

Pal Joey

By Kim Offenburger

Eleven-year-old Joey looks up from the Call of Duty game he's playing on his cell phone and watches his mother emptying the contents of the refrigerator into Wal-Mart bags. They tip over spilling the contents on the floor, and bottles of Sunny-D and Diet Dr. Pepper roll across the vinyl tiles. Their Ford Escort is backed up to the front door, which stands wide open. His clothes, a yellow and red plastic basketball hoop, and a veneered jewelry chest are stuffed in the hatch.

He gets up from the couch where he has been sleeping for the last four months and looks around for his school books and the picture of his dad in the resin frame that's covered with miniature baseball bats and catcher's mitts.

"Where's my stuff?" Joey sticks his thumb in his mouth and chews on a ragged nail.

"In the backseat. Get a move on. We've got to get out of here before Daniel wakes up." His mother's wispy red hair forms a halo around her face her mascara is smudged into her blue eye shadow. "And for chrissake, be quiet."

Joey looks under the couch one more time, but the picture isn't there, just dirty diapers, empty tins of cat food, and a couple of beer bottles.

In the back seat of the car he struggles to stay awake. It's after 3 a.m. and he hasn't been to bed yet. He's sandwiched between a floor lamp and a pile of pilled acrylic blankets. His camouflage sleeping bag is wadded up at his feet. He slides down in the seat until he's almost invisible. He slips his hands into the front pockets.

"Stop Mom! Stop the car! I haven't got my phone."

The car is coasting down the driveway, engine silent, headlights off, when a light pops on in the manager's window of the apartment building.

"Damn it Joey. Forget it. We can't go back now, Daniel's up. We'll just have to get you a new one." She twists the key and the engine turns over and they fly down the drive spraying a fountain of gravel behind them.

The car bounces over pot-holed country roads. Its headlights pick out deer along the shoulder, their eyes, ghostly blue orbs. Eventually, it turns into a weed-choked lane and stops in front of a green

asbestos-sided, 1930's bungalow. The porch light is on even though the rising sun has painted a violet line across the horizon.

Joey grabs his sleeping bag and drags it up the splintered porch steps. The house smells like stale beer and fried catfish. He shuffles down the hall to his new bedroom. His sister's three-month-old baby, Bitsy, is asleep in her portable playpen and does not wake as he lays down on the stained mattress on the floor and pulls the sleeping bag up to his chin.

He's about to doze off when he feels a vibration in his back pocket. With a sigh of relief, he pulls out his phone and reads the caller ID.

"How you doin' pal?" His dad's voice sounds cheerful. "Sorry to call so early but they got me on swing shift. I don't know whether I'm comin' or goin'. You getting ready for school?"

Joey mumbles something into the phone and lays back, wishing he had a pillow. He listens to his dad ramble on about work, deer hunting, and the dogs. Joey nods his head and plucks at the zipper on the sleeping bag,

"Well, gotta go. Keep in touch. Call me any time. You need anything, you just let me know. 'Bye son. Love ya, pal." The phone goes silent and Joey sighs and lies on the bed without a pillow and watches the sun come up over the tree line, turning the low hanging vanilla clouds the color of orange sherbet.

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