

TREVOR CORKUM  
**1987**

“SO WHAT ARE YOU doing right now?”

It’s New Year’s Eve, that glittery right of passage, the last sayonara to an unremarkable year, the Year of our Lord, 1986. It’s two hours before midnight and you’re watching someone else’s kid, while his mother—a waitress at the Villager diner, a woman you’ve never met before tonight—is getting smashed at a dance at the Legion several blocks away.

“Nothing.”

“Me neither.”

You listen to Brandi’s heavy breathing on the other end of the phone while watching pop music videos on TV. One of the American stations is counting down the Top 100 Videos of the Year. Madonna, Janet Jackson, and the still nominally heterosexual George Michael feature prominently in the rotation. The baby is asleep and the apartment, on the ground floor of a rundown Victorian house in the rougher west end of town, creaks in the December cold.

“Are you home alone?”

“No,” she says. “My parents are downstairs playing Uno. My brother is watching Ghostbusters. I’m so frigging bored.”

“Wish you were here,” you say, thinking of Pink Floyd, and wondering if what you say is true. You picture Brandi in hot-pink sweatpants, with her tangerine-scented hair, curled up in what must be a pink bedroom at her farmhouse outside of town, in the deep, dark woods of Linkletter.

And in some ways you *do* wish she was there, nestled up beside you on the long, itchy couch, eating JiffyPop popcorn from the pan, deep kissing her with your tongue and considering what could possibly change in both of your lives, in the impending Year of Our Lord, 1987.

It’s pretty good, when you’re in eighth grade, to have a girlfriend in the ninth, even if by *girlfriend* you don’t mean anything particularly romantic, even if you’d barely even kissed her, let alone put your hand down the

front of her fake leather pants; even if she, in the words of your best friend Peter Pineockle (himself a part-time pariah of dubious social lineage) was a kind of born-again *freakozoa*, and even if, despite your best attempts to wean yourself of the urge, you'd rather be making out with Jason deWhinney, captain of the boy's soccer team, volunteer at Somerset Senior's Centre and, it must be said, an all-around smash-up guy.

The girl in question, that one-time girlfriend, that ninth-grade fringe actor in the theatre called Junior High, who, despite her tenuous social standing and the smattering of blonde hairs that ran along her upper lip, was nevertheless the prom queen of your soul—her full name was Brandi Carmichael and you liked her, *but not in that way*, though the novelty of it all, the bizarre confluence of events that brought you floating into her feminine orbit, was nearly enough. Of course you called her only *Brandi*, that coltish name printed forever in your mind in a kind of passion-pink curlicue, stenciled onto an imagined cheerleader's bag, reminiscent of the powder-faced, pure-of-heart, mega-selling teen queens of her time. Sometimes lying awake at night, compulsively masturbating and trying without success to focus on the pliant curvature of Brandi, you would substitute the face and body of one of these pop princesses. Although when the inevitable explosion arrived, those seconds of hot bliss before the inevitable tide of shame, the cold and sticky detritus of a lost world shrinking in your Fruit of the Looms—it was always the image of Jason, the imagined weight of his sweaty body crushing your inadequate frame—that made you feel truly alive.

Brandi was the kind of girl you'd want as a best friend.

"Oh Jesus, did you see what Sheila Lee was wearing today? She looked like a total slut!"

She was the sort of person who stood by you in the toughest of circumstances, such as when three ninth-graders, young men with troubled families and minimal emotional intelligence, young men who would end up in various halfway houses, holding cells, penitentiaries of the provincial and federal sort, or dead (two suicides, one stabbing), took it upon themselves to torment this younger you, this bookish, *emerging* you, in the school hallway.

It was about this time that you fell in love—or at least deep like—with Brandi.

"Fucking assholes!" she said, rounding a corner to find a trio of said thugs swarming you and demanding lunch money. Without stopping to think, she struck up an aggressive warrior pose, fists cocked at her chest.

She smacked Jimmy Arsenault in the shoulder, causing him to wince and step away.

“Why don’t you go fucking get a life!”

The other two perpetrators sneered, and one of them kicked you in the ass, before all three finally scattered.

“Are you okay?” she asked, lifting you off the tiled floor with its black muddy sneaker marks and pitted Hubba Bubba. You stood beside your locker, clutching your Canadian history text as though it were some kind of book of apocrypha you’d unearthed during afternoon recess.

“I’m cool,” you said, while your cheeks bloomed crimson. And Brandi—Saint Brandi of Assisi, with her octagonal glasses, her dangly feather earrings, and her baggy mauve sweatshirt with comic-book hearts stenciled across the front—she rubbed your shoulder and smiled at you in a way that made you feel less lonely about the world.

“Cool,” she said, clearing her throat, and rooting around in her purse for her yellow Sony Sports Walkman.

“Then I guess I’ll see you around?”

The mother isn’t anyone you know, just a friend of a friend of your own mother’s from one of the lesser-known bingo halls. Your father dropped you off at nine, idling the car uncertainly in the woman’s unpaved driveway, while snowflakes the shape of diamonds spiraled onto the windshield. Waiting in the car, motor running, he sighed, somehow disappointed in you, yet he wished you a Happy New Year, even shook your hand stiffly before handing over a five-dollar bill for the middle-of-the-night cab ride home.

The mother stood eagerly beside the kitchen table, bouncing up and down like a matador, cheeks flushed from a couple of warm Kahluas. She was younger than you imagined, with bleached, shoulder-length hair, an armload of plastic bangles and what looked like a red corset tucked into a pair of torn jeans. The Kahlua bottle sat like a trophy on the dirty counter, next to a porcelain breadbox shaped like the Empire State Building.

“I’m Denise,” she said, as if you didn’t know.

You shook her hand. Her skin was shockingly soft, and you tried not to notice the cleavage that spread before your eyes like some kind of damp invitation.

“I’m David.”

She showed you around the apartment. There wasn’t much to see. A living-room with a plaid couch and a series of photos of Niagara Falls set

into identical black frames; the cramped kitchen festooned with red tinsel and a mismatched dinette set; and two bedrooms—one for her, with a lumpy mattress and a bed half-made; the other a tiny nursery, with her infant son sleeping in what looked like a broken-down playpen.

A wind-up Fisher Price mobile with bright plastic creatures of the sea dangled a few feet up, out of the baby's reach.

"He probably won't wake up," she said, patting his curly head. "He sleeps like a baby gargoyle."

She also showed you the cupboard with the salt and vinegar chips, gave you the number where you could reach her mother, in case there was an emergency. She said she didn't expect to be late, but not to worry about waiting up, just in case.

Someone in a black Camaro picked her up by leaning on the horn and blinking the headlights on and off, as if spelling something out in Morse code.

"Do I look okay?" she asked nervously, adding one last coat of lipstick in front of the heart-shaped mirror by the door.

You nodded, and she gave you a wet smooch on the cheek, leaving a damp red mark and a lingering chemical smell of roses.

When she was gone, you locked the door, poured a large glass of Diet Pepsi and immediately picked up the phone.

"Hello? Brandi?"

"Hi."

"Hey. It's me."

Three weeks after she'd rescued you from the complicated trench wars of junior high, you and Brandi were dating. Or what passes for dating anyway, when you are thirteen years old and live in a sleepy town on a snow-swept island in a lost era many years before the *information superhighway*.

You don't actually spend much time together, at least outside school. In school you spend your lunch hours huddled in a corner of the cafeteria, eating soggy fries smothered with extra gravy. Around the long foldout table she tells you stories of visiting Toronto that seem exotic and hard to believe. Walking up Queen Street West and seeing two lesbians with spiked green hair walking hand-in-hand. Standing in front of the Much Music window and waving to the whole world, live on camera, behind one of the cute VJs. She gave you a stick of incense and a stubby sandalwood candle and you burn these in your bedroom like a shrine, under your poster of George Michael. At

recess, once, she took your hand and led you to a janitor's closet, just like in the movies, where she kissed you, lips against lips, teeth to teeth, encouraging your hand up the front of her blouse where you encountered soft flesh that made you think of your Scottish grandmother in Cape Breton, kneading warm blobs of whole-wheat bread dough.

Otherwise, your relationship exists entirely on the phone.

After you hang up, you plop yourself down at one end of the couch and click the remote through the eleven cable channels—World Junior Hockey highlights, the CBS New Year's countdown from New York, and the Canadian New Year's Eve festivities, hosted by Anne Murray, broadcast live from Toronto.

You settle on the video countdown where they're already at 47 and spend a moment thinking about the weirdness of counting things down—the end of a year, the end of a night, the end of a certain epoch. You wonder—not in a maudlin way—how many New Years you might have left. You believe it is wise and practical to consider such a question. As if you knew how many years you'd be ultimately granted, you might attempt to plan things accordingly.

At ten-thirty, during a frat house beer commercial, you hear a soft whimpering, like the sound of a wind-up toy. The baby is a warm ball of sweat, his damp hair hovering in every direction. It seems he is crying in his sleep. Is he having a nightmare? His balled hands reach up to you, punch at the dry air. You stare at him, think about the dreams of babies, and are glad you are no longer so tiny, so absurd. You sing him a made-up nursery rhyme set vaguely to the tune of *Live to Tell*, like you like to do with your two-year-old brother, until he settles down. Then you tell him a fake horoscope about the year ahead, imagining he is a Capricorn.

*You will grow into an energetic, well-rounded toddler.*

*You will learn to enjoy solid foods, with carrots being the only exception.*

*You will never feel afraid.*

In the mother's room, a few minutes later, you slide open the closet door, turning on a bedside lamp shaped like a small piano. The woman's clothes are stylish but cheap, imitation-leather mini-skirts and colourful crinkled blouses, and their flimsiness fills you with tenderness. You pull open a drawer, fiddling through a row of bras and a pile of dainty, white panties,

and you hold a pair of these up to your nose, searching for secret, hard-to-detect, womanly aromas.

Excited, you feel around the closet shelf, find a Christmas tin with a few nubs of dried pot, a carton of Player's Light cigarettes and a couple of wrinkled *Playgirl* magazines.

It's exhilarating to stretch out on her bed, flipping through the magazines, hands shaking. Most of the men are your father's age, or the fathers of your friends. Hairy men, husky men, quarterbacks and hockey players, doctors and fake mechanics, posing with their gear, or with their legs splayed open beside a stream, innocent as antelope.

What is it, you wonder, that makes you want to be like these men—one of the barrel-chested doctor's assistants, sternly clutching a clipboard and wearing a seahorse-shaped tattoo and a long, thick stethoscope?

Just as you are settling in, a sharp ringing punctures the sweet little lung of your longing.

You stuff the magazines back into the closet and, heart pounding, race down the hall for the phone.

"Hello?"

It's Brandi again, for the third time that night. Her voice comes at you as if she's been there in the dark all along, hovering above you, watching.

"Hi!" she says. "What are you doing? It's almost midnight. You sound like you've been running. Do you miss me yet?"

When you imagine your life with Brandi, it goes something like this.

You will continue to date through the tricky maze of high school, dodging invisible landmines, possibly performing together in the school's year-end musical or travelling to Montreal or Boston as part of the junior high marching band. People—your best friend Peter, pipsqueaks in the seventh grade, certain members of the school administration—will look up to you, and think the two of you a perfect pair.

Eventually you will make love to her, either on a tropical beach or on a red-and-white checked blanket on a hill in a farmer's field. You will be confident and certain, and when the time comes, you will treat her like a woman. You will drink French champagne from plastic flutes and feed her Laura Secord chocolates. A soaring, symphonic soundtrack will accompany the deed.

(Truth be told, you have difficulty picturing the actual *event*, the synchronized joining of parts, the disturbing smells and awkward, messy secretion of bodily fluids.)

After high school, you'll backpack the world. You have a vague idea that you'll live somewhere together in Europe. Maybe Paris. Or Stockholm, where the men are blond and fit and have thighs like small canoes.

Brandi says she has to go, that her mother needs the phone. So you watch the end-of-year festivities alone, the loud shouts out of 'Ten! Nine! Eight!' and the giant glittery disco ball descending into Times Square. You listen to a powder-faced woman on the psychic channel make predictions for the year. The Middle East will rise up. Michael Jackson will release a new album. You check on the baby one more time, and he's still fast asleep, snoring ever so slightly. A ripe, bitter smell fills the little nursery, but the woman didn't say a word about diapers, so you close the door tightly and pour some Kahlua into a Tupperware juice cup, just to see what all the fuss is about.

After a couple of lukewarm shots, you head back to the bedroom, grab one of the *Playgirl* magazines and relax on the bed. You're fixated on a spread called *Team Spirit: American Men in Sport*, when there's a commotion outside, a cacophony of voices and a horse-like whinny of laughter. You just have time to put down the magazine and zip up your stonewashed jeans before there's a loud, insistent pounding on the door.

The woman must be home early. She's lost her keys or locked herself out. Heart hammering, cheeks warm from the Kahlua, you step toward the entrance.

Outside, two tall men and a woman who is definitely not the mother stand in a huddle with snow gathering on their shoulders. One of the men is bald, wears unstylish glasses and a long black trench coat. The other is fat. They all smell boozy.

"How're you!" the fat guy slurs, before pushing his way into the apartment and setting himself down at the kitchen table.

The woman, dressed in a small red parka with a ring of grime at the bottom, seems the most sober of the three.

"Les. Come on now Les," she says a few times, pulling at his shoulder. But she enters the kitchen too, and closes the door behind her.

"It's cozy in here," she says.

"I need to pee," Les says.

“Can he use your bathroom?”

The second man hangs about the door looking nervous. Snow drips from his face. All three adults look at you, and you feel small.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” you whisper.

The music videos roll behind you. They’re re-counting down from number ten.

“Come on,” the guy says, pleading, banging the table just enough that that the salt and pepper shaker jump. Maybe he has a knife. Or a gun.

There’s a pause. Just the lonely notes of Whitney Houston crooning in the background. The woman looks around the kitchen, as if checking for surveillance cameras. The man standing up looks beyond you to the TV, and past it, to the door of the nursery.

“What’s in there?”

Instinctively, you grab the giant wooden salad fork hanging on the wall and hold it in front of his face, threatening.

“You guys better get the Jesus out of here,” you say, the hard tone in your voice surprising you. “My dad will be here any minute. And he’s a Mountie.”

The woman giggles. The seated guy starts to wet himself. The piss spreads like a stain on his faded jeans, then tinkles down the spindles of the chair, puddling on the linoleum.

“Oh Jesus, Les,” the woman says. She gets up, looking disgusted.

“We got to get you out of here. Jimmy, give me a hand.”

The man and woman carry Les out. The woman starts to shut the door carefully behind her, as if she’s just come over for tea.

She grins before turning away, as if remembering some private joke.

“Happy 1987, sweetie,” she says, winking, before the door clicks shut.

You fall asleep. Or maybe you just stare at the white of the TV screen—the delicate snow, the lonely fuzziness brought to life—wondering what comes next. The baby (a miracle, you will understand in the future) does not stir.

At some point past three, the doorknob turns again, keys scrape in the lock, but it’s just the mother with a swirl of snowflakes like a Christmas wreath in her hair. Her mascara is streaked and her cheeks are ruby red. There’s alcohol on her breath. She asks you how the night has gone, and you tell her uneventful. While you wait for the cab in the kitchen, making ridiculous small talk, she looks you up and down, rubs your back gently, even



kisses you on the lips and bids you farewell at the door, saying *you've been a real good guy, have a happy new year honey, thanks for taking care of Mikey. I sure hope I see you again.*

“Goodbye,” you say, feeling old somehow and free, a few minutes later, in the plush smoky stink of the cab’s backseat.

And what about the rest?

You and Brandi will tough it out.

You’ll manage a few more dates before the phone calls peter out—Tuesday for a cheap double bill and glow-in-the-dark bowling a couple of snowy Sundays.

But eventually, regrettably, you will run out of gossip to bond over.

So you will start to pull away from each other, mouthing over-zealous *hellos* and offering half-hearted Bon Jovi air salutes from across the chaotic cafeteria. Until one day in the hallway she’ll be tying her purple shoelaces with her glasses sliding down her face and her profile will seem wholly foreign to you, like she’s the star of some Danish mini-series in a bad translation.

By the time the grass turns green and the tulips push up from the earth, your romance will have ended.

And then walking to school one morning in June, a few short weeks before you escape eighth grade, you’ll hear from your best friend Peter—whose mother is in a curling league with Brandi’s—that Brandi has died in her sleep. She crawled into bed as usual, fluffing up her pillow and turning out the bedside lamp, and simply never woke up.

A blood clot, he said, on the brain.

“I love you,” you told her, that New Year’s Eve, listening to the rise and fall of her breathing and trying to distract yourself from the sweaty jocks beckoning from their dog-eared magazines.

“I love you, too,” she said, her voice soft and expectant on the other end.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Goodbye, David,” she said, and hung up.