

# F I C T I O N

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## STRAGGLERS

*by Michael Parker*

**T**hen this guy comes up to me as I'm standing in the parking lot finishing my cigarette.

They start already, he asks me. His voice was low and raw, like he'd been sick or something.

I did what Tory called my nod-shrug, my maybe-maybe-not-but-what-do-I-care gesture. She had other names for it. She said she couldn't understand me in the winter because I mainly talked with my shoulders.

You got another one of those, the guy says.

You can say no to yourself and others. But I pulled the pack out and shook one toward him.

You need a light too, don't you, I said, and he grinned, filter between his teeth, while I patted my pockets for matches. I wasn't really looking at the guy's face, but I was working at the Conoco station back then, and because it was boring selling gas and pop and cigarettes all day, I would watch people when they came in and note their height on the strip lining the door jamb. I had got to where I could guess within an inch. This guy was 6'1. Stringy.

Hey, you know that girl Tory?

I could hear chairs scraping inside. Chair scraping's like a guy clearing his throat before he makes his speech. Last call, pretty much.

She's my sister, I said. Because sometimes I just say shit, to myself and others.

Oh, man, I'm sorry, he said.

Why are you sorry? All you did was ask me do I know her.

I wouldn't like some strange dude coming up to me bumming a smoke then asking about my sister.

Why not? I said. He looked at me and turned his head and blew smoke down the stairs toward the basement door, like he was *in* the basement already and he wasn't supposed to be smoking in there and he was blowing it out the window. I knew what he was going to

say before he said it. The way he smoked, like he was getting away with something but worried he wasn't, made me anxious. He wasn't talking, so I felt like I had to.

So I said it for him: Because she's your sister, right?

Yeah, how'd you know?

How did I know what?

That Tory is my sister. Not *your* sister. Mine.

Tory never mentioned any brother. She just talked about her sister who was married to the guidance counselor at the high school. Beth. Of course she hated Beth because I wasn't a guidance counselor. Neither was this dude. I looked at him for the first time, or tried to. The sun was almost down and he wore a hoodie, which made his neck appear thicker than it was. His face was hard to see even though he was standing close enough to blow smoke on me. Maybe a little in the eyes? Hers were brown, though, and deep set. I studied his nose. Definitely not the same nose.

Tory never said she had a brother, I said.

Yeah? She certainly said some things about you.

I met Tory in the rooms, but we'd spent more time out of them than in. Now she wanted what she called a necklace. String together some days. She'd been talking about it. I knew I couldn't be standing in the parking lot and her inside and us still take the bus home. I also knew this guy wasn't her brother any more than I was. He was her new ride home.

I wouldn't say y'all favor, I said.

He took a drag of his cigarette—*my* cigarette, actually—and flicked it into the parking lot. That parking lot, any parking lot, a thousand parking lots. Freshly paved, potholed, enclosed by chain-link fencing or shrubs, hemmed in by buildings too tall to see the tops of, opening onto a park or a forest or a lake. How is it that so much of my life has been spent in parking lots and I don't even own a car? Always waiting for something or someone. Meet me in the parking lot at four, after work, before supper, I'll be by there, we're on our way. Heat-wavy pavement, an inch of exhaust-blackened ice.

Different fathers, he said. He might have thrown me off earlier, but he was in my parking lot. I'd seen the likes of him, in parking

lots from Tallahassee to Spokane. But I'd never seen him around Richmond before. His different father must have scooted. That's what different fathers do: make way for a new different father.

So does that mean she's step, or half? I asked, and before he could answer I said, Also, man, what exactly is a first cousin once removed? Who removed your cousin? The cousin removers? I guess they only had to remove his ass once, am I right?

He had stopped smoking to look at me.

Cousin removers all up in his face, I said. Don't you make me come back down here, cuz.

Jesus, he said, she was right.

Yeah she was. She's always right. And she's right inside. Do you want to go in there and say hi?

He looked almost ashamed then. I thought I had him. But then he started blinking and looking beyond, just like Tory had done when we'd got in a fight earlier waiting for the bus and I told her fuck it I'll take the next one go ahead I'll meet you.

I don't like everybody looking at me, said Tory's brother.

You want me to go in with you? I said. He nodded, and we walked down the stairwell, which was covered with wet leaves so thick you couldn't see the drain at the bottom. I opened the door and stuck my hand out like, you first. You can say no to yourself and to others. As he squeezed past me he whispered, she was right about you. She was watching from her folding chair. She had her arms crossed. Blinking. She was looking beyond me, at the door, which took forever to close.