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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

KENNY

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KENNY

The rifle stock leaned against the edge of the car seat next to the driver. The butt rested on the floorboard, the barrel pointed up and backwards toward the rear window. The driver sat with his hands crossed on his lap. He stared out the front window over the top of the steering wheel. Outside the air was still. Thin high clouds dimmed the light from the stars. The only sound came from the occasional car passing on the nearby highway. The driver paid no attention to them. He could see them as they passed but knew that they could not see him. Where he had parked in the roadside grove of trees, he and the car were hidden from view. He came here often. He liked the solitude. Tonight it was even more special. It would be different or maybe not, he still did not know.

His thought again about other times and places.

Christmas morning. The bright winter sunshine was already streaming through his window. He was surprised that he had slept so late. He had excitedly run from his bedroom to the living room and the presents stacked beneath the tree. Even at the age of 10, he still had the Christmas joy of a younger boy. His mother, father and older sister were already up. As he burst into the room he was oblivious to the prepubescent erection with which he had awakened. It had happened before and he was confused by it, but this morning his thoughts were only of Christmas. It was only after his father screamed at him that he realized his penis was poking out through the fly of his pajamas. His face reddened in shame as his father grabbed his arm and jerked him back into his bedroom.

“What the hell are you doing? Don't you know your mother and sister saw you?”

He didn't know what to do or say. His eyes filled with tears as his father shoved him backwards onto his bed. His confusion grew. What had he done wrong? He didn't know what caused his penis to grow; he didn't make it happen; he didn't want it to happen. It made him afraid.

He tried to make sense of everything, but he couldn't. All he could think is that he had done something wrong, something dirty and shameful. He turned his head and cried into his pillow.

“I'm sorry,” he burbled through his sobs.

His father balled up his fist and struck him on the side of his head. “Shut up,” he shouted. “Stop your belly-ackin'. And don't come out until your decent.”

He cried a long time but even when he stopped he was afraid to come out of his room. He was embarrassed and afraid to face his mother and sister. He didn't know what to do. It was Christmas and he didn't know what to do.

He heard another car on the highway. The sound of the engine and the tires on the macadam increasing and then receding as it passed. At this time of night there wasn't much traffic. He opened the car door and got out.

Standing by the front fender, he took a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, extracted one and lit it with a match. He set the cigarette package on the hood rather than

putting it back in his pocket. He inhaled the smoke, blew it out and looked at the glowing tip of the cigarette. He still didn't really know why he started smoking.

He hadn't when he was first in High School. He wanted to go to the Air Force Academy and be a pilot. Even though he had watched all the World War II movies in which John Wayne or somebody flew fighter planes against the Japanese and smoked, he somehow thought smoking would not be good for that. Even though most of the boys at school smoked, and chided him for not taking it up, he refused. The Academy. It was too important to him. He worried about other things about himself that might keep him out. But maybe they wouldn't know about those.

On a vacation trip he had seen the Air Force Academy. He was taken by it; the spires of the chapel; seeing the cadets march in formation across the quad; the giant B-52 suspended above the roadway leading in to the base. It was what he dreamed about.

Eventually though, the dream was gone. And he did it to himself.

It was gone, the night that he and his only friend were out late. They were walking through the snow in the parking lot of the closed shopping center. In the window of one of the stores was a mannequin wearing a sweater that he really liked; that he thought looked cool and said so.

“So, lets get it,” his friend said.

“What?”

“Lets get it.”

His friend picked up a large chunk of roadway ice that the snowplows had churned up. It was heavy and covered in black road grit.

“Here. There's no one around, no one to see. Break the window.”

His friend handed the chunk of ice to him. He threw it at the window. The glass shattered. He grabbed the sweater off the mannequin and they both ran away. He hid the sweater under his mattress, afraid to wear it. 'This is stupid,' he thought. 'I can't even wear this.'

The next day the police came. They had followed his and his friend's tracks in the snow. He had been easy to find. They were going to arrest him. As usual, his father screamed at him as the police escorted him to the cruiser for the trip to the jail. In a cell, he had never been so frightened in his life. He didn't know what would happen to him.

Because of his age, the store didn't press charges if he gave the sweater back and did restitution. The police told him he was lucky, that his life could have been ruined. Even though he didn't go to court, he thought his life probably was ruined.

“There will be no Academy now,” his father said.

And now he smoked.

He finished his cigarette, dropped it on the ground and crushed it out with his shoe. He opened the passenger side door and took the rifle out. It was a Marlin lever-action .22. A gift

last week on his 16th birthday. Guns were important to the boys in the town. So owning a rifle of his own had become important to him; it might help him fit in. He leaned it against the fender of the car.

He thought about Theresa.

He had gotten up enough courage to ask her to the spring dance earlier that year. He wasn't really attracted to girls but Theresa had been one of the few that had been nice to him; she would actually talk to him outside of class. Everyone would be going to the dance and he didn't want to be the outsider again.

"I'd like to take you to the dance," he said to her.

"Kenny, that's nice, but I can't"

His face reddened with embarrassment and he didn't know what to say. Here was the rejection that he had feared but now it was real.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I already have a date."

She probably did have a date. But he also thought it was because he was different even though he didn't understand how or why

"Okay," was all he could say and walked away.

He watched another car pass on the highway. He picked the rifle up and aimed it at the empty road. He thought about pulling the trigger. He thought about what it would be like to

watch a bullet strike a passing car. He didn't really think he wanted to shoot at a car; maybe to hit someone in the car; maybe to kill them. He didn't really think he wanted to do that but it was the same sensation he had when being in a very tall building. Thinking about just stepping off a balcony hundreds of feet above the ground. Not wanting to jump but thinking that he might impulsively do it; wondering what it would feel like at the instant he fell away from the building; what would it feel like to fall through the air?

He lowered the rifle from his shoulder and leaned it against the fender of the car again. He picked up the package of cigarettes, then changed his mind and put the pack down. Another car approached and he picked up the rifle again. The sound increased and he raised the rifle to his shoulder. He sighted down the barrel following the car as it passed.

When it was gone he lowered the Marlin .22 from his shoulder, put the muzzle underneath his chin and pulled the trigger. He didn't feel anything anymore. The darkness was gone.