

Mr. Smiley Lives Next Door

Short story by Allison Fine

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His pants were big enough to be bought at the Large Man's department of Wal-Mart. Size 54-inch waist. He was used to being ashamed about it, and so did not think about the shame. It was just there. It sat on him like the rolls of stomach flab that sat on his knees. He figured it was his spiritual burden to carry all that weight around. It was hard, it was there, it was just what he had to do.

Jane lived next door. She was cute, just turning fourteen, little budding breasts, nipples showing. When she ran, her little breasts barely bounced. My. Smiley looked at her and got scared and excited at the same time. She would dart in between the houses and he would look at her from his dining room window. He had binoculars. He was careful not to let anyone see him looking at her that way. He wanted to get close in to her nipples, he wanted to see those breasts way close. Sometimes she'd stand in her yard, looking out at the sky or something. That always gave him a good shot to watch those breasts, as long as she didn't turn her back completely to him. He did not think his pastime was sick or wrong. It was the only way he could feel his heart at all, watching her run, watching her legs, her little breasts, those nipples. It was the only way he knew. He had to do it.

Jane's mother was also very attractive, but he did not want to watch her. She looked as if something was pinching her from the inside out, and she was trying not to show it, but it showed anyway. She didn't look happy. Jane looked happy, most of the

time, except one afternoon she was sitting in her backyard crying. He watched her closely through his binoculars then, feeling his own heart cry and contract with hers. He wanted to go out and hold her close to him, tell her it would be all right, but he knew she would think he was repulsive with all his fat. So, he stayed inside and watched her. That's all he wanted to do was watch. It wasn't any harm, he figured. No one could arrest him for watching.

Jane was basically a good girl. Her mother didn't understand her, which was normal. Her father was always too busy to understand her, but when he wasn't busy he understood her. She was closer to her father. He was an accountant for a large firm and brought work home. Her mother didn't work. She was a volunteer for many things. Jane didn't feel good around her mother, so she kept a distance. Her mother preferred it that way. Jane would see Mr. Smiley, the big fat man next-door, go to his mailbox everyday at the same time. He looked pathetic. She hated him. He shook with every step--it made him wheeze and get out of breath just to walk from his door to the mailbox. She thought he was the most hideous thing she ever saw.

"Isn't Mr. Smiley nauseating?" She said to her mother one day.

"Oh, Mr. Smiley--that poor man. I feel so sorry for him."

"Why doesn't he just go on a diet?"

"It isn't that simple, Janie. I mean--being that fat, obese, well, it's a kind of disease."

"Yuck. I'm glad I'm not that fat."

"Yes, well--you should have some pity on the poor man."

"Oh, he's so disgusting mom. I see him looking at me from his window. Ick."

“Okay, that’s enough about Mr. Smiley. Have you done your homework?”

Jane started watching Mr. Smiley. She knew he was watching her so she decided to watch him right back. Watch him watching her, when he knew it, and watch him when he wasn’t watching her, like when he rolled and shook and waddled to his mailbox. She decided to spring herself out at him one day without warning. He was almost to the mailbox and she jumped up behind him.

“Hi Mr. Smiley!” she spoke brightly.

He turned and saw Jane wearing one of her usual tight baby T-shirts, no bra, those nipples poking out at him like missiles about to explode in his face. He turned red. It was so embarrassing. He was unable to breathe or talk.

“So--what’s in the mail today?” she asked him, a slightly sarcastic smile gracing her little rosebud lips.

“Nothing much.” he grabbed his mail, accidentally dropping a few envelopes.

“Oh dear,” he said. He knew he couldn’t bend down to pick it up.

“I’ll get it.” Jane quickly scooped down and picked up the few pieces of mail, handing it to him.

“You get alot of junk mail like we do.”

“Yes,” he gasped and turned to walk toward his house. She followed him. He was panting and wheezing with every step.

“Are you going into your house?” Jane asked breezily.

“Yes,” was all Mr. Smiley could say before he got up the steps, in the door and slammed it shut. He hated her with every difficult breath he had to take. She was laughing at him. He leaned on the door and vowed to get some stronger binoculars, ones

with infrared capabilities in case she went out at night. He would change the time he went to the mailbox too. No sense in inviting another one of these surprise encounters. She was onto him; he would be onto her and fool her. Change his habits. That was fine. He didn't care about habits anyway. He lived on disability checks and his sister brought his groceries over. He had a TV and his watching Jane. That was all that mattered. Everything else in life was dim to Mr. Smiley. Jane seemed bright. She had the glow of something he had long since forgotten, from his past. He remembered it--the feeling. He just wanted to look at her when he could. Look at her. He forgot to even notice her breasts at the mailbox she scared him so. No more of those surprise attacks, he thought. Got to get a grip on reality and plan my days differently.

He thought these thoughts as he shoved a man-size portion of frozen Salisbury steak into the microwave.

What a loser, Jane thought. She conceived of an idea to entice that ugly man, make him really excited. Give him what he wanted and then some. She figured out when he was apt to watch her most. She planned to be in some conspicuous place in the back yard where he could get a good look. She'd assemble her clothes--short skirts with no underpants--tight see-through shirts and no bra, that kind of thing. Give the man what he wanted--a really good peek. She wasn't aware of his plan to watch her at night--she still focused on daytime opportunities. But they were there, plenty of them. Just after the mail episode, even, there he was, the repulsive shithead, watching her go into the house from his dining room window.

Mr. Smiley spent his nights watching TV until he got his sister to get him a set of binoculars that had infrared lenses. After he got the binoculars he spent many hours plotting how to spy on Jane at night. Of course, Jane had no idea he was planning this. She just got a few items of wardrobe together to wear out in the yard after school.

They had a collusive relationship, she realized. It was something they both participated in, two consenting adults--(well, she was almost an adult) yielding to this little game with each other. She found a see-through blouse at the mall in the underwear shop section of one of the department stores. It was gauzy, off-white, with blousy sleeves. Kind of tacky, but perfect for Mr. Smiley. She would put it on one of the days her mother had a meeting of something or other.

When she put it on she admired herself in the mirror.

My God, she thought, my breasts are just perfect. They were small, well-formed, with taut nipples standing out quite conspicuously under the sheerness of the blouse, slightly rounded but not too much. They had a kind of haughty yet perky beauty, young, aware of themselves and their intelligence, but cute and sassy as well. She loved her breasts. She only hoped they made Mr. Smiley feel sick to his stomach. She didn't want him to feel good about it, no way. He was to feel jealous, anguished, sick and sexually starved. Only his total depravity would do, she decided.

As for his part, Mr. Smiley was aware of none of this. He only knew that if he went more than a day or two without sighting Jane he would sink into that familiar wasted, blue feeling, falling, dipping into that huge chair of his, a glass of pop on one arm, potato chips and dip and mounds of sliced ham on the other. He would sit there, blue and despondent with the television interminably on, watching and eating, eating, eating,

and plummeting into some kind of mindless, numb netherworld of non-being. The non-being of Mr. Smiley. It was nothing to smile at.

Jane had no intentions on telling her parents anything about this relationship with Mr. Smiley. It was not an item they talked about at the dinner table, but she felt a compulsion about it that broke loose.

One evening Jane watched her father push things around on his plate with the fork and knife facing backward. His wife watched him with disdain. Jane was forever choking on her food. She hated steak and they had it all the time. Her vegetables were lying sullen on the plate. She hated them too.

“Mr. Smiley is a weird man, don’t you think?”

“Do we have to talk about him tonight?” her mother asked with impatience. *What was her obsession with that poor fat man anyway?*

“Who?” said her father, shoving salad into his mouth. A piece of lettuce was hanging out of the corner.

“Dad--could you eat less like a non-humanoid?”

“Jane--”her mother warned. “Dale--” she discreetly pointed to the corner of her mouth corresponding to his. He picked up his napkin, hiding his mouth behind it, and pushed the lettuce into his mouth.

“Jesus,” Jane said under her breath. Her parents were hideous.

“Now, who are you talking about here?” Dale said, smiling through chewing.

“Never mind.” Jane shoved her plate away.

“Don’t talk to your father that way,” her mother spoke, also with food in her mouth.

“Can you guys not talk with your mouth full?” She violently pushed her chair out from the table and left with revulsion.

“She’s hormonal,” Dale said and let it go at that.

“That’s no excuse,” his wife said as she began clearing plates.

“Who is it she’s talking about?”

“Mr. Smiley,” said Susan as she walked away from him into the kitchen. He followed her, carrying his salad bowl and a glass.

“Mr. Who? Who the hell is this? A new teacher?”

“Coffee?” said Susan.

“Yeah—Okay, if you spike it a little.”

Susan reached for the whiskey bottle on top of the refrigerator. Dale often had whiskey in his after-dinner coffee. It was the Irish blood in him, she guessed.

“Mr. Smiley is that horrible fat man who lives next door.”

She poured a generous amount of whiskey into his waiting coffee mug.

“Oh my God--him? She’s--what’s the deal?”

“Who knows. She’s taunting him--you know, making fun of him, I think.”

“Oh. Well, he needs medical attention.” Dale took a healthy sip of his coffee and felt immediately better.

“Well, I’m going to watch the news.” He left the kitchen. Susan felt suddenly stranded, as always. She never got a chance to finish a conversation with Dale; he always left before she even knew what happened or what she thought. Thinking was not her favorite thing anyway. She began doing the dishes.

Jane came skipping down the stairs, wearing her little skirt, no underpants, and the see-through blouse. She was careful to put a big jacket over the whole thing so the parents wouldn't notice.

"Going out!" she called to her mother at the sink. Susan looked up and saw a streak of leg go out the back door.

Once in the yard, Jane had no idea what to do. She figured he'd be at the window looking for her, and sure enough she caught the sleeve of his ugly blue house-sized shirt in the window. She waved. The blue sleeve disappeared. She skipped around the yard, turned a cartwheel so her skirt went up, revealing her pussy. That's what he wanted, wasn't it? She turned another cartwheel. The sleeve moved a little.

Hah! I got him! She thought. She did the splits, turned over so her skirt went up, revealing her little white buns. She could imagine Mr. Smiley shaking and quivering inside his place. Maybe about to wet his damn pants! That thought made her laugh. She started laughing. Once she started it was uncontrollable. Laughing and laughing. She collapsed on the grass and just let laughter come out. It was startling: a kind of yelling and screaming, more than laughter. She was sure she would split her skirt if she didn't stop. It felt like some wave of energy was overtaking her and it wasn't laughter anymore. It was a kind of spooky feeling.

Maybe like sex, she thought. I'm having sex with Mr. Smiley on the grass in my backyard! That made her want to laugh some more. She tried to stop but she couldn't. Suddenly Mr. Smiley opened his window and leaned out:

"Stop it!" he shouted.

She stopped. Like a car coming to a screaming halt, the whole thing became silent and ugly.

Holy shit, Jane thought. *What the hell--*

“Hey--you pervert!” she shouted back.

“**Shut up!**” he shouted and slammed the window.

Oh my god--what a weirdo, she thought, picking herself up and walking dejectedly into the house. Maybe she succeeded in her plan and maybe she didn't. Mr. Smiley had thrown a wrench into the whole thing by shouting out the window.

“What are you doing out there?” her mother asked.

“Nothing.”

“I heard you laughing to yourself.”

“So what?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

That was the extent of it between her and mother. Her mother couldn't possibly get a clue about it anyway, she was barely clued in about her own life. Jane trounced back up to her room and slammed the door. She looked out the window and into Mr. Smiley's window catching Mr. Ugly Repulsive Fat Slob walking over to that nasty chair he always sat in. She saw him fall into it.

“I hate you!” she shouted to the closed window, threw herself onto her bed and turned on the radio full blast.

“I hate this whole stinking life,” she said to the wall.

Her father knocked on the door.

“What is it?”

“Can I come in?”

“At your own peril.” She sat up. Shit, she’d left the big old jacket in the back.

Now she’d have to go out and get it.

Dale came in and sat on the bed.

“You know--”

“Oh, God dad, I am not in the mood for one of these understanding talks.”

“Well--it’s just that--”

“Please.”

He looked at her. He just wished he could be a little cooler and talk a little faster, maybe she would respect him then.

“Couldn’t we--”

“Couldn’t we?” She turned onto her side, repeating his words, and put her hand gently on his tie, loosening it. He was endearing, if a bit daft.

“Just--” he pulled her hands off his tie. “Never mind.” He loosened the tie himself, taking it off and laying it gently on the end of her bed.

“What’s going on these days in school?”

“Oh God. I hate school. It’s so monotonous.”

“What’s your favorite subject?” he asked her absently and walked over to the window. These fall days were getting colder at night. He shut her window. The street lamps came on and he saw the sun make its last dip below the skyline. Next door he could see that Mr. What’s-it sitting in his chair watching television. He closed her shade.

“You should keep your shades closed.”

“Okay.”

“What are your plans for the Harvest Dance?”

“How’d you know about that?”

“Mrs. Howland is on the dance committee.” Mrs. Howland was his office manager.

“Oh.”

She sighed and opened her geography book absently.

“I want Jason The Stud to ask me.”

Dale nodded. Things were on track.

“Well, I better go back to my news.” He carefully picked up his tie and left the room, shutting the door quietly.

Jane read the same sentence repeatedly in her book, hardly even aware of what she read.

Mr. Smiley was angry. No amount of food would assuage it. What a little bitch. He knew what she was doing! She was trying to make him upset. He shoved popcorn into his mouth. He didn’t eat that much, anyway. Being fat was just his punishment for being born into the family he was born into. His mother was a drinker. That wasn’t his fault. He piled salami, mayonnaise and ham onto a Kaiser roll, added a few slices of provolone and took a bite. Movies on television made him cry. But she--that bitch--she just made him mad.

Mad as hell.

He needed to go to the bathroom. It was an ordeal. Heave himself out of the chair, heave over to the sink, lean on it for a minute to catch his breath, slide over to the

bathroom, lean on the door, undo his pants and lean over the toilet, bracing his hands on the wall behind the toilet. It was getting to the point where he'd need a walker or a cane or both. It scared him to think that he might not be able to get around his place anymore, or go anywhere, or go to the bathroom by himself. Sometimes, he wished his heart would give out and he'd die right then and there. Death was looking to be easier than life.

He told his sister to get him new binoculars, these ones are broke, he said. She said okay. He said he wanted them so he could see at night. She said okay and then laughed and asked him, what for? He said just cause it was easier for him, that's what for. She said okay. So now, he was using those binoculars every night. That gave him a reason to live through the day.

He flushed the toilet, pulled up his pants, didn't bothered fastening them, and waddled back to the chair. He might just sleep in the chair tonight. Some nights he couldn't handle going up those stairs to bed. It was too much. He could hardly breath to make it to the top. And when he got there, undressing took him so much effort he sometimes slept in his clothes. It was easier just to stay in the chair. He pitied himself. Tears rolled down his face. He took another bite of his sandwich and daydreamed that Jane found him funny and cute and came over to cook for him and clean his house.

Jane was the last person to ever consider cleaning anything. Her room was the aftermath of bad thinking and unrequited sexual thoughts. Unbeknownst to her parents an array of dildos was stashed under her bed, beneath a bunch of *Premiers* and *People* magazines. Her mother didn't have it in her repertoire to look under her bed, and if she did, Jane was sure she wouldn't know what the dildos were for. Her masturbation orgies were committed late at night when she was sure the parents were asleep. She often

thought about Mr. Smiley as she jabbed her favorite dildo inside her little wet vagina. She thought of him standing above her, heaving and gasping, watching her get off. That thought got her hot. What kind of a sick girl am I? she wondered. Getting aroused by some horrible old fat man. It didn't occupy her thoughts too long. There were plenty of masturbation sessions with Jason the Stud, too. He was a lot more fun to imagine, with his developed chest and the dark hair that always fell over his cheek and eyes. Jason was a good subject.

Most of her friends masturbated too, they just didn't go in for devices as much as Jane. She'd sent in for them from some magazine she saw in the bookstore advertising aphrodisiacs, dildos, thongs, sexual devices of all kinds, including videos. She often wondered if her father was involved in this kind of activity, or ever had been. She didn't want to wonder about this too long, it made her sick. Mr. Smiley was more fun; imagining him dropping dead while watching her get off. That was a mean fantasy, she decided, and curtailed herself from imagining that again.

When Mr. Smiley's sister brought over his infrared binoculars he was beyond joy. They were inside of a box, packed tightly with bubble wrap and popcorn.

"Listen Bud, those damn things were expensive," his sister complained as she put the groceries away in his kitchen. "Don't you ever clean this place up?" She eyed the stack of dirty dishes strewn all over the counter, the sink and the table. "The refrigerator has stuff in it that could walk by itself," she laughed as if no one had ever said this before, her hearty laugh. Smiley just stood in the doorway, not smiling.

"Well--" he started to say. He couldn't tell her how desperate he felt, how tired he was, how it was hard to breath, let alone move around and clean things, how--

“Look Bud--I know things are hard. Why don't you go back to that clinic again and try getting on their program? It did you good last time.” She was wetting the sponge and getting ready to clean the place up.

“I guess.” He hated the clinic, he hated the program, he hated the nice way the nurses and clinicians and doctors treated him because he knew they didn't mean it. He hated himself and his body. He cursed the God that made him fat.

“Well, Bud--it's your life.” She pulled all manner of things out of the refrigerator, food in various states of preservation and decay. What a mess.

“I come over here every week--get you your groceries, clean the place up--I just think you need to do something for yourself.”

“I do,” he said. He sat precariously on one of the kitchen chairs. They had had to bolster it with extra wooden slabs so it wouldn't break. Even sitting down was hard for him. It compressed his chest and made breathing even harder. He couldn't sit, he couldn't lie, he couldn't stand. He might as well be dead.

His sister made him a ham and cheese sandwich and handed it to him.

“Ham and Cheese--you need to get some other kind of low-fat food, Bud.” She put away all the groceries, slammed the cupboards and refrigerator shut and looked at him.

“Well, you do the shopping.”

“True. I'll get some low fat cheese next time. Have you been to the doctor lately?”

“No,” Mr. Smiley said, mouth full. “I'll go.”

“When?”

“When you can drive me!”

Mr. Smiley had stopped driving ten years ago when he had become too fat to fit inside a normal sized car. It wasn't comfortable to drive.

“You make the appointment, and I'll drive you, Bud.”

She wiped the counter, threw the sponge into the sink and grabbed her purse.

“Well, I got to go. If you need anything, holler.”

“Yeah, I will.” Smiley was rooted to the chair, eating. She didn't expect him to see her out. He heard the door slam and her car back out the drive.

Thank God, he thought. Now I can go watch TV.

He heaved himself out of the kitchen chair and waddled into the living room where his favorite easy chair was waiting for him.

Somehow, Jane figured out that Smiley changed his habits. She also surmised that maybe nocturnal enticements were the way to go. She wasn't sure how she figured this out, but she did. Maybe she and Smiley were on a similar wavelength. They had some kind of destiny together.

One night, around eleven, after mom and had were asleep, she decided to go out into her yard completely nude. It was a little nippy; she figured could handle it. Smiley was there, by his window. She could see him with his binoculars, looking at her. She danced around the yard, making sure her breasts were pointed straight at his face. It was a real charge. She didn't want to bore him, so she stopped and went in after a few minutes.

Always leave them wanting more, she thought, and went upstairs to masturbate. She had a particularly fat dildo that she reserved for her Mr. Smiley sessions.

Jane started going out into the yard every couple of nights, after her folks were asleep. Mr. Smiley never knew when she would appear. She liked that. It kept him guessing. He, on his part, was extremely depressed on the nights she did not show up, and totally elated on the nights she did. When she danced, his heart jumped inside his chest, he felt alive for those few moments, he felt as if there were a purpose to his being here. The rest of the time life was barren.

Jane was aware of her power, but she wanted to up the stakes. It wasn't enough to just get this guy hot looking through those damn binoculars from his window, she had to see him up close, face to face, watch his expressions, see the massive, fat body quiver with excitement. She just wasn't sure how she was going to execute this.

Mr. Smiley, for his part, was content to watch. He didn't want a repeat of that shameful mailbox experience. Watching her dance through his infrared binoculars was all that he needed to keep him going from one day to the next. It wasn't enough for Jane. She decided to steal his mail and have to return it to him, in person.

She snuck out to the mailbox one afternoon, just after the mailwoman came and just before Mr. Smiley got out there. She only took one piece of mail; that way it would look like it accidentally got delivered to her house. The next day, after school she would deliver it to his door. Imagine her disappointment when she rang his bell and realized that he was gone. She rang again and again, just to make sure. She checked the side of the house, peeped through the window. The TV was on, but nobody was home.

Mr. Smiley had given himself a bath and got stuck inside the bathtub. He was unable to heave his body out of the tub without help, and the phone was in the other

room. He leaned back in the water and sighed. Little did he know that he had missed the opportunity of a lifetime. Jane left with a deep sense of regret.

Oh damn, she thought. Where could he be? He never goes anywhere.

“Mom,” she said the next day after school, “are you making coffee?”

“Yeah. So what? I don’t want you drinking coffee, Jane, it’ll stunt your growth.”

“I think my growth is pretty much done with, mother.”

“Okay.”

Her mother vigilantly poured the coffee grounds into the filter.

“Mom.”

“Yes?”

“You know, we got something of Mr. Smiley’s delivered to us by accident.”

“Oh?”

“I got it.”

“I see. Well, take it and put it in his mailbox.”

“Well, actually, I rang his bell so I could give it to him personally. Yesterday.”

“Jane, I just wish you’d leave that man alone. I mean, what is your fascination with him?”

“Mother, I’m just doing the neighborly thing.”

“I know Jane, I know, but I think it’s weird that you talk about this guy all the time.”

“I don’t talk about him all the time, mother. Anyway--”

“Yes?”

“I rang his bell several times and there was no answer, so I thought--”

“Maybe he went out.”

“He never goes out. I mean, his sister delivers his groceries, and he doesn’t drive.”

“Look, sweetie, I really don’t want to pry into anyone else’s business, understand?”

Her mother simply would not listen. That night she danced again in the yard, but he was not there at the window. In fact, the house was dark, the lights had not been turned on. She really began to think something was wrong, but her parents didn’t seem to care one way or another. The whole neighborhood was like that--people lived their lives and kept their business to themselves. They figured they had earned the money for the space and the privacy was their privilege.

It was several days before she re-addressed the Smiley issue again. Jason The Stud was making eyes at her in school. He waited for her after Chemistry class and they went to the cafeteria together, commiserating about school, how bad it was, how much they hated it, how the teachers were geeks. He laughed at her witticisms, she pretended they were un-rehearsed, she looked with longing at him when he wasn’t aware, at that lock of hair that fell over his face. She wanted to kiss him, to fuck him, to have him fuck her repeatedly. These thoughts were not cool for a girl to have at age fourteen, even if it was the 21st century. It just wasn’t okay for a girl to have aggressive, sexually predatory thoughts but she had them anyway. Jason was a little shy around her because her breasts made him hot although he’d never admit it. She was the girl of his dreams.

So, things were going along swimmingly with Jason, and Jane hardly thought about Mr. Smiley at all. Days went by. She decided to confront her dad who might be more interested.

“Dad,” she walked into his office.

He was doing the bills, writing checks, using his calculator.

“We need to start thinking about your college, Jane. Have you had any thoughts about this?”

“Not exactly dad.”

“Well, I’ve got that big book over there about colleges. Maybe you should take that to your room and look it over.”

She glanced over at the book and nodded.

Okay. Dad, listen, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Oh, by the way, did that Jason fellow ask you to the dance?”

“Oh, he hasn’t asked me, but I’m sure he will. Now--”

“Janey--I’m doing the bills. Is this important?” She sighed.

“Forget it.” She turned to leave.

“Take the college book!” he reminded her.

“Oh yeah.” She grabbed the book which was heavier than her Geometry textbook, and walked out. Her mother was in the den watching TV.

“Mom,” she sat on the end of the armchair. “I am really worried about Mr. Smiley. I think we should call the police.”

“Jane, I am trying to watch this show.”

Jane realized she would have to take matters in her own hands. She hadn't seen Mr. Smiley go to his mailbox or come to his window for days. She was wondering if something was wrong. The lights hadn't gone on in the house at night. He couldn't have gone away on vacation, could he? His sister was due for a visit soon, she reckoned, and at that point she planned to make herself known.

Sure enough, two days later his sister showed up. Jane was already staking the scene out when his sister drove into the driveway. The dining room window was open just a crack and Jane had slid it open with a shovel. The screen was easy to pop out.

When she got inside the house it was scary. There were potato chips and stale bread all over the floor next to his chair. The T.V. was still on, the kitchen was a mess of half opened boxes of food, dirty dishes and garbage. She was afraid to go upstairs. Something told her she wouldn't like what she found. She went up there anyway.

His bedroom was really a mess. There were his huge clothes everywhere. Clothes tumbled out of the dresser drawers. There were old newspapers, the bed wasn't made and the sheets looked filthy. This man was a mess, Jane realized. She crept cautiously through the bedroom and into the bathroom, where what she saw made her scream. She couldn't do anything else but stand there for some minutes and scream. The screaming sounded as if it were coming from somewhere outside of her, but it was not.

William Smiley's sister came up the stairs after she heard the screams and walked to the bedroom.

"What's going on? Oh my god--Buddy!" She saw his body, blue and dead wedged into the bathtub.

“What are you doing here?” she asked Jane.

“I live next door. I was concerned.”

His sister called the hospital and then the police. When the police arrived they questioned Jane for a few moments and the ambulance took Mr. Smiley’s body to the morgue. They found suggestive, nude pictures of pre-pubescent girls on top of William Smiley’s dresser. How he got them, no one knew. He had them, nevertheless. Jane had sent them anonymously to brighten up his day. How she got them was anybody’s guess. Her father wouldn’t tell, she knew that.

Jane went home dejected. Her mother made her hot chocolate and offered to rent a movie. Her father patted her on the hand and told her everything would be all right and she should look forward to the dance. The dance seemed to be some kind of childish and stupid prank to Jane in the light of Mr. Smiley’s death. The guilt would not abate and she knew she could tell no one about her complicity in the whole affair. It sat on her mind like a brooding weight for life. Jane began to understand despair.

“Look Dad, I did not murder Mr. Smiley.”

“Who said anything about murder, for Christ sake?”

“Don’t worry,” said her mother and handed her a cup of hot chocolate.

“I wonder where in hell he got those pictures,” her mother asked. Her father was silent. Jane’s sense of destiny sank even further into stupor.

“He was a perverted old man. He probably got a thrill from them. How could I know he’d die in the bathtub, for God’s sake?”

“Well, of course, dear, how could you know? It has nothing to do with you. Don’t give it a second thought,” her mother reassured her.

“I’ll never be able to go back to school after this,” she pouted.

“Why not?” her father asked.

“Childhood just seems so silly and pretentious anyway.”

“Well, you’re going to be in school for quite some time so get used to it,” her father concluded and ambled off into the office.

Something inside of Jane felt absent. She tried to think about Jason and his beautiful hair, but images of Mr. Smiley panting at the mailbox kept popping up. Ever since this whole thing broke, no one even remotely assumed she had anything to do with Mr. Smiley’s death, but she knew she did. The nude pictures, everything, it all suggested a plot. She almost wished someone would put it together and take her out of her misery, but it was not going to happen and she knew it. Her life would go on, much as before, only different. What changed was her. There was no more innocence in life, she decided, and there never would be.

An autopsy showed the cause of death was a massive heart attack. This did not release Jane. She would never be tried in the court of public appeal. She would return to school, many would actually pity her for this recent tragedy and all would be forgotten. Mr. Smiley had meant very little in this life.

Smiley’s sister sold the house and got rid of all his stuff. He was her brother and she felt sorry for the whole business but she was kind of relieved it was over now. Smiley was probably skinny in heaven, having a great time. He deserved that. We can’t all be fat forever, she thought.

Jane went back to school and Jason took her to the dance. There were innocent moments of sexuality between them and she agreed to allow him to touch her beautiful breasts. After all she didn't really feel that much differently than before, although her life lacked the excitement she felt titillating Mr. Smiley.

There was a teacher at school who was kind of fat and she decided she liked him a little. He wasn't as fat as Mr. Smiley, but then, she figured, that was good. Less likelihood of him dying of a heart attack. She started sending him little notes in his mailbox. It was the beginning of a new chapter in her life. This time, she'd be in more control.

Every so often she would think of Mr. Smiley. It made her kind of sad. It wasn't his fault. She hoped he was delighted with heaven. She was happy and that was all that mattered.

The End