

JOHN SHUMATE

The Day Laura Died

HERE SHE IS, drinking coffee in the kitchen on a Saturday morning. She is wearing a pink bathrobe and blue bunny slippers. A cool spring breeze blows through a window, shuffling her long brunette hair over her face, obscuring her view of Rick, her husband, who is cramming eggs and toast into his mouth. A rush of pain flows through her bruised cheek and she massages the spot, brushing the hair away from her eyes and watching Rick drip egg yolk and bread crumbs over his janitor uniform. There will be an orchestra concert at Marion Harding High tomorrow, and Rick has been called in to clean for eight hours, in preparation for the event. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but Rick is too preoccupied with the dread of scrubbing urinals to acknowledge the fact. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but she is confined to the house for the day while Rick scrubs urinals, confined to baby-sitting Junior and Carl, their elementary school children playing outside, jumping on a trampoline, enjoying the first day of Spring Break. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday but she doesn't plan to take a shower or get dressed or visit relatives or

do much more than drink Maxwell House out of her "Life's a Beach" coffee mug. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but there doesn't seem to be any indication that the world cares — the front page of the *Marion Star* says there are terrorists killing innocent civilians, that the unemployment rate is skyrocketing, that the police are looking for a wheelchair thief, that authorities found the body of a seven-year-old girl floating in the Delaware Dam, that, in short, the world is going to Hell in a hand-basket while Rick scrubs urinals. She gulps the last ground-ridden bit of coffee in her mug and lights a Newport.

"More coffee, Rick?" She hears herself ask.

Rick stops his shoveling long enough to check the level of coffee in his Dale Earnhardt mug. "No. Have to go soon. What does the paper say?"

She scans the front page again, remembering the details of the paper's contents. "Two-hundred more teachers are being laid-off in the Central Ohio area. There was a Pro-Choice riot in Columbus. They still haven't caught that serial flasher. It's going to rain all next week. They found a dead girl in Delaware Dam, that Jill Preston who went missing last September. Do you remember?" No answer. She looks at the picture of the dead girl, almost a mug shot, little Jill Preston, age seven, missing since September, buried under moss and fish feces. She had been staring at the picture for hours, long before Rick and the kids woke up, thinking about what it must be like, to lose a daughter. Missing since September — she remembers the reports, the fizzling search parties, the crying parents losing hope, accepting their daughter's fate, accepting her for dead a month after the searching ended. Missing since September, but it seemed so much longer to Laura.

Rick nods, as if carefully weighing the bout of information. He drops his fork onto the empty flower-patterned plate,

scratches his goatee and adjusts his gold wedding band, sliding the ring up and down his ring finger, allowing his finger to breathe. Rick's extendable key ring jingles from his waist as he stands and scrapes crumbs from his shirt. He studies a spot of dry yolk near his pen-pocket. He scrapes the yellow goo for a second, then concedes with a sigh. Laura wonders how many hours she has spent in the past ten years, just washing that single shirt, and she resents Rick's carelessness. She resents a good deal of Rick, or rather the cool, stubborn, uncommunicative Rick to whom she is now married.

Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday. Last night she spent half an hour looking at her flab and her stretch marks in their upstairs bathroom while Rick masturbated to lesbian porn in the bedroom — "warming up" he calls it. As she gripped her scarred paunch she heard Kitty Supremo begging and moaning: "Turn me into a slut. Turn me into a slut." She thought of their boys, Junior and Carl, and she wondered how much porn they had listened to over the years, in their bedroom on the other side of the stairway, jumping under their Harry Potter sheets and pretending to sleep when Rick peeked into their door. "Maybe we should quiet down some," Rick was prone to musing while slapping Laura on the thigh. Laura knew that her husband considered their sex life "hot" and "nasty," but Laura thought those adjectives were bred from the Lion's Den paraphernalia which had crept into their closet. She wondered if Rick actually believed he was in love with her, as opposed to Kitty Supremo and Ginger Love and Angela Flesh.

Rick slides in his chair and hovers over Laura for a second, kisses her forehead. "I really wish you'd trim this shit," he mumbles, yanking a long piece of hair out of his mouth. She follows Rick through the laundry room and to the backdoor, thinking about Kitty Supremo's shoulder-length hair, Kitty Supremo's inflated and pouting

lips, Kitty Supremo's hairless vagina.

"Have a good one, honey. I'll be back for lunch," Rick says, opening the backyard gate, vanishing behind the knot-hole infested fence surrounding the yard, into his grey Monte Carlo and gone, gone, gone to scrub urinals. Junior and Carl are sitting on the edge of the huge black trampoline, four feet above the ground, staring in silence at their father's exit, absolutely motionless, only resuming their actions when their father's car is out of ear shot. They share their mother's hair color and they are wearing matching Pokemon t-shirts. Carl is cocking his Supersoaker 5000 and Junior throws a Nerf ball into some bushes across the yard.

Laura looks at the dreadful condition of the backyard, again rubbing the bruise on her cheek — Rick has yet to improve the yard for spring. He hasn't done much in the way of home improvement since the beginning of autumn, inside or out. A discarded lightning rod juts out of a pile of trash in the far corner, a few yards away from the trampoline, its business end poking the air. She grinds her teeth — she had hoped Rick would get rid of the rod over the winter, but still it rests in that soggy pile, endangering her kids with its rusty presence. Blue tarps with ancient puddles cover the lawn chairs and a heap of tools and wooden ladders are congregating in the shin-high grass along the back of the house. The house. It was once yellow, but most of the paint has cracked off, showing the dark green wood underneath. Even if they could afford the paint she doubts if Rick would ever get around to painting the house, and as a result she has been ostracized by the neighborhood over the course of a few years. She has noticed that the decline in baby shower and barbecue invitations is directly proportioned to the passing of yellow paint: a corner of the house shed paint and the Brewers ignored Laura's friendly waves; a chunk of the front porch lost its luster and

the Mandells stopped offering to baby-sit; a few feet of paint disappeared from the second story windows and the Harmons stopped visiting for coffee and gossip.

"Junior," Laura commands, "go around front and get yesterday's mail. Sit it on the kitchen table."

Junior nods and whispers into his brother's ear: "Race you."

Laura looks at her children for two seconds and closes the screen door, her mouth watering from the idle thought of coffee, more coffee. She stumbles into the kitchen and opens a cabinet, searching for a fresh pack of CoffeeMate filters, but she notices something else in the back of the cabinet.

"Slow down in here!" She shouts as Junior and Carl whirl through the kitchen, slamming a wad of mail onto the table.

"Can't Mom, I'm *it*!" Junior shouts as they circle through the laundry room and slam out the backdoor. Laura rubs her temples, staring at the mail sprawling across the table. The Columbia Gas bill has found a home on Rick's dirty plate. Flicking on the light above the sink, she resumes her inspection of the cabinet. There is something else in the back of the cabinet: a half-full bottle of Jose Cuervo.

As she places the bottle on the counter her mind races back to the binge-birthdays of yesteryear, when such an occasion was of little concern, nothing more than an excuse to take the day off work and get plastered with friends. It was all such a blur, running around with gin and tonic and joints in hand, the world seeping with possibility, boys holding their tongues and fists in quiet preparation for their first piece of ass, weaving in and out of booty-dancing crowds, worrying only about spilling drinks or burning cigarette holes in skirts and jeans.

She looks out of the kitchen window: Carl and Junior have continued their trampoline games, flopping about in the midst of all the white spring noise, their

giggles and infantile curses mixed with the chatter of cardinals, squirrels, barking dogs. She studies the lightning rod past her jumping children, gauging the distance, too big and rusty to move on her own, without any help. Impossible, she thinks, the boys could never jump high or hard enough to fly so far. As long as they don't touch it, don't grab it, don't try to use it as a light saber, it will be fine. Turning her back on the hazard, she returns to the table, hand sliding down the neck of the liquor bottle.

She does the math, a simple proportion problem: Rick gets drunk three and four times a week, returning home from Whitey's tavern hours after his shift, while on the other side of the equation, she has been sober for two years, including the day of her father's funeral, which the whole of her extended family took as an easy justification for throwing a kegger. One bored and depressed housewife. Two distracted kids on the dawn of Spring Break. One bottle of tequila. "Jose, you win," she smiles, slamming a *South Park* shot glass onto the kitchen table.

The first and second shots are malignant. The fourth and fifth shots are benign. She is grateful to discover that the pain in her cheek leaves after shot number five. Shot number six is waiting on the sidelines when she reaches out for the heap of mail: Verizon phone bill, MasterCard application, Value Pack, Fashion Bug Spring Fling Advert, Papa John's Pizza Coupons and at the bottom, a red envelope addressed to Laura, with no return address. The alcohol swimming in her blood triggers a hyper-emotional skip of the heart — could it be, she wonders, somebody remembered my birthday? She tears the envelope and smiles, licking the liquor coating her lips — it's a Hallmark card with a Van Gogh sunflower painting on the cover. She opens the card: "Happy Birthday!" and beneath that somebody has scribbled the words "We here at Dr. Schmeltzer's Chiropractic Center wish

you the happiest of birthdays! (740) 555-6281."

She downs shot number six and throws the card onto Rick's empty plate. Carrying the mess to the trash can, she enjoys the drunken challenge of dumping the contents of the plate into the trash. A slice of crust falls to the floor, which she ignores. She throws the plate into the sink, grabs the Jose and the shot glass and stumbles into the living room, tripping over the Super Nintendo on the way to her couch — wires and games are scattered over the carpet, in front of the faux-wood entertainment center. She looks down at the mess of antiquated electronics, and Super Mario World looks up at her. She puts the cartridge into the Super Nintendo and flips the power button, having never played a video game in her life. But today is the day for new experiences, more Jose.

The neon green and red of Mario World blinks from the television, and she loses herself in the glow of it, the room spinning now, mixed with the family photos surrounding her from every corner, she takes stock, bobbing her head in time with the bleeps of the video game — she sees a silver frame float by, a snapshot of ten years ago, when she and Rick had first met, tucked within the frame's borders, they are smiling, arms draped around each other, their hair perfectly arranged, Rick's eyes in mid-wink, two glasses of Chardonnay in the foreground. And faster, faster, another photo appears, the whole family in the woods, the kids angry because they've been asked to stand still. Rick is the only person smiling, holding a large bass in one hand and a bottle of Heineken in the other, keys dangling from his leather belt. Laura is behind them all, looking slightly to the left, zoning out, as she remembers, to the steady flow of mobile homes lumbering across the nearby interstate.

She blinks and reads the screen: "New Game, One Player Select, Two Player

Select.” She moves the cursor to “One Player” and presses the start button.

Half an hour and three shots of Jose later and Laura is Mario, on an epic quest to save the beloved Princess Peach, with the help of the turtle-eating dinosaur Yoshi. She is, as many gamers would submit, in the zone. Jose sits beside her, twirling his mustache and grinning, offering suggestions which only seem to complicate matters:

“Try to jump over that large gap, maybe there’s something cool on the other side. Go into that giant ghost’s mouth, there might be a way to beat him from the inside out. What do you mean you thought you heard Carl crying? You have a kingdom to save!” But in spite of Jose’s annoying advice Laura enjoys the absent flipping of buttons, her brain going into autopilot, relishing the ease and idle frustrations of playing children’s games. She crosses the Donut Plains and treks through the Boss Castle which blocks her path to the caverns beyond. She dies in the Castle three times, unable to pass the zombie skeleton turtle guarding the door to the Boss. For the fourth time she collides with the turtle and Mario stops in his tracks, shrugs his shoulders, falls off of the screen. Her face turns red and she clenches her teeth. “Fuckin turtle.” A menu appears — she has expended all of her available lives.

“Continue?” the menu asks.

A twinge of guilt registers in the back of her brain as she thinks of her unsupervised sons, battling in the backyard. She throws the controller at the television screen and stands up, feeling a rush of nausea. A thrust of vomit hits her esophagus but she skillfully swallows it down and wins the battle. She fears puking — she remembers the embarrassment of being told by numerous family members and friends that she sounds not unlike a wounded sheep when she pukes, and even in the privacy of her own home she fights that image from ever returning.

She sways for a moment, standing in front of the TV, finger moving toward the channel button, pushing, turning to a random news at noon station. There she is again — a picture of the little dead girl pulled from Delaware Dam, a family picture left over from the tear-filled search through forests and parks. The girl is smiling, her missing teeth clearly defined in the dark of her mouth. She is sitting on top of a wooden and steel jungle gym, legs wrapped around a cedar pillar, hands busy plucking a dandelion. “Jill Preston,” Laura says, reading the name at the bottom of the photo, drunken tears filling her eyes, feeling the loss of that happy youth, wondering why, why, why. An autopsy will be performed tomorrow. They will find no clues. This girl, Laura thinks, will be swallowed by time, buried and forgotten, her phantom killer long gone, speeding to Vegas in a stolen Ford pickup, and nobody will notice. Nobody will care. She tries to imagine the kind of filthy creature who would kidnap a little girl, molest her, leave her for dead. What kind of monster, she wonders, would do that to an innocent girl?

The phone rings. It’s Rick, breathing heavy and sniffing as he always does, his nostrils suffering from the bleach and urinal cakes. “Laura? Have you started lunch yet?”

“No.”

“Good, I was hoping I’d catch you. There’s too much to do here. I’m staying during lunch. Think I’ll eat from the vending machines.”

“I know what you really want to clean — your hands,” Jose says.

“What the fuck do you mean? Are you drunk?”

“Your finger. It’s itching, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you mean, Laura. You better go feed the boys.”

He hangs up. Laura stares at the hard lump of plastic in her hand. “They’ll do the autopsy tomorrow,” she says. The

pain returns to her cheek — she consults Jose.

JUNIOR AND CARL are throwing worms at each other when Laura steps into the backyard. Her body sways with the breeze and she feels that at any second she might double over, spraying vomit all over the dandelions.

"Hi Mom!" Carl runs to his mother, carrying a handful of fresh worms. Slime and dirt cover his face. "Want one?"

"Put those nasty things down," Laura hisses, trying not to look at the squirming life in her son's hands. She had thought about making spaghetti for dinner, but now she isn't sure.

Carl shrugs and throws his collection into the weeds. He presses his belly against Laura. "Mom, you smell funny."

Laura raises her mouth to the sky. "I haven't showered yet."

"Mom! Mom!" Junior calls from the trampoline. He jumps high into the air, waving his hands. "Come jump with us!"

Laura smiles for the first time in weeks: Jose is telling her to follow Junior's order. She tightens her fuzzy pink bathrobe belt and bunny-slippers her way through the tall grass, Carl skipping close behind. "Okay, but just for a second," she looks up at Junior, standing on the trampoline, fists against his hips like a scolding adult. She raises her hand, pink sleeve falling to her elbow, revealing her pale freckled arm. "But I need some help here."

Junior takes Laura's hand, grunts and shifts all of his weight in the opposite direction. Carl does his part by pushing his palms against Laura's adequate rump. "Mom, you're heavy. Is there gonna be enough room for me?"

Laura flops onto the trampoline. Standing over Junior, her face is crimson with embarrassment and awkwardness, her granny panties peeking through the loose

folds of her robe. The unstable, artificial ground beneath Laura's feet sinks to accommodate her weight and her bunny slippers descend a foot into the trampoline. She swallows another rush of vomit, stabilizes her rolling eyes. "Carl, you stay off, I don't want too many people on here."

Carl crams his hands in his muddy Levi pockets. "Okay, but it's my turn next, Junior!"

"Whatever, bat-brains." Junior is on his feet now, bending his knees and springing into the air. "Like this Mom. Jump like this," he instructs, as if Laura is in need of explicit directions.

"I am Mario," she mumbles. Her knees pop as she crouches for liftoff. She closes her eyes, fearing that if she sees the motion she will puke. She jumps.

A small skip, then with force, hair mixing with the fence and the sky and the peeling paint, the kids, Junior giggling somewhere to the left, the laughter enters her throat, infects the whole backyard as she rises, rises, rises, higher and higher, into the air, gravity lifting and releasing her swishing bathrobe, bunny slippers shifting under her heels and leaving her feet, flying across the lawn and landing in junk heaps. She opens her eyes, breath lost and sweat dripping, rising again she sees over the fence — the Brewers are out, heaving their propane grill into the sun, arranging paper plates and ketchup bottles and bleeding sirloin for a barbecue lunch, Mister Brewer in plaid boxer shorts and "Kiss the Cook" apron. She feels vomit creeping, but jumping all the same she sees across the yard, and over the other fence little Jimmy Mandell tinkers with his trove of action figures. Her bare feet slide across the rolling surface. Her knees bend and buckle. She stops.

Carl is there instantly, hands around the borders of the tramp, hopping up and down, up and down, "Okay Mom get off, my turn! My turn to jump!"

Laura slides off, feeling the crawl-

ing earth under her feet, the juices in her brain convinced she hasn't stopped jumping. "Carl, stay off. I'm not done," she says, resting her hand on his shoulder, bending over and bleating like a wounded sheep.

"Oh, gross," Junior says, hitting the ground and standing next to his brother, hands scratching his greasy scalp. "Mom's puking."

The vomit flies out, finally liberated, yellow and tar-like, stinking like a filthy wino. Though she can't see anything but the flowing bits of eggs and toast, she can sense the stillness around her and over the fences, neighbors pausing in their idle activities, snickering under their breath, laughing at her, at Laura, the sheep. She wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her robe and shoves her children to the side, stomping toward a pile of ladders and debris against the wall of the house. The boys are silent, studying Laura's trek, Laura's grunt and heave as she grips the rungs of a wooden ladder, pulling it until it rises out of the junk like a termite-ridden phoenix — it slumps onto the side of the house, slices of roof tile and gutter slime falling under the ladder's strain. Jose stands on the other side of the ladder, tapping his boot and winking, pointing his index finger toward the roof. There is no hesitation, no moment of doubt or consideration — she wants only to jump higher, to see the world shrink beneath her feet, to see all of her enemies and problems disappear, lost somewhere in the space between her soles and the trampoline. They won't have a reason to laugh, she thinks, when the sheep is soaring hundreds of feet above them, ready to sprout wings and hit the clouds. They will marvel at her powers, the youth in her flapping arms, her robe flopping in the wind like the cape of a superhero. She felt so high, in her brain and in her actions, down there on the tramp. She wants the adrenaline to go faster, the freedom to last longer. She has scaled half the ladder when Junior calls from below: "What

are you doing, Mommy? Can we climb too?" The Jose haze undulating around her head throws the voice off target, and though she doesn't hear the words, Jose is kind enough to answer the question: "Stay there. Stay off my tramp. It's my turn, you little shit." She continues her climb, the wind growing in strength with every step, but she is determined — a mountain climber with a mission, the summit goading her, teasing her, calling her name, over and over again: "Laura. Laura. Laura."

She swings her leg over the edge and mounts the roof, her feet burning over the tar and rough shingles. Wiggling her head, she fights to focus, the entire neighborhood now visible from her perch, she takes it all in — the rows of emerald lawns and yard gnomes, the dogs running out of their tiny box houses, barking at the sheep, the strange apparition in pink standing on the roof. But I can go higher still, she thinks, and Jose agrees. She huffs the air and looks in every direction, down and left and right, observing her audience, standing and whispering all around her, she hears Carl sob, and his brother joins him. All of the Brewers are in their yard now, even the extended family, cousins and the like, dressed in the latest leisure fashions from The Limited and Old Navy, faces contorted, trying to determine if they should be scared or laughing. Mister Brewer hovers over his grill, a large steel spatula clenched in his fist, frozen in the act of flipping a burger, his mouth hanging open, inhaling the toxic smoke floating around his face. "Should I call the cops?" His wife touches his elbow, her other hand loaded with a plate of celery sticks and deviled eggs, "No, honey. don't get involved." Carl and Junior are looking up at their mother, faces red now, littered with tears and wrinkles of concern, holding each other's hands, begging Laura to come down, begging Laura to fix their spaghetti, to clean their pants, to do anything but stand there in a pink robe, toes dangling over the ledge, body waving

dangerously. Jimmy Mandell is sitting on top of a red picnic table, legs and fingers crossed, his GI Joes and Transformers standing in long, organized rows in front of his feet. Rick and Kitty Supremo are sitting on the hood of the Monte Carlo, necking each other and sharing a forty ounce of malt liquor. Laura's gaze centers and rests on the pile across the lawn, and Jill Preston stands there, leaning against the lightning rod. Her naked body is blue and green, chunks of lake scum sliding through her black hair. She giggles and plays with the rod, shaking it, watching flecks of rust fall away, revealing pristine, glowing sliver, flashing across Laura's face. Laura nods and Jill echoes the motion, smiling and poking her tongue through the gaps between her teeth. "I'm sorry," Laura whispers, "It isn't my intention, to join you. I can't leave the boys. They would end up next to you, at the bottom of Delaware Dam." The dead child pats the lightning rod with tenderness, as though it is the shoulder of her best friend, and she moves away, backing up slowly, one tip-toed step at a time. Everybody disappears as Laura concentrates on the trampoline, and all that remains is the sound of ruffled gravel, the slam of a large car door, a familiar, raspy voice, filled with desperation and concern, "Laura! What are you doing? Laura, come down!" But it is too late because Laura is soaring, flying, casting a shadow over her audience, she can see them down there, so many ants, trifling, insignificant. Jill Preston bows and extends her right arm, as if to say "all is clear. All is clear."

All is clear.