

## WE'RE ONLY PLAYING

*Thomas Christopher*

My friend Eddie's sister, Shannon, was seventeen. She was eight years older than we were. Even though she was hardly around, I always felt her presence whenever I was at his house. Sometimes her door was open, and I stole a glimpse of her rumpled bed or some scattered clothes on the floor. But even if her door was closed, simply being near it thrilled me in a way I couldn't describe.

One day when Eddie was showing me his new football cards, Shannon appeared in his doorway. She was wrapped in a red bath towel. Her honey-blond hair was wet and her skin flushed pink. For some reason the sight of her bare feet sprinkled with water was exciting. She smiled, leaned her shoulder against the doorframe, and said, "What are you boys up to?"

Not long after she left, I told Eddie I needed to go to the bathroom. When I walked into the hall, I saw Shannon's door was open. I had to pass by

it to get to the bathroom. A nervous flutter went through me. As I approached Shannon's door, the sound of music grew louder until the words became clear, *Oh oh, it's magic...* The music wasn't loud, and Shannon sang along softly in what I thought was a beautiful voice. When I finally stepped in front of her open door, I felt like I was stepping right next to a cliff. I was afraid to look over, but I did. And there sat Shannon at her vanity table, still in her red towel, looking into the mirror and combing her wet hair.

In the bathroom, the air was still warm and steamy. Condensation ran down the mirror on the medicine cabinet. I quickly glanced at Shannon's discarded clothes, things I never saw in my bathroom at home. As an only child, I had no sisters, and my mom never left her clothes lying around like that. I pulled open the shower curtain and peeked at all the droplets and streaks of water on the bottom of the tub. Water that had no doubt come rolling off Shannon's body. Feeling light-headed, I hurried out, darted past Shannon's room, and back to Eddie's.

A week later, I walked across the bridge over the muddy Raccoon River and up the blacktop road to Eddie's house for the very last time. We both lived in the country. Eddie lived about a mile away on top of a hill surrounded by green corn and soybeans. His dad used to have dairy cattle

before he hurt his back and had to work at the grain elevator. Behind the old milking barn was a rock pile. On my last day at Eddie's, we dug around in the rocks until we found some fool's gold and ran inside the house. As we scurried past Shannon's room, I noticed her door was open again, only slightly this time. I knew she was gone, and I suddenly had the overwhelming desire to take something of hers.

We sat on the lower bunk of Eddie's bunk beds and examined the fool's gold a while before we began talking about the lifeguard at Broken Run Lake. Talking about girls was something we had been doing a lot more lately, although what we said didn't make a whole lot of sense. Eddie liked how the lifeguard looked when she went back to her stand because you could see her bathing suit stuck in her bottom.

"It looks like a wedgie," Eddie said.

We both laughed, but I was secretly thinking about Shannon and the way she looked the only time she went to the lake with us that summer.

Normally she was with her friends at Lake Wisaka farther north, but she was home that day and had decided to come with us. When she entered the kitchen after going to change, she had on a peach-colored bikini. I had never seen her up that close before in a swimming suit. Her bikini top cupped her

breasts like two fine eggshells, and her bikini bottoms ran straight across her stomach and around the fullest curve of her hips. Her skin was tan like a caramel apple.

Her mom, Dora, said, "That's what you're wearing? You're practically naked."

Dora drove the pickup. Eddie sat squashed against his mom, and I sat squashed against Shannon. The closeness was shocking at first. The feel of her warm bare skin pressed tight against mine made me dizzy and giddy at the same time. It was almost a relief when we got to Broken Run Lake.

Shannon stood in the water and let me and Eddie dive between her legs. I remember trying to deliberately brush against her. I went so far as to reach out and slip my hand across her leg. The act seemed so daring to me, and when I came out of the water and shook my hair, I looked at Shannon to see if she noticed what I'd done. She shot me a quick glance, as if she knew. I felt we had a secret then. She let us jump off her shoulders and, to help us go farther, she crouched low and then sprang upward to launch us into the water. I was surprised at how strong she was.

When we left the water, she didn't dry herself off. She let the sun burn away the streaks and droplets on her skin. We were all lying down on the

beach blanket. I was on my stomach with my arms folded in front of me and my head turned toward Shannon so I could stare at her. After a while, she leaned forward and all I could see was the curve of her back and part of her shoulder where she spread a shiny gloss of suntan lotion. She rolled on her stomach and asked her mom to rub some on her back. I closed my eyes. The rich smell of coconut filled my head. When I opened my eyes again, Shannon was reading a novel called *Hollywood Wives*.

Of course, in Eddie's room, I didn't tell him I was thinking about his sister. I just let him go on about the lifeguard's suit wedged in her bottom and how she pulled it out before she got on her stand. We laughed about that, too. All the while, the temptation to take something from Shannon's room wouldn't leave me alone. It was all I could think about. Before I knew it, I told Eddie I had to go to the bathroom.

I stepped into the hall and looked around. My heart raced wildly in anticipation. I snuck down the hall and stopped before the doorway to Shannon's room. I hesitated with my back against the wall. What I was about to do seemed like some kind of violation, as if I were on the edge of something I wouldn't come back from.

Her room smelled like flowers and had a sloppiness to it that was appealing because it made her seem more real, more so than if her room had been neat and tidy. The bed was unmade and the crumpled comforter had a pattern of lavender paisleys. The pink pillow was indented from her head and the bedspread wrinkled from where she had slept. Her vanity table had all kinds of bottles and tubes on it. On the walls were pictures of rock stars and posters of Monet and Matisse.

To be honest I wanted to take some piece of clothing, but I knew I wouldn't be able to fit anything that big in my pocket. And even though I needed to find something quick, I still wanted to go into her closet and rummage around, hoping to find out what secrets she had hidden in there, hoping to find something private to take. The longer I stood in her room, the more nervous I got, afraid someone would come in and catch me. Without thinking much, I grabbed a silver tube of lipstick off her vanity table, stuffed it in my pocket, and quickly left her bedroom.

When I turned in the hall, Eddie was standing outside his door in his white underwear. He frowned at me. "What're you doing?" he said. "That's Shannon's room."

I didn't know what to say, so I just stood there looking at him.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

In his room, Eddie yanked up his white briefs so they wedged in his bottom like the lifeguard at Broken Run Lake. He started shuffling forward, swishing his butt back and forth. He looked funny and I laughed.

“You do it too,” he said.

I stripped off my clothes, relieved he didn't say anything more about me being in Shannon's room. I even forgot all about taking the lipstick. I grabbed the sides of my red underpants and pulled them up my hips until they wedged in my bottom like Eddie's. The seams cut into the creases between my legs, but I didn't care because it was fun pretending to be the lifeguard. We swished our hips from side to side in exaggerated imitations of women. We paraded around the room until we fell on the bed, laughing.

“Watch this,” I said.

I backed up across the room and then sprinted, sprang into the air, and landed with a smack and a whoosh on the beanbag chair in the corner. The instant I rolled off, Eddie came flying past me. The sides of the beanbag puffed out like the cheeks of a bullfrog. At that point, we were just goofing around, as far as I knew.

Eddie and I bounced off the lower bunk bed and dove into the beanbag some more, but I wanted to increase the degree of difficulty. I climbed up the ladder to the top bunk and dangled my skinny legs over the edge. Eddie stood below, his eyes wide and excited.

“I dare you,” he said.

My feet hit the floor with a thud. My knees buckled before I leapt forward into the air. I flung my arms and legs out like a bird and plunged into the beanbag. Not to be outdone, Eddie scampered up the ladder and launched himself too. Then we went together. After we crashed into the beanbag chair, we howled with laughter and wrestled around a while.

Our fun was soon over when the door flew open. Eddie and I were in each other's arms. We both looked up at Eddie's mom. She had always made me uncomfortable because she never smiled. I found it hard to believe Shannon was her daughter.

“What is—” she began to say, until she realized we were lying together in our underwear. Her face turned white before it flushed red with anger. “Get up, you two!” she shouted.

Eddie and I stood up.

“I can't believe this. Come here!”

She grabbed Eddie by the arm and yanked him to her. Eddie fell to his knees. He squealed and clutched at his mom's grip. She swung her other hand down and whacked Eddie's behind.

"We're just playing!" he bawled. "We're only playing, Mom!"

She pointed at me. "Put your clothes on."

The way she looked frightened me so much I couldn't move. She stormed off to the bathroom with Eddie and slammed the door.

As I put on my clothes, I heard more smacking sounds. I cringed with each one. I sat on Eddie's bed and balled up my hands and squeezed them between my knees. I rocked back and forth until I realized Shannon's lipstick tube was in my pocket. I looked around frantically for some place to stash it, afraid Eddie's mom would find it on me.

Eddie screamed. I thought for sure I was next. Then I heard the bathroom door open and the sound of Dora's feet marching down the hall. Eddie came rushing into the bedroom and scampered onto the bed beside me, sobbing. I inched away from him.

"Get out of here, Tim Isen!" Eddie's mom shouted. Her face was all twisted and red.

"Yes, ma'am," I mumbled, and covered out of the room.

I ran down the steps, frightened and confused, and burst out the kitchen door, running for my life. I didn't understand what had happened and why Eddie's mom got so angry. When I was finally far enough away, I slowed to a walk. At the bottom of the hill, the muddy water of the Raccoon River snaked beneath the bridge. In the distance was the rumble of a tractor. Tall green corn stood like walls on both sides of me. I stopped and picked up a piece of gravel alongside the blacktop and twisted it around in my fingers. I didn't like how mixed up I felt inside. I reared my arm back and threw the rock as hard as I could at the wall of corn across the ditch.

After I turned and stuffed my hands in my pockets, I felt Shannon's lipstick tube again and took it out, but holding it tight didn't thrill me the way I thought it would. I walked to the bridge where I looked over the railing at the muddy river rushing beneath. I pulled the cap off the tube and looked inside the chamber where a length of red lipstick hid. When I turned the bottom, the red tip twisted until it stuck straight out. In the sunlight, I saw tiny grooves on the beveled edge from where Shannon's lips must have swept across it. For a moment, I wanted to touch the lipstick to my own lips, but I didn't, even though no one was around. Instead, I put the cap back on, held it over the bridge railing, and dropped the lipstick into the river.

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**Thomas Christopher** grew up in Iowa and received his MFA from Western Michigan University. His short stories have appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Redivider*, *Cooweescoowee*, and elsewhere. He was also awarded an Irving S. Gilmore Emerging Artist Grant and was a finalist for the Matthew Clark Prize in Fiction. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife and two sons.