

JANICE DAUGHARTY ROUTE 1 BOX 595 STOCKTON GA 31649 229.242.5917

SEWARD@SURFSOUTH.COM

*modified low
raised middle
raised low*

American Breakfast-Mexican Dinner

This morning Pippy gets the chair. Just a K-Mart lawn chair with frayed and dangling blue vinyl webbing, but it's the only chair on the sunrise side of the building where the four of us kids wait nine hours every day. The reason Pippy gets to sit in it now is because Big Rod, man who owns the café, beat him up last night. He gets the ashtray too, a smutty ceramic crab. It shakes in his filthy right hand. The fact that he's thumping ashes and smashing butts square into the crab says he's scared to death of Big Rod, who has laid down the law to us about dropping butts on the narrow strip of concrete. Not that it would matter, not that any of Big Rod's customers would care; there's about a jillion burnt cigarettes from the front door around the corner, to the side facing the highway where we have to stay till our mamas knock off from work.

Nothing ever happens, so Pippy's getting beat up is like a Sunday in the middle of the week.

According to Pippy, he's fifteen, but he looks like he's twelve, my age, and just wishes he was older. He's skinny, sickly, and dark-skinned, but at the same time pale as wax. *written:* It's like he's been inside too much, which of course is not the case. His dull black hair hangs down in his eyes. His black jeans and T-shirt are smeared with food and filth, and his high-top Reeboks are no longer white. His right leg twitches and every once in awhile he places a hand on his knee and

squeezes it. Right now he is cussing in Spanish and English, but when a car pulls up in the front lot he gets quiet. Smokes, thumps ashes, smashes butts in the ashtray.

Slow traffic on the two-lane highway, and the smell of fish and salt air gets stronger as the sun burns through the clouds. It's hot enough in the morning on the roadside of the narrow redbrick building; by the middle of the day the concrete is like sand in a desert; the only shade *is a* precious edge of shadow from the eaves when the sun inches toward the peak of the roof.

This diner-size café is the only breakfast place around. The sign out front says AMERICAN BREAKFAST-MEXICAN DINNER, and nobody eats here but once. Most mornings rich dumb summer people, renting houses on St. George Island, east across the viney palmetto palms and the bay, come cruising across the long bridge, looking for a place to eat out.

Good luck, I say, because aside from a grimy, damp, family-run grocery store, there are only a few seafood restaurants and they don't open till four in the afternoon; there's a bar and two liquor stores, and plenty of fresh sea-food markets and bait shops. Men in low-sided wood boats with huts for getting in out of the lightening fish and shrimp the bay, supplying the fresh seafood markets. One whole wall at an oyster place up the road is hidden by a mountain of warty shells and smells rotten. A big yellow tractor is forever gobbling up oyster shells and spitting them out into truck beds but the pile never seems to go down.

Some evenings when my mama is off work, she takes me and my little brother Stinker riding in her old car, up and down the stretch of seafood places, liquor stores and wind-beaten shacks running into woods and marsh. We always end up riding across the bridge over the bay. We turn around at the gate to St. George Island, where the rich people live, before our car runs hot or the gatekeeper gives us the eye. Beyond the iron gate, keeping us out but not keeping them in, I see pretty teenage girls running with their primped-up dogs, and even young mothers

running and pushing babies in strollers. Kids in summer white shorts are out walking and sucking on snow cones. Not a cigarette butt anywhere, and pruned oaks, palmettos and crooked pines grow from islands of yellow and red flowers. Anywhere else pines that crooked would be chopped down, but here they make a big deal out of what's worthless, plant flowers around it. Like the dogs, the wild plants and trees are treated better than us poor people, what Mama says. When it comes to tipping, rich people are the worst in the world.

They don't let us see around the curves in the road, I guess cause we might steal something or want one of those tall ritzy houses we can see the roofs of above the trees. But that doesn't stop Mama. "I'd give my eye teeth..." she says and rolls her brown eyes. She turns the car around and our ugly world rushes at us—mud, weeds and scum, starting with the bay.

I know she's thinking about our hog-pen of a trailer where Big Rod lets us live while we're here. Or maybe about our little rented house in Milton, Florida, which we had to leave from in the middle of the night when my daddy got drunk and tried to shoot us. I was ten then and ever since we've been running, because Mama thinks he's looking for her. I think he's not. I think she just needs to believe in somebody looking for her. Anybody. And too it gives her an excuse to keep moving place to place, man to man. One day she's gonna meet the right one, she says, and strike it rich.

So, I don't care about these big houses and rich people, just a safe little place to sleep and something to eat. Except that Big Rod is mean as a snake and most times after dark I hear him making grunting noises in my mama's room, nothing but a bed that let's down in the front room for her to sleep. Mama says that's how she pays the rent so don't go judging her. From waiting every day with Pippy and his older brother Pedro, I know what she means.

The sun is getting hotter along the eastside of the café. Rising out of its burrow of palmetto palms and scrub oaks across the highway. The light blooming from the bay and the ocean goes from cool lavender, to warm shrimp, to hottest fire. We change with it.

I wish something else would happen to put a dent in our waiting. About every other word out of Pippy's mouth is "fuck." The one word he knows real good in English. Pippy can talk dirtier than anybody I know. Dirtier even than Stinker, who's really getting an education, as Mama says. He's not but eight, husky ^{WITH} ~~and~~ cropped spongy brown hair and one curl hanging down on his neck in back. He's my mama's baby, so he pretty much gets his way. When people say how cute he is, to be nice, Mama says, "He's a stinker."

Pippy smashes out a cigarette in the ashtray and rubs his knee. Says he's gonna kill that motherfucker (Big Rod) if it's the last thing he does.

A yippy little dog has been left in a big blue car and he is leaping seat to seat, sticking his pointy muzzle out the front windows left a little bit down so he can breathe. The older man and woman, the dog's owners, are inside eating. They'll have one dead dog if they don't hurry before the sun gets higher and hotter.

Secretly, we all hope he dies.

Outside we can smell eggs and bacon frying, a kind of greasy fog that never burns off. One thing we all agree on is the sickening smell of breakfast mingled with leftover Mexican seasoning. And too, we all hate school. None of us knows where we will be going come August. School is just a cover word, a block of time, a season like summer. Except that then we won't have to wait everyday, which to me is not much improvement in life. Summer and school both are prison.

We watch the cars pass and pick out the ones we're gonna own when we grow up. All except for Pippy, who says in jumbled English and Spanish that we ain't none gone own no fucking cars, we just kidding ourselves.

Stinker says he's getting hungry. I wonder what time it is. Mama says Big Rod will have our hides if we go in to eat before nine. I'm not hungry, but I want to sit in the air conditioning, so I wrap my arms around my bony ribcage and follow Stinker inside. He's wearing a thin gray T-shirt and sweat shorts down to his stained fat knees, same clothes he slept in. No shoes and the soles of his feet are parched from the hot concrete and stepping on burning cigarettes.

The older man pushes through the grease-smudged glass door, letting us in as he goes out. He has on brown checked Bermuda shorts and a pale green button-up shirt with tucks up the front. Like most old men on vacation, who we make fun of, he has on brown dress knee socks and sandals. At his car, he opens the door for the frisky little dog and clips on a leash, then walks him a bit, up and down the high grass growing from the drain north of the parking lot. In a few minutes, he hooks the leash to a limb of a low-growing mimosa, pats the dog's head and comes back inside to finish his breakfast.

Stinker is sitting on a stool at the right end of the counter, next to the cash register, swiveling side to side. I stand behind him, watching Mama working end to end, putting on coffee, flipping bacon, wiping her hands on her white apron with the strings wrapped around and tied in a bow in front.

Her hair is brown and done up on top of her head in a bouquet of curls. A yellow pencil is stuck above her left ear. She wears red lipstick, which keeps you from noticing her baggy sad eyes. Those eyes are everywhere, moving like her feet in clean white Keds that she claims are killing her by the close of her shift at 3:00. Six to three, that's her and Pippy and Pedro's mama's

shift. Generally, except in a pinch, they don't do Mexican, they say, just American breakfast, though the other woman is about as Mexican as they get.

I have to move closer to Stinker's back to keep the air-conditioner duct in the scorched-looking ceiling from dripping ice water on my head.

Stinker taps his fingers on the bar, waiting, watching Mama to see what kind of mood she's in. Is it nine yet? Big Rod is nowhere to be seen, and through the smeary window above the booths on my left, I can see Pippy limping out toward the highway, still holding the ashtray, down the shallow weed-choked ditch, then up to the road shoulder. His brother Pedro behind him. Pippy seems to be showing Pedro something in the grass. Maybe money, maybe a gold chain that one of the rich people's kids threw from a car. They both look for a minute, stumping in the grass, then head back empty-handed toward the place where we wait.

Pippy gets the chair.

The older woman in the booth behind me and Stinker speaks to the man who has walked the dog. "I won't be surprised if we get hepatitis-A from eating in this place."

"Well," he says, "you wanted to eat out, didn't you? You'd have griped about the long drive if I'd taken you to Pensacola."

They get quiet as Mama trots around and refills their cups, then heads around the right end of the counter to place the glass coffeepot on the eye of the tall chrome coffee maker.

Pippy's mother, a heavy set Mexican woman in a loud shapeless dress, steps through the swinging door, tying her white apron while walking toward the other end of the bar. As she passes Mama with her back to her, she says, "Last day, last day."

"Yeah, I hear you!" Mama laughs. It's a mocking laugh but Stinker takes it for a sign that she's in a good mood.

"Hey, Mexican Mama," he says to Pippy's mother. He tries to stay on everybody's good side, but never seems to say the right things.

She looks up at us. Slow brown eyes bogged in the dark rosy flesh of her face.

"No call atall for him beating the boy up," Mama says, flattening the sizzling bacon on the rectangular grill with a long spatula.

"He sass," Pippy's mama says. "Have a mouth on him, that one."

"Still and all," Mama says, halfway turning with her hips cocked and the spatula in her hand.

More people come in and the two women get busier. Eggs cracked and dumped on the grill like crossed yellow eyes. Bacon and sausage, coming up!

The man and woman with the dog are standing before the cash register. The man is holding out a ticket and a twenty-dollar bill. While waiting he takes a toothpick from the tiny domed plastic dispenser and begins picking his teeth. The woman with a sack-like straw bag slung over one shoulder clears her throat. Mexican Mama ambles over and takes the ticket and the twenty and rings them up. Hands their change across the counter. The man pockets it. The woman is already out the door, heading for the yippy dog now rearing on his hind legs and lunging the limits of his leash. He lands with a roll of his stuffed brown body, scrambles to his feet and starts over again.

Stinker is still drumming his fingers on the bar. Smiling. He's learned the hard way that smiling will get him what he wants and grumbling will get him slapped.

Now I'm cold. I'm sleepy from getting up at six. The air is stale and moldy and the hot Mexican seasoning from last night has clung to everything. I want to go outside and warm up but

I know I'll be roasting the minute I walk out and to come back in again, I'll be noticed. I stand still, hugging myself.

When Mama heads down to our end of the bar, stuffing tips in her jeans pocket, Stinker says, "Mama, can you take my order yet?"

She seems not to hear him, stops before the ^{GRILL.}griddle. Her butt jiggles in the tight faded jeans as she flips the eggs.

Then she turns to us, looking at her watch, takes the pencil from behind her ear and the order pad from her apron pocket. "What'll it be?"

I think she is flattered by Stinker acting like her job is so great. Really he means it, because where else can he eat free? And too he has an excuse for ordering her around, the way of all her men.

"Two eggs over-easy," says Stinker. "Believe I'll have bacon and don't cook it too much. And grits." He leans forward, elbows on the counter. "Got any biscuits?"

She eyes him hard but smiles. In a good mood, I imagine, because she just swiped some of Mexican Mama's tips.

"Toast is okay."

"Jilly, what'll it be?" she asks me.

"Hot cocoa, I guess." She named me Jill after some singer by the name of Jill St. John. Mama'a about wore out an old scratched up record called "Cry Me a River,"^M loud as it will go on her suitcase record player that goes everywhere we go and is the only suitcase we own. I can hear the song in my sleep—the record player needle stuck on "cry me, cry me, cry me," in the same pleading tone.

"Ain't it hot enough for you out there?"

“Yes um.”

She talks snappy, which means she’s acting to cover some crime. “Hot cocoa coming up.”

Pippy and Pedro’s mama is rolling toast over a revolving metal rod rigged above a small tray of runny yellow grease supposed to taste like butter.

Stinker crosses his arms on the crumby orange counter. “Old Pippy got his ass whipped, didn’t he, Mexican Mama?”

She keeps rolling toast over the greasy dowel. “You a smart boy, you keep you thinking to yourself. An watch you mouth, same thing don’t happen to you.”

She doesn’t even look at us, but a woman with three children sitting in the booth this side of Pippy and Pedro, smoking, framed in glass, does look. She is feeding the blond baby in a high chair at the head of the booth from a jar of baby food, scraping the orange slobber from his scar lips with the spoon.

The other two children, both girls about my own age, sit across from their mother. They have wide blue eyes. Their mother, a pretty tall blond with tan legs in khaki shorts, says “Don’t stare, girls.” So, they watch Pippy-in-the-window, head bowed low and smoking. Pedro has his back to the girls, whose blared eyes are like the lens of a camera. *Bat and the shutter clicks—I know your type; you’re what we’ve been taught to be on the lookout for.*

Just our luck, Big Rod pops through the swinging door behind the counter, rimming his bogged brown belt with his great thumbs. He has on a white knit shirt with a horse over one breast; both breasts are swollen as a woman’s, and his gut is bigger than the rest of him put together, short legs, square head and all. His black hair is spiked on top, glittering with oil, and he wears a thick gold chain around his neck.

I haven't sat on one of the empty stools just in case he came in and started growling about us taking up customer space.

Bowed over his plate, Stinker is stirring his eggs into his grits, fork in one hand and the other hand helping. He scoops up a wad of the buttery gruel and is about to put it in his mouth when Big Rod Rodriguez stops in front of him. Both ringed hands on the counter and him leaning in.

I keep sipping my cocoa to show I'm not doing anything wrong and that I'm not scared, but I am. The cocoa tastes like beer from the night before.

"You kids get on outa here, you get finished, hear?"

I glance over at the back of Pippy's head in the window. His shaggy hair and chicken neck. A cigarette butt falls from the full ashtray to the concrete. Pedro picks it up and throws it out to the grass.

I guess to save his own hide, Stinker says, "You did a job on old Pippy out there," and laughs with his mouth full. Eggy grits drips from his fingertips.

"Cross me, boy, and I'll do a job on you too." Big Rod laughs and swaggers past Mama at the grill, running a hand over her butt. Not stopping on his way to the door leading to his office. The door swings and swings behind him *whump whump whump* as he passes through.

"You a bad boy," says Mexican Mama, passing on the other side of the counter with a clear plastic pitcher of ice water. "Won't come to no good."

Stinker laughs because he knows that being chubby and cute and Mama's baby besides he can get away with anything.

I set my plastic glass on the counter to his left and hug myself. On the way out the door, I see the two girls in the booth staring at me. Their mother shakes her head and they look down.

The heat rushes over me as I go out the door. Stench of dead fish and salt mud ripens in the damp air. By three this afternoon it'll be raining, lightening like fireworks in the gray hull of sky. Cooling off just as our mamas are knocking off. I think they work the American Breakfast shift to keep us out of the lightening and rain.

Pippy isn't talking now, only smoking. Pedro, a head taller and rosy dark, like his mother, is still leaning against the window where the two girls with their mother are peering out. I don't like them, though I've never seen them before in my life. I know them from school, their type, spoiled brats. I'll be glad when they are gone, so I won't feel tempted to prove I'm not who they think I am. To prove that I choose to go out and stand with these sorry Mexicans. When I grow up I'll drive a black BMW and show them. Do they hate or pity us? The kids who don't belong anywhere, the kids who just wait.

Nobody ever speaks to us. They just watch. Pedro says they watch because they expect us to break in their cars and rob them. I say, they don't speak because we are nothing. If one of us dropped dead, I wonder would anybody even notice.

I lean against the window on Pedro's left, both of us baking in the sun like sharks beached in the bay when the tide goes out.

"He in there?" Pedro asks me.

"In his office, I guess."

That sets Pippy off and he starts cussing again, loud enough for the two blue-eyed girls behind us to hear.

"Office, my ass," Pippy says, shaking the overflowing ashtray in his left hand. "Break-down table an chair an fucking dog slop. I no want what he got? I no touch it with a ten-foot pole."

The mother of the girls knocks on the glass with her diamond ring. I don't look. I'm not into this, I'm just killing time.

"What y'all find out by the road?" I ask.

"Ole watch band, nothing," says Pedro. He slings his head to get his hair out of his eyes. I wait till the girls and their mother and baby pass through the front door and get into their green what they call SUV. The mother on the passenger side is buckling the baby into his seat while the girls are buckling themselves up. Still, they watch.

Pedro gives them the finger, partly because an SUV like theirs is the kind of truck he's gonna own when he grows up. They stare down.

The mother with long tanned legs goes to the driver's side, gets in, buckles up, starts the engine, and pulls out to the highway, not a dozen feet from where we are standing.

The girls don't look out but I can tell they want to.

The SUV moves out into the slow traffic, heading north between flanks of high grass, weeds and stunted trees.

I move farther down the wall, to the corner at the front. I don't want Big Rod to think I'm in on Pippy's cussing him. I wish I could go to our trailer in the woods behind the café but I know Mama'll have a fit if I leave. I don't know why me and Stinker can't stay home while she works. I figure that Pippy and Pedro are pretty dumb for just standing around the door like dogs waiting. They are old enough to be left alone, and so am I. We know Stinker sticks around to get food. Our mama says that Pedro got picked up by the law one time for suspicion of something. Mexican Mama claims that if she leaves her boys home they will eat up all her groceries. Here they get fed for free.

Stinker comes out the front door and around the corner, wiping his greasy mouth on the shoulder of his gray T-shirt. Runny egg like snot all down the front. "Big Rod says tell you you're in for another ass-whipping if you don't lighten up out here. Running his customers off."

Pippy sits forward in the chair, holding the butt-loaded ashtray. His brown eyes flare in his small face. "I whip he ass, he come out here."

"Cut it out, Stinker." Pedro says, propping one black tennis shoe back on the bricks of the building. The bricks where he has been doing this for so long look like somebody has been walking up the wall to the window. "Why you want making trouble?" He shoves off from the building with that one foot and steps to the edge of the concrete and sits, placing both feet in the high grass and his arms on his knees.

We are not supposed to sit on the concrete. We are not supposed to step on the grass. We're supposed to sit in the one chair, I guess taking turns.

Stinker is sleepy now, in one of his moods. "Get up and let me set down a minute," he says to Pippy.

Pippy gazes at him, smoking. "Shit the brick, Stinker!" Pippy is sweating so that his bangs are points holding beads of water. His blanched face is beginning to take on some color.

Worst time of the day is between ten and twelve. It's too hot to move.

I look through the window to see if Big Rod is inside. I have to place my hands each side of my face to cut the reflection of us waiting, me long-faced, blond and scrawny with a mouthful of big teeth. He's not in there, so I think to go inside and cool off a minute. I step around the corner and push through the greasy glass door, cold air shooting out.

Bellowing like a bull, Big Rod pushes through the swinging door behind the counter. I turn around before the front door closes and go back to stand with the others. My heart beats

against my ribs and I see sparkles of red in the shimmering heat off the asphalt. One of our mamas is in big trouble for moving too slow or burning what they're cooking. Or is it me? I won't go back in.

Finally Pedro announces that he is going to walk up the road, see can't he scare up some work. Everyday he says that. Everyday he goes and comes back without a job. He's as quiet and law-abiding as me. We never get in trouble. But neither do we get to sit in the chair.

Me and Pippy and Stinker watch him walk off along the road shoulder with his fists rammed in his roomy jeans pockets. His legs look short in the high grass.

Pippy stands, crooking his bad knee, holding out the ashtray like it's precious as the chair. Stinker sidles behind and sits in the chair, scraping the metal legs on the gritty concrete. Pippy goes around behind the cafe, dumps the ashtray in the garbage bin and comes back, leaning against the building on the other side of the chair.

"He break your leg, Pippy?" Stinker asks. His tan feet don't touch the concrete, just hang there.

"Break something. Fucking knee, feel like." He hobbles in front of the chair and stands next to me in front of the window.

"What'd y'all get into it about?" Stinker places both arms on the flat metal rests of the chair. He's square like the chair, almost covers it—a boy chair.

"You ask what you a-ready know."

"Man, you was speaking Mexican thi'smorning. I ain't no *Mexican*."

"Fucker say I steal from him his cigarettes."

"Did you?"

“Hell, no. I sit in the back room he call office. Waiting on my-mama working night shift.”

“Mexican Mama don’t cook Mexican,” says Stinker, swinging his feet. “I mean generally she don’t.”

“Well, she work night shift in the last night. Now shut up and give me my chair.” Pippy pops the top of Stinker’s head with the flat of his open hand.

“Hey, man!” Stinker scoots the chair forward, out of the edge of the eave shade making up in the rising sun. “I ain’t mess with you.”

Mexican Mama knocks on the glass like she’s knocking on Pippy’s head. She shakes her head and leaves the window reflecting us.

“Next time you hit me like that I’m gonna tell Big Rod.”

“Know what I think?” Pippy says, standing over him with one knee cocked. “I think to myself Big Rod fucking your mama, how come you look like him.”

I walk in front of them, hugging myself. Pressing close to the brick wall, I sneak around the corner to stand in the thin shade of the eaves at the back of the café. Stunted trees and vines on my left and ahead a gully of greasy water from the dishwater. The blocky gray air conditioner smells stale and roars like a train. I lean against the cool bricks and stare out at the green vines that have climbed up the trees and spilled down. I need to go to the restroom, but I’ll have to wait till Big Rod leaves. If he comes out the back door, a rectangle of gray metal set in the bricks, I’ll slip around the corner before he can spot me.

There’s a tall rustic red house beyond the strip of trees. A bony old woman with reddish hair and freckles hangs a small rag rug on the railing of the balcony above the vines, peeping down at me. She has on a thin white T-shirt and shorts and her knees are wrinkled. I don’t want

her to see me. I don't know why. I mean, it's unlikely that she would tell Big Rod. I've never seen her in the café, only on her balcony above the strip of trees that separate the café from her house. No, the real reason I don't want her to see me is she might pity me. I'll probably never see her up close, so what does it matter? In a few weeks, when we leave here for wherever Mama will find work in winter, the woman will be just one more person I've seen when we passed in the old car, one more person I haven't mattered to and who doesn't matter to me.

The thick green grass and weeds around the air conditioner wave in the blowing of the motor. The roar constant and heavy, blocking Pippy and Stinker's arguing and the traffic. In a few minutes, the roar turns to a drone and I hear Mama's stuck record—"Cry me, cry me, cry me..." I could almost fall asleep; I could sit close to the building and place my head on my knees and nap but I don't. I can feel the woman still up there, looking down at me.

But when I look up, she is staring at the highway, eyes stretched and hands covering the lower half of her face.

I turn to look too and see Stinker standing on the edge of the gravel road and something on the road before him, which looks like Pippy's black shirt and jeans. An old long white car, the kind none of us wants when we grow^h up, is stopped at an angle and a man is standing next to it with his hands behind him holding to the open door.

I can hear only the roaring of the air conditioner until I step around the corner to the spot where we are supposed to wait. And then I hear Stinker shouting and the women inside screaming, pouring out the front door. Mama first, and then Mexican Mama behind her, hands to her face like the woman on the balcony. She walks slow as if to let Mama get there first and report back that she's not seeing what she thinks she is seeing.

Stinker backs away with his arms crossed over his head to show he didn't do it, whatever it is. Then I see Pippy lying still on his side, his hurt leg jacked forward. His ashtray is on the other side of the highway, a whole crab perched behind the right car tire, two or three butts still in it.

Big Rod is standing in the doorway, foot jamming it open to stay cool and wait. I duck under his arm and go in to the restroom at the far end of the café. I know I should have gone to the road with everybody else, but using the restroom seems more important. I figure that Pippy went out to the road, acting like he'd found some money or a gold chain, trying to lure Stinker away from the chair, and got hit by the white car. Sitting on the toilet, smelling the cold fake-flower deodorizer, I hear the sirens and people shouting. Mexican Mama screaming and crying. The record in my head comes unstuck and the song goes on—"Cry me a river, cry me a river..." Stuck again. Crying myself, I try to figure out the rest of the song.

Finally Pippy is being seen, finally he is somebody. Something important is at last happening to us. I hope he's dead and not just hurt again. I hope this is not just another nothing day.