

THE 2NDHAND

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THE2NDHAND is a free quarterly broadsheet—one story per issue—and online magazine (THE2NDHAND.COM) featuring new writing. Back issues are available as free downloads at THE2NDHAND.COM, or send \$1 (or two stamps) per issue to editor/publisher Todd Dills at the Birmingham address below. If you like surprises, a sampler package of 5 issues is available for \$4, and lifetime subscriptions for donations of \$30 or more. See THE2NDHAND.COM for advertising opportunities in both print and online. All donations offset costs associated with printing, distribution and our roving reading series—find us in Chicago, NYC, Birmingham, Atlanta, and elsewhere. Otherwise, we run on volunteer power—send us an e-mail if you'd like to get involved in distribution, or subscribe to our monthly events newsletter. RSS: www.the2ndhand.com/rss/the2ndhand.xml.

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THE2NDHAND.COM features new writing every week—and audio occasionally. Watch for updates: our new audio editor, Chicago's C.T. Ballentine, is canvassing for 10-to-15-minute scripts and already produced, short audio plays. Email him at 2ndhandAudio@gmail.com.

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FRIENDS FROM CINCINNATI

by Patrick Somerville

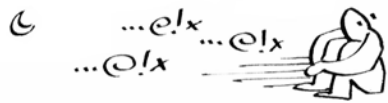


There's a man walking his dog. It's misty out, like 8:30 at night, nice and quiet in the suburbs, and this man is watching his dog, maybe thinking about what he did at work today or what his wife said to him before he left. Some headlights light up his back, but he doesn't turn. He's wearing a gray fleece. He watches the dog try to decide where to pee. He says something encouraging.

The car, a red Toyota, comes around the corner too fast and is right on top of him, the beams of light flashing in the mist. If it's a movie the violins have been going soft in the background until this moment, when they come up loud as the car squeals around the corner. Maybe you can get a quick shot of him turning and holding both hands out in front of his body, like he'll be able to stop it. Maybe you can get a close-up of his face, his wide-open eyes. And then BANG, the grill makes contact with his hips. Dead man. Pancake. The car slowly drives away.

Except this dead man isn't dead. This is what I love. The dog is confused, running around its master, barking. Then, just like that, the guy stands up. First one hand into the grass, then the other. He pushes himself up. The dog tilts its head. The man just picks himself right up off the ground, looks around, and walks up into my backyard like he lives at my house.

The dog follows him, wagging its tail, happy it's worked out after all. The man walks without trouble for a hundred feet, pats the dog's head, then rests one hand on our stone birdbath. He breathes once, blinks, tries to remember where he is, and then quietly, in the dark, collapses into a heap and dies.



Not long into the game I was sitting down by the big round bush that's right up against the side of the house, thinking of this story, running it in circles in my head and watching it play out in my brain like a looped movie. I'd already been there for what felt like two hours, crouched and worried, too afraid to get up and make a run for it because Dina Jackson was the ghost and she had all of us hysterical with terror. I was in lockdown hiding mode, and had taken to thinking of the dying man to pass the time. I didn't need to test her.

But this meant I was alone, and in the right place, so while I was there I couldn't help but look toward the garden, the garden that was *the* garden. There was the birdbath, there was where the dog had stood. I had been obsessed since the night it happened, when I saw the lights out the back window but was not allowed to go out and see for myself. His name was Charles Lane. Chuck, my mom had called him to the police.

The Jacksons were in town on a visit from Cincinnati. Dina and Eddie had been my friends, and their parents had been friends with Mom and Dave—they were our neighbors for five years and had been gone for about six months. The Stevens kids were over as well, at least to play, even though I don't think either of them said a word to Dina or Eddie the whole night. Mom wanted us out of the house while she and Dina and Eddie's parents had dinner and wine and watched a movie (*Primal Fear* starring Richard Gere, but not scary at all).

"Hey," I heard in the middle of all of this thinking. I looked over and Eddie was close, now, crouched down beside a tree a few feet away from me. His black skin was not even there, now that it was so dark, and he was wearing all black for the game, too. It was summer dark. I could see his white eyes.

"You going?" he asked, in a kind of half-whisper. "Where is she?"

He was talking about his sister, who was the ghost. I was afraid of Dina. To be perfectly clear: I was very afraid of Dina, like everyone else who was playing. She was a year older than me and three years older than Eddie, and she was bigger, stronger, and faster than both of us. Bigger, faster, and stronger than almost anyone I'd ever met. She had played football with the boys from the neighborhood—vicious, burning with anger, the first to introduce the stiff-arm to our local league—when she and Eddie lived in town, and now the rumor was she was being recruited to play halfback for a high school team in Cincinnati. It was not hard to imagine her hitting the weights with the fellas, or even being cheered on by the offensive line of the varsity team as she bench-pressed three-hundred pounds or slammed her shoulder pads into a tackling dummy as the coach bawled her out. When she hit you the sensation was a kind of rolling away in the direction opposite the one usually associated with falling down—you went up, first, and somewhere in the violence you were suddenly on the ground. She once hit me so hard I had to go home. Straight up had to go home. I found myself on my back, smashed into the cold dirt, with Dina's long hard body poised to rise off me like a black vapor, her breasts pressing up against me for a confused second—me, tackled, in pain, but having been tackled by her, wanting her to stay right where she was. The ball was crushed up against my ribs like a jagged rock. I stayed there on the ground as she rose. I thought about doing the same and then did, though slowly, unsure as to whether or not I would be able to.

"You OK?" she asked me. Even she knew she'd gotten a once-in-a-season hit on me.

"I'm fine," I said. I went back to my team. I watched our quarterback draw a quadruple hail-mary into the palm of his hand.

We lined up. Before the snap I held my hand up and said, "I think my mom is calling me to come back."

Everyone looked over. We listened. There hadn't been a sound.

I waited, holding my ribs, my head cocked a little bit as though I could hear my mother's voice faintly, far away. Then I finally just walked off the field, across the rest of the park, and went home.

People knew it was about a combination of pain and shame, but as long as we didn't spend too much time talking about it, it seemed fine. It wasn't like they didn't know how much of an athlete she was. Everyone had at some point been faced with the choice of getting in front of Dina and trying to tackle her as she was coming straight down the sideline, looking to lower her shoulder on you, and I'd be willing to bet that every single person there had also chosen, at some point, to step aside and let her score. Anyhow, I'd been hurt. Badly. I needed to lie down for a couple hours in front of the TV to think it over and heal up.

"I don't know where she is," I told Eddie. "But I'm not going out. Why would I right now?"

"Because we're supposed to," Eddie said, and then I could see his teeth. He was acting confident, but it was a sham. Who knows what kind of terrible torture he had endured at her hands within the confines of their home, in the darkness of the basement playroom or late at night, passing in the hallway? Noogies, snakebites, cow bites, smurf bites, headlocks, all of it. He pounded a fist into his palm, and I continued to disbelieve his confidence.

"You do whatever you need to do," I said. "I like being here. It's safe."

"We're not even s'posed to be hiding, though," he said, trying and failing to keep his voice to a whisper. "She's out there hiding. We're supposed to find her. This isn't the game."

"Do it however you want," I said. "I've got my strategy, you've got yours."

He was right, of course, about our jobs as ghosthunters, but the rules of the game morphed around Dina. I didn't want to find her, because if I did, and I screamed out that I'd found the ghost, the next thing would be me running through the dark as fast as I could, back toward the driveway, with her right behind me, ready to take me down. She didn't tag. She tackled, like she was so mad she hadn't turned out a boy that she thought if she tackled enough of them—and hard enough—she might stand up and finally be one herself.

My plan was to let someone more ambitious like Scott Stevens, the kid from down the street, find Dina and be the one to get his face mashed into the grass. Eddie looked like he wanted to lay into my strategy a little bit then, but before his sucked-in breath turned into more angry whispering, his eyes went wide. I saw he was looking up above my head.

"Ghost in the graveyard!" he yelled, so loud that I'm sure everyone in the neighborhood heard. He pointed above my head, and I knew then Dina was on the roof above me.

Eddie was on his feet and running and laughing before I even started scabbling backward and away, scraping my heels into the dirt and looking up to make sure she wasn't going to jump and land right on top of my head when she finally made her move. And there she was, perched like a monstrous statue on top of a skyscraper, ready to leap. I tried to say, "Dina, no," but before any of the words came out she was in the air, and then she landed gracefully, on her feet, her hands falling to the mulch right beside the bush that had been my hiding spot. She gave me crazy eyes as I crawled a little more.

She took a step forward. Somebody ran by in a flash of blond and pink—by those colors and the air-starved giggling it was probably Lindsay, Steve's little sister—and I saw Dina's eyes go up for a second, puma-like. But there was no way she'd go for somebody moving at top speed instead of me, down on the ground. I took the opportunity to get up and start running. I was doomed.

I swerved right, in the direction Lindsay had gone, hoping that if I passed her Dina wouldn't have any choice but to take Lindsay



CALL FOR CONTEST ENTRIES: BIRMINGHAM ART WALK

The evening of Friday, September 7, THE2NDHAND, Birmingham and Chicago's print and online literary magazine, will host a reading in downtown Birmingham featuring four showcased authors in conjunction with Birmingham's Art Walk festival and juried show—at least one of those authors will be chosen by competition, taking entries through June 30. Birmingham- or area-based authors send work weighing in at 2,500 words or less and such that you will be comfortable performing it for an audience.

Winners will receive \$100 cash award, publication in special edition of THE2NDHAND, and participation in the reading, with among others Jonathan Messenger, author of *Hiding Out*, due from Featherproof Books in September. Stories can be sent via e-mail to todd@the2ndhand.com in a double-spaced Word document or comparable file, or by standard mail to THE2NDHAND c/o Todd Dills, 1827 1st Avenue North #301, Birmingham, AL 35203

as her minion instead of me. I ran through the thick, humid night past my mother's vegetable garden. I heard her close behind me—I felt the strong hand on my shoulder. Then I was going down.

We tumbled together, both rolling from the speed.

"I got you," Dina said. She was on top of me. She had her hands on my shoulders, pushing them down, and I could feel the weight of her pelvis pressing against me. "You're my new ghost, now."

"OK," I said, trying to shuck her off with my hips.

"You're gonna have to be my slave, though," she said. She leaned in closer, her face dominating my entire view, blacking out even the blue-gray sky above us. "You promise to help me next time?"

"I promise," I said. "I promise, Dina, Jesus." I rolled as much as I could, tried to get my shoulders going. "Just let me up. I can't breathe."

"Give me a real promise." She was even closer, her breath gum-sweet and tinged with the pizza we'd had earlier. "I gotta get a real one."

"That was a real promise."

"Give me a real one," she said, and before I could say anything else, her tongue was in my mouth, hot and wet, moving around.

It was all over before I knew what had happened, and then she was back up on her feet. But that had been my promise, and for the rest of the game, I did what she asked of me without question, a zombie under her.



Inside after the game it was hot and bright and they were all listening to jazz. I knew what that meant—drunk parents. Saxophone. Charlie Rouse always meant Drunk Mom, drunk Dave, drunk Eddie and Dina's parents. It wasn't so bad—they were all in a good mood, and I think I even saw a little bit of dancing before they took us down into the basement and set us up with a movie to watch and got the sleeping bags and pillows and everything together.

They all said good night and clomped back up the stairs, but Mom forgot her glass of wine, and so before we started the movie—it was *Halloween 4*, classic—Mom came back downstairs and I asked her to tell Dina and Eddie about Charles Lane.

"Chuck?" she asked. "Honey, why would you want to hear about that?" Her lips were shining in the light and I knew that was a sign of it, too. Maybe because she used too much chapstick when she cut loose.

"Eddie and Dina want to know," I said. We were already in our sleeping bags, spread out on the huge couch. We were too old for it, but our parents were ignoring our ages, hoping for one more visit before having to acknowledge that we were no longer toddlers, and of mixed gender. Eddie was 10, I was 13, Dina was 14.

"It was just sad," said Mom, leaning down against the arm of the couch. "It's just a sad story."

"Maybe we should just watch this movie instead," said Eddie.

"What are you three going to watch?"

"*Halloween 4*."

"That one again?" she said, shaking her head. She looked down at me. "Why do you like that one so much? I can't even watch it. Huh-uh."

"I don't know."

"I don't want to watch it," said Eddie.

"Tell them," I said.

There was so much about being scared that I loved. It filled my chest up and made me feel my heart like it was an animal inside of me. My ears got red. And it was clear to me—it had been for months, maybe years—that I was going to make horror movies when I grew up.

Mom looked at the wall for a long time, then she looked at the blue screen on the TV.

"He didn't live very far away," she said.

"But what happened with the car?" I

asked. "With him getting hit?"

"She had a seizure," she said.

"She?"

"The girl driving."

"What's a seizure?" Eddie said.

"That's when too much electricity goes through your brain, honey," Mom said. "It's like an electrical storm. Even though there's usually electricity in there, too. But a seizure is when it goes out of control."

Eddie just looked back at her.

"Couldn't she stop it, though?" asked

Dina, finally. It was the first thing she'd said.

Mom turned to her. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why couldn't she stop the car?"

"Oh no," said my mom, shaking her head. "No, honey. You can't control it."

"Why not?"

"It's just something," Mom said. "Something that happens. Epilepsy, it's called. The disease. It's like having cancer. It's a sickness. Caesar had it." Mom looked like she felt embarrassed about this last line, and she even frowned like she didn't know for sure.

"I could have stopped it," said Dina.

My mom didn't know what to say back to that.

We could hear the laughter upstairs and the feet stomping around. My mom looked up at the ceiling. She stood. "I'm sorry I even started telling you."

"Was it illegal for her to drive away after she hit him?" I said. "Even if she had a seizure?"

"Yes," she said. She waited there. "Now, you guys start your movie."

She smiled one last time, then patted me on the head. "We'll come down to check one more time," she said. And then the three of us listened to her climbing the stairs again.

"That's crazy shit," Eddie said, after we heard the door close. "I don't have electricity inside of my head. You think that, Dina?"

"I don't know."

"No," I said. "She's right. It's there."

That's how everything works."

"That's God in there that makes it work."

"I think that she's right."

"That's God. Dina, tell him that's God."

"I don't know, Eddie," said Dina. "Stop asking."

"Fine," said Eddie. "I'll stop. But it's God. Put on the damn movie, Mike."



Michael Myers killed everyone just like he always did. When it was through and the lights were off and our parents had quieted down and gone out to the front porch, talking and smoking, the three of us lay there on the couch and I felt Dina's feet pressing up against mine.

"I need the goddamned lights on," Eddie said.

"We're not turning the lights on," I said.

"You wimp," said Dina. "What are you scared of now? You scared that man's gonna show up down here and stab you to death?" She laughed her sort of cruel, pleased-with-herself laugh. "With a pitchfork?"

"That movie was messed up, Mike," said Eddie, ignoring his sister, trying to sound casual. "Him with the pitchfork like that? Why'd you make us watch that? Why would I want to have that up in my head?"

"I didn't make you do anything."

Dina moved her feet some but I don't think there was anything to it, anything like what I had felt when we were outside and she was on top of me. It's hard to flirt with four feet stuffed inside two different sleeping bags, but my sensors were up, and I was waiting. But nothing happened.

"Turn on the lights just a little bit, Mike. I know you have dimmers."

"Go sleep in the bathroom if you're scared," said Dina sharply. "You can have the lights on all you want. Sleep in the tub. Just stop keeping me awake."

"I just might," said Eddie, like he was daring us to tell him to do it again.

"Go, then," said his sister.

I heard his sleeping bag scraping against

the couch, then saw his dark form standing in front of the TV. "I'll be in the bathroom, then," he said, and he walked off, dragging his sleeping bag behind him. I heard the door open and close, and saw the light under the door.

Then it was dead quiet and pitch-black.

"I'm just testing," Eddie called to us. "I turned it off to test how dark it gets in here. I'm turning it back on."

He flipped the light back on, and I could see the fuzz of Dina's hair.

"Goodnight, Mike," Dina said to me.

"Goodnight," I said. I held my breath.

There was nothing I wanted more than for her to crawl across the long part of the couch toward me and to press her body against mine one more time. But she didn't do a thing. Soon I heard her breathing, and I knew then she was asleep.



I don't know what the sound was that woke me, but when I opened my eyes and remembered that I wasn't in my bedroom and remembered that Eddie was in the bathroom and Dina was down at my feet and that she had kissed me outside in the yard, I sat up and looked and could see by the light from the bathroom that she was gone, and she'd left her bag behind.

The parents were quiet now, and I looked down at the green of my glowing watch. The little sticks told me it was close to four o'clock, so late that it was the next day. It is summer, I thought. Through the one storm window I could see a very little bit of the blue-grey morning light starting up.

I got out of my bag and went upstairs. There was nothing in the kitchen except all the empty wine glasses and the salad bowl in the middle of the table, and I stopped there and pressed my finger down into the oil-soaked lettuce and brought it up and touched the dressing to my mouth. I blinked a little bit and looked out the front window and I could tell that the parents had all sat out there, too. There was more wine and beer and some nibbled crackers and there were some cigarette butts in an ashtray I had never seen. That was probably Dave. I think maybe Eddie and Dina's mom smoked once in awhile, but I wasn't sure.

I went back through the living room and looked out the window, toward the backyard. Windows at night with the lights off are fine; you know you're looking out, and nobody can see in. But windows at night with the lights on, I can't handle that. I always think there's a prowler out there, standing right in front of the window, staring at you. Only you can't see him. Then he comes closer and closer, and you edge out a little more and squint into the dark. You're only a foot away. Then comes the moment when finally there's just enough light, and you realize you're looking straight into his eyes.

I could see Dina in the garden, sitting on the metal bench.

I went out and stopped right at the edge of where I imagined the white outline Chuck Lane to have been, even though the police never really drew anything there. "What are you doing?" I asked her. I was barefoot, but the grass was soft and felt like carpet.

"Just sitting here."

"Did you wake up or you couldn't sleep?"

"I couldn't sleep."

I came over and sat down next to her. She was sitting upright, staring out across the backyard toward the streetlight. "I can't believe it," she said.

"What?"

"I can't believe the story that your mother told."

"Yeah," I said.

"Tell it," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Tell it again."

It wasn't a question, and she still hadn't looked at me, but I felt as though this could be my chance, and if I could tell it in the right way, she'd be able to see why it was so important. But I didn't want to tell it like

it was horror. She was too quiet, too sad, and I knew that she was thinking about it in a different way than I had been. So I just stayed with the facts, and I told her everything I knew. I talked about the dog a lot, I don't know why.

"Listen," she said, when I was through. "Let me ask you something."

"What?"

"Hold my hand. Will you?"

"Why?"

"Don't ask me why," she said, frowning, not looking at me. Had she been crying? It was too dark to tell, and it might have just been her sleepy face. I looked down and saw that she'd laid her hand out for me to take. I thought about it awhile, but I took it.

"Thank you," she said.

We sat there for a long time, and I just held on to her hand. It was clammy than I thought it would be, and a little bit cold. I didn't know whether the question she'd wanted to ask was about the hand, or something else. But she didn't speak again.

"I'm sure he didn't really feel it," I said.

"I'm sure that he didn't know what was going on, even." I couldn't believe how hard Dina was taking the death of Charles Lane. I tried to see her in all of her football gear, shoulder pads on and helmet under her arm. Then the picture mixed up with Charles Lane, and I saw her down in a three point stance, just waiting in someone's yard, watching him about to get run over as the car tore around the corner. She launched out from her stance and tackled him into the other side of the street. They got up together and she brushed him off. "You surprised me there, stranger," he said to her. "But now I see that you saved my life. Thank you."

"I'm not thinking about him," Dina said.

"What, then?"

"Her."

"Who?"

"The girl who was driving the car," she said. "The seizure girl." She shook her head at me, her lips pursed like a mother. She breathed out through her nose and turned back to the street.

"Oh," I said.

"She didn't really do anything. That's what I keep thinking."

"Except she ran him over."

"No," she said sharply. Her eyes were open wide. "No, Mikey," she said, a little softer. I must have looked scared. "She didn't do anything. You heard what your mom said. You heard that she can't control that kind of thing when it happens."

I thought about it awhile. Part of me wanted to keep arguing about it—why was she driving at all if this kind of thing could happen to her?

"She didn't do anything and she's never gonna be able to forget about it now," Dina said. "I would've rather been him. Charles Lane."

"But she's still alive," I said.

"Yeah. And she's probably out somewhere not even thinking about it right now." Dina leaned forward, her shoulders slouched as she grappled with the ideas. She finally took her hand away from mine, and leaned her chin into her hands. Her elbows rested down at her knees. She sighed. "But it'll probably come back. Maybe even when she dies she'll see him looking at her and wondering whether or not she's going to be able to stop the car."

"I always think about how he kept walking."

"I can see that, too," she said.

We both looked out at the grass. I wanted to do something then, maybe take her hand back. Maybe even put my arm around her shoulder. But I didn't. Soon she'd be back in Cincinnati and I'd be back at school for the start of eighth grade, my new backpack weighed down with a hundred books, each of them a thousand pages. I'd be walking down those long halls, just me, all by myself, that backpack almost snapping my spine with everything inside of it. Dina would be starting high school, and probably would have a similar backpack with similar books, but she'd be a few states away, in Cincinnati, where I had never been and where I had no plans to visit.