called her Bountiful after the paper towels but that name never really stuck—too stupid. And once when we were coughing it, Sean gets all retarded and says kind of loud, "Shit picker upper, suck my dick," and we all laugh but really I'm kind of sick of the way he's always showing off with lame stuff. He thinks he's so cool.

The final thing happened later. Really we saw the bitch and her dog so much. Once or even twice a day she walked the mutt. Maybe it'd be her and her little boys and they'd stay at the park. That dog would dig in the sand and bury its head or whatever. And I heard those kids laughing about how sandy its nose got. I just knew they'd make some joke about sandwiches or some other lame pun—it was that kind of moment. We tried not to be noticed by her, or any grown-up for that matter, but sometimes we just had to ride through the park. Her little boys would look up at us as we rode away. The younger one took his finger out of his mouth to point at us as we sped past on our bikes. I liked that little one. He was cool but the other kid was always screaming and whining about something.

Anyway, the grand finale came in the beginning of fall, October I think, when it was still nice to be out but the bugs were all gone since

we'd already had a freeze or something. We still had some coverage in the bushes and trees around the river trail where we'd pulled a picnic bench into the woods. Alex and his cousin and Sean had copped two six-packs from Alex's cousin's neighbor's house in Oakwood Acres. The garage was open and there was a refrigerator stocked with pop and beer. When Alex rode by, they'd seen the lady leave with her kids and the other car was gone and the house looked deserted so the guys rode around the block and then went back there and into the garage and they each took a six pack under their jackets and rode away. They were like so happy about this; they called it their "beer heist." They'd brought the beers to the park and found me riding around so we all went back to our picnic bench. It just so happened that Alex had his Swiss Army knife on him so we decided to shoot the beers. We put a hole by the bottom and we put this to our mouths and then we popped the top and the beer would rush down our throats. I managed to shoot one whole can, well, practically. We also drank some regular but before we'd drunk all the beer, Matt drove up through the woods. It scared us all when we heard the noise of someone coming. We all tried to put our beers under the table to hide them. He pulls up real cool like, just braking at the last minute, his bike stopping just short of the table and out of the pouch of his jacket, with real flourish, he pulls a jay. Doesn't it taste good to drink beers and smoke at the same time? I know why people go to bars. Too bad every day after school couldn't be like this.

We get to talking and wouldn't you know it, the subject of the polka-dot dog lady comes up. Sean sings kind of like the commercial, "Quickest shit picker upper," and we all laugh and we start to talk about the dog—how did it get those spots, was it part Dalmatian or maybe Spaniel or Pointer? Then he asks, "Did you ever notice that that dog has a black spot on its side like an upside down heart?" All of us had noticed it and we all noticed the dog's purple collar and we all knew the dog's name, Maggie.

Sean says, "They should of named her Cupid."

Then, not thinking at all, I ask, "Does anyone know her name?" and no one does 'cause we always hear her being called Mom and then like a fool, I ask if anyone knows what color eyes she has. The question just popped out of me but I knew when I said it that it was mistake my even asking it. And of course no one knows but me and all the guys just look my way for the answer. A way long time ago I noticed her eyes. She gave me a look once, though I didn't tell this to the guys, but I did notice the color of her eyes—blue. The way she looked at me then it

was like she wanted to say something almost or even more, it was like she wanted me to say something but I turned away real fast.

So they all jump on my case, giving me grief 'cause I know what color her eyes are. Well, I take my ration of it and laugh it off but it did bother me—them saying I had a crush on her or something. It was typical Sean too. Always the mouthy one. “You probably just want to play with her dog, huh Lee? Don't you know it's pussy you want, not puppy?” They all laughed. Sean could always make a joke.

Then Alex starts talking about the BB gun and the time we hit the duck back here on the river trail. That was earlier in the day of the famous garbage fire. That was when I thought she saw me try to hide the gun under my shirt, holding it against me, with my arm stiff at my side.

Out of all us, Alex was the one who got the biggest thrill out of shooting that gun. I hated it and it was mine. The whole thing was trouble just waiting to happen and I always knew that. I hated having it pointed at me when kids played with it in my room. I hated the way people glommed onto it automatically, how everyone picked it up, aimed and tried to sight it, and pretended to shoot. I was glad to always be out of ammo, to have an excuse not to use that thing. To be honest, it scared me a little. The whole gun thing, I'm not into it, not like Alex. He stroked that baby. He always talked about it and the way he liked it I finally got to realize what the word covet meant—he coveted that BB gun. It was one thing I had over Alex. I had the BB gun and he had a love for it.

So once he was a little buzzed he did what he always did, started talking about the BB gun. “Remember when we were down by the big sewer pipe and I shot that duck?” and he does his little shooting routine and he even shudders a little with imaginary recoil. The bad thing was that Alex hadn't killed the duck when he shot it but had injured it by its back leg, shot it in the body close to a nerve to the leg or something, because the duck couldn't even waddle away from there. What was awful was the noise it made, it drove us away, so loud and pathetic, like when a kid you hit starts crying really loud, right away, and you just wish it'd be quiet. We ran back toward the field house and I tried to stuff the gun under my shirt and huffed it home. It was dark. We saw her walking that dog and her kids through the park, probably coming home from the Dairy Queen. They were walking slow like it had really been a far way for them. The one kid was whining about something, then looked at us and got quiet. That's one reason I think they saw the BB gun 'cause he

shut up so quick and then they seemed to hustle it home, far as I could tell anyway 'cause I was hustling too.

After we'd shot the BB gun, we split up so we didn't have time to talk about what we'd done until later, after we'd all met up by the vacant lot and gone to the park. Alex was like still high off it some six hours later, he liked shooting that much. Me, my adrenaline had been pumping hard and the feeling of it was still fresh to me but I wasn't like Alex. And Sean, who always has something to say, said, "That sure is a lame duck now" and we all cracked up. Sean ended up laughing so hard snot almost came out his nose and that got us going again. But it all made such sense to us, we'd never heard that expression used for what it really means and it seemed so like obvious and so funny.

It wasn't till the next day that the cops came by to talk to me, said they'd had a report about a BB gun in the park and some garbage fires, made my older brother come out of the house and talk to them since Ma was at work. My brother Dwayne just shook his head real sorry like when the cops talked, like he was taking. In all they said, looking over to me with a wait-till-I-tell look. He said real polite that we were all home last night and that he'd make sure his little brother didn't do nothing wrong in the future. He said he'd keep his eye on me and that one cop—Drabowski, I think or something like that—said, "Good. We'll be watching out for Lee too," and he looked me straight in the eyes. They tried to look tough when they left, touching their guns, looking back to us on the porch a couple of times. And I was scared for a while, watching the back of the police car going down my street. Then Dwayne took hold of my shoulder and looked at me and laughed, "Be careful," he said, "I don't want the cops coming here."

The cops never said anything to anyone else, just me. When I told Alex what that Drabowski cop said it was almost like it didn't register with him. He didn't care, he said, the cops didn't for sure know it was us or anything, forget about it. Now every time Alex was a little stoned he liked to remember the duck shooting and we had to relive it with him. And after this latest reenactment, Alex says, "only this time I hit that mother of a duck right through its tiny little heart." Then Sean says, "I wonder if you could shoot that dog in the heart, the heart on its fur." And it comes out of nowhere except that everything has two meanings with Sean.

So we all sit around in dazed wonder, pondering this—shooting a dog in the heart, the upside down heart-shaped black spot on the dog's

side—till I put down the idea totally and say, “Let’s go to Washington Park and see what girls are hanging out.”

But now this idea of Sean’s is in Alex’s head and you can see the wheels start turning. And Matt says, “Funny you should talk about shooting, Sean,” and I know something is up between the two of them, “’cause not only did I secure us a high, I got us a little ammo too. My brother got me some BBs from Wal-Mart.”

It all worked out so smooth. They had the idea and suddenly the means. It was like serendipity but serendipity for the bad, whatever that’s called. Sean and Matt must have planned it out, knew Alex would want to shoot. All they needed was my gun, which I had to give them even though I balked at first, “No, come on you guys, let’s just go to Washington Park and see who’s there. And if no one is there, we can come back.” But they didn’t like that idea and I couldn’t be a total weenie so I finally said okay and we rode our bikes to my house to get the gun but I never really thought they were going to shoot the polka-dot dog.

And before we head out, Sean the ever-mouthy says, “What two letters make a bitch wail? . . .” and we know it’s going to be stupid and we’re all ready to groan when he says, “BB.”

We ride to my house and I go in while they wait outside. My mother is not there—no surprise—and Dwayne is still at work too so I don’t really have to sneak it. I just get the thing from under my bed and stuff it up my Starter jacket and awkwardly hold it while I get on my bike, holding on with one hand, and pedal, the stupid thing hitting and bumping into my legs, and if I don’t sit up straight, the barrel end scrapes against my chest bone. By the time I follow the guys back to the park, Alex is chanting “what two letters, what two letters,” as he rides, with his cousin on the handlebars, up the river trail right to the big sewer drain-off pipe, and I think he’s just like a salmon trying to spawn, he has to return to the same site to shoot. And I’m wishing I weren’t even there. But we get off our bikes and Alex waits for me to hand him the gun so he can load the BBs. And he looks to Matt for the BBs like it’s completely understood he’s going to be the one who does the shooting. So Matt gives him the box and I give him the gun and since I do, I know I’ve lost all control but it seemed like it was meant to happen.

Once he loads it, he takes this military posture and he starts running, all bent low, down the river trail to behind the houses on Estes and now I think maybe that polka-dot dog is in for it. Part of me just hates this whole thing and I’m not just saying that now. I ran behind them, way

behind them. Alex and Sean and Alex's cousin and Matt are going pretty fast, cutting through the bushes like they're GI Joe or something. On one part of the river trail, behind the third house down, the owner tried to prevent us from walking back there so he had the fence extended all the way down, practically in the river and it was hard to climb around this fence wall thing and stay on the bank. I don't know how Alex did it so fast with the gun in his hand. But real quick, him and the guys reach the narrow strip of bank behind the polka-dot dog's house. And just like everything else that worked out, wouldn't you know the dumb dog was out in the yard, sniffing around. Alex said that before she could start barking, he and the guys stopped behind some evergreens and he lifted the gun and took aim and let go some. He swears to this day he never saw the bigger kid, the stupid one in his soccer uniform over by the bush with the bright red leaves (which I since learned is called Burning Bush—which somehow all seems to fit). And by the time he lets go some and the kid starts screaming and the dog starts yapping and howlin, I'm not even past that fence obstacle thing and the four of them are running at me and then we're tearing it out of there, to our bikes, to pedal out of the park and back to my bedroom so we can put that damn gun back under my bed. But before we leave, Alex, the fuckhead, hands me the gun to put under my jacket. He has to ride his cousin on his handlebars so like an idiot, I take the gun and we go as fast as we can out of there, back to my house because it's the closest. All I needed was for someone to see me.

This time when Alex's talking about the shooting he's not reliving the excitement so much as trying to explain it away, "That dog was over by the plastic flamingo and the right side, the side with the heart, was showing, and she was just sniffing like she didn't even hear us coming or anything. And it was a perfect shot, a perfect line of vision, it was like in a movie or something, and I pulled the trigger and that kid shows up in his little red soccer uniform, red shorts, red socks, and I think I hit him 'cause he was screaming and he might have come up in the middle. I don't know. I don't think I hit him but I don't know. And then they both started wailing. I don't know."

Alex looked like he might cry, like he was almost about to, which we'd never seen before. His cousin was crying already, not making any noise really but he was crying all the same. Of course, he's only 10 so what do you expect? Alex was tough but now he's like all excited but not in a good way. And Sean for once is quiet, which we all know is

unusual and he gets this moony face on and those freckled cheeks get all splotchy and stuff. Matt just keeps saying, “Oh, shit, oh shit,” over and over. And I’m just asking again and again, “What happened Alex? Remember more.”

And it wasn’t ten minutes before the cops showed, right to my door. Like everything else that happened, it was like we all expected them to come and I got out the gun when they asked for it right away. None of us had anything smart to say. It was like the whole thing just took all our energy or something. All the events just unfolded and we were there for the ride and this was part of it too—being put in a police car, our parents called at work or wherever (Sean’s old man was at the bar). And the cops took us into separate rooms and no one tells us what happened to the kid or the dog. They just asked again and again what happened, who did the shooting, why did we pick that yard, and who were we trying to hit, the dog or the boy, and were we on anything, what kind of drugs. I think they took turns till all five of us told all of them our story and then our parents showed up and only after all that do we find out that Alex hit the dog (no one asks was it hit in the heart though knowing Alex, I bet he’d want to know how good his aim was this time). On top of that, Alex hit the kid in the leg. The dog would have to be put to sleep, the word they used was “destroyed.” The kid, we’re lucky, only needed some stitches and was treated in the emergency room. When they tell me this, then that I realize I’m gonna have to see her again. I can picture her taking her little boy and putting him in front of the TV. He’d have a bandage on his leg and she’d give him a glass of milk with a straw and fluff his pillows and give him his teddy bear and his little brother would come up to him and they’d make a cozy picture like the ones in the Goofus and Gallant in those lame *Children’s Highlights* in the doctor’s office. They’d be Gallant’s family, all polite and everything and helping the kid recover but they’d be missing something. Maggie’s wet nose wouldn’t be on the boy’s leg and the black-and-white head couldn’t squeeze between them. Now it was the polka-dot dog lady and her kids without the dog and me a dog killer, a dog destroyer. God. Then the cops told us we’re released to our parents until our court date except Alex ‘cause he did the shooting.

Because it was my BB gun and because I’ve been picked up for shoplifting and curfew a couple times before (and because, I think, because my mother tells them she can’t handle me anymore), I have to go to the detention home out in the sticks. And actually it isn’t that

bad; some of the guys are okay and we have some horses we take care of. And one thing good is that the guy who runs the stable is okay; he used to be a stock broker and maybe he's 40 but he's pretty cool (I think he's smoked pot before). I make lots of jokes about him; he such an easy target. He says I'm a good rider, that I have natural hands that'll show the horse just how to go.

He says I should stick with it though it's murder on me. My legs and back were sore the whole first two months I was here. They had to find me some regular jeans 'cause the baggy ones I had just rubbed raw the inside of my legs like you wouldn't believe. And my hands and arms are always blistered or cut. And that's hard for me cause once I get a cut I just can't stop picking at it. I just can't help myself. I have to pick it and before I know, it's gone—the scab is off and I'm bleeding. The nurse at my old school always told me not to, “Lee, you've got to stop picking these scabs,” she'd say, “They'll fester soon, become infected.” Fester soon. Yeah, really. But when we're all listening to Ms. Hollis reading *Bridge to Terabithia* or some other dumb book, my fingers stray from being folded and I pick, at first just the ultra-dry stuff at the edges and then sooner or later the whole crater top will launch off, an island lost in the stream. I bleed once a day. Lots of times I won't even go get a Band-Aid and sometimes I keep it hidden so no one knows. It's something I know I've got to stop.