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Opening extract from

Chicken Dance

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ONE

My sister's name was Dawn, and my mother said she was named that because when she was born it was like the sun had just risen. My name is Stanley. My parents told me that they named me after my father's uncle, who left the country because he owed a lot of money to some loan sharks because he gambled and drank a lot. I don't remember being called Stanley because my parents always called me Don. They didn't tell me why they changed my name, except that they didn't like the name Stanley anymore.

What my parents told me wasn't really the truth, but I didn't find this out until I was twelve years old. Until then, I thought my name was Don. Actually, they told me my name was Stanley when I was eleven, but only because I found my birth certificate, because I was cleaning out the big closet, because my mother was having the "Power Couples" over to our house for dinner, because she thought she could get stuff from them

if she gave them some eggs. I guess that doesn't really make sense, so maybe I should start from a couple of years ago, on my eleventh birthday, when things started happening.

But you know what? Maybe before I tell you that, I should tell you who I am and where I live and why I live there and some other stuff that you might want to know about me.

My name is Stanley Schmidt and I live on a chicken farm in Horse Island. It isn't really an island and there aren't a lot of horses there, but there are a lot of chickens. Almost everyone has them, and people drive from miles away just to buy their eggs in Horse Island. The town has always been filled with chicken farms, but it wasn't until one of the people from there, Jonathan Jacobs, moved to Lafayette and became a weatherman that people started wanting eggs from Horse Island chickens. He talked about the town all the time during his weather report and would say stuff like, "Tomorrow is going to be a sunny day. I'm sure all the chickens back on my parents' farm in Horse Island are going to enjoy it and give some delicious eggs. Maybe even a double yolk."

Because he talked about Horse Island all the time, people from other towns like Cow Island, Forked Island, Pecan Island, Kaplan, and Abbeville drove to Horse Island to buy eggs.

I wasn't born in Horse Island, though. I was born in

Shreveport, but when I was a baby, my parents and I moved to the chicken farm in Horse Island.

My sister, Dawn, didn't move with us because my mother told me that Dawn had died from scarlet fever when she was fifteen and I was just a baby. Although I didn't remember her, I knew what she looked like because we had a bunch of pictures of her in dance costumes all over the house.

Dawn and I didn't look alike at all, even though she was my sister. She was thin with straight brown hair, and her skin looked like she'd been out in the sun a lot, and her eyes were kind of the color of the insides of a pecan. I had green eyes and wore glasses and was short and I had reddish hair that was kind of curly and my skin was white, except for a bunch of freckles.

Anyway, the reason my parents and I moved from Shreveport was because my father inherited the chicken farm from his uncle. Not Stanley, whom I was supposedly named after, but Sam. In Uncle Sam's will, he said that my parents could live in the house for ten years if they kept at least twenty-five chickens at all times. Uncle Sam's lawyer had someone come and count the chickens every month and my mother called this person the "rodent counter." My parents were allowed three warnings if they didn't have twenty-five chickens when they were counted. After the third warning, the house and land would be donated to the American Poultry Association. After ten years of

keeping twenty-five chickens, my parents could do whatever they wanted with the farm.

My mother said Uncle Sam had gone insane because he'd spent so many years alone with a bunch of chickens. I'd never met my father's uncle Sam or anyone else in my family. I didn't have any aunts or uncles that I knew about, and I'd never met my grandparents because my mother said that her mother and father had been killed when a tornado tore through their house. And that sharks had attacked my father's parents during a fishing trip off the coast of Texas.

But even though I'd never met my father's uncle Sam, I liked him a lot because I loved the chicken farm he'd given us. My mother wouldn't let me go into the coop alone because she was scared they'd peck my eyes out and then she'd have to go in and get me. So I spent all of my free time sitting near the fence that separated our backyard from the chicken yard.

The chicken yard was just a big yard surrounded by a chain-link fence. When the chickens weren't in their nests laying eggs, I'd watch them dance in the yard or roll in the dirt. When one got close enough to the fence, I'd poke my fingers through one of the holes and try to pet it.

Sometimes I'd even talk to them about stuff at school and about this kid named Leon Leonard, who made fun of me because my mother said we kept our chickens for ambience.

The chickens would answer me back and say stuff

like, "That's okay, Don. One day Leon Leonard is going to poop in his pants and not have any friends."

The chickens didn't really speak back to me. I only imagined that that's what they were saying. It was a lot more fun for me to make up what they were saying because that way they never said anything that I didn't like and so they became my best friends.

I really liked living on that farm, but my mother hated it. She never told that to people when they'd ask her why she and my father lived there. She would tell them that since she and my father were in their late thirties, they thought it was time to leave the city. Then she would add that we didn't keep the chickens to farm them because that would make us chicken farmers, and we were anything but that. She'd tell people that we kept chickens for ambience and because we loved fresh eggs.

I think this confused some people because a lot of them didn't know the meaning of the word *ambience*. And if they did, they didn't think scraping chicken poop off the bottoms of their shoes was ambience.

I guess I've told you all the stuff I need to for now, so I'm going to start telling you about the night of my eleventh birthday, when everything kind of started to change.

TWO

On the night of my eleventh birthday, my mother, father, and I were sitting in our living room eating TV dinners and watching television like we did every night. My father sat in a brown leather recliner and my mother on a dark pink velvet-covered love seat. It looked more like a chair to me, but my mother called it a love seat, and if my father or I called it a chair, she corrected us.

I sat on the dark pink velvet-covered sofa. If my father or I called it a couch, my mother corrected us and told us that she didn't know what we were talking about, because she didn't have a couch in her living room. She told us that she had a *sofa*, and that we should use the correct word.

She called it a sofa on my eleventh birthday when she shouted at me, "Don! Don't spill. Your sister loved that sofa. I'd hate to have a big stain on it because of your clumsiness."

My mother had broken the rule of no talking during regularly scheduled programs and my father, who had been taking a bite of his chicken cacciatore at the time, looked at her as if she had just given him a math problem that he didn't know the answer to.

Anyway, since it was my eleventh birthday, I decided I was going to ask my parents for a favor that I'd been wanting to ask for almost a year. It made me kind of nervous and so I started thinking about a KC and the Sunshine Band song to help me relax. I knew all of their songs because I'd won their greatest hits album at a chicken bingo at Horse Island Food and Furniture.

You see, Horse Island Food and Furniture had this contest where they put a chicken in a big cage, like about the size of a bed that two people can sleep in. On the floor of the cage was a white board with red numbers, like a big bingo card. Mr. Bufford, the owner of Horse Island Food and Furniture, put the chicken in the cage in the parking lot on Saturday mornings, right before the store opened, and everybody would watch what number the chicken used the bathroom on. Then they'd try to buy food and furniture that cost the same amount as that number. Mr. Bufford called it the "Magic Number" and one day it was 33, and my mother spent that exact amount by accident.

When it happened, the cashier smiled real big and told my mother, "Congratulations, you've reached the magic number. For one hundred dollars can you tell me 'the sentence that wins it'?"

My mother looked at the cashier and asked, "Excuse me?"

The cashier asked again, "For one hundred dollars, can you tell me 'the sentence that wins it'?"

I knew "the sentence that wins it," so I smiled and said, "Horse Island Food and Furniture does it the way I like it."

My mother looked at me and said, "Don, please. What did I tell you about not speaking unless you're spoken to?"

But then the cashier said, "He's right! Congratulations! You win one hundred dollars cash!"

My mother smiled and said, "Really? What a nice surprise!"

When the cashier gave the money to my mother, she put it all in her purse.

Then the cashier looked at me and said, "Since you helped your momma, young man, I'll give you the chance to win something as well. Can you tell me the name of the President of the United States?"

I smiled real big and said, "Jimmy Carter."

And the cashier said, "That's right. Congratulations! You have just won yourself a greatest hits album of KC and the Sunshine Band."

I had an old record player in my room and started to listen to the album every day and sometimes sang the songs in my head. Because I was trying so hard to think of the words, I'd forget what I was thinking about before I started singing. So sometimes if what I was thinking

about made me nervous, I'd start singing a KC and the Sunshine Band song in my head. And it would help me forget what I was thinking about and then I wasn't so nervous.

So on the night of my eleventh birthday, I started singing "Boogie Shoes" to myself. But then I stopped because the opening song of "Happy Days" started playing on the television and my mother squealed like a pig.

Then she said, "That's 'Rock Around the Clock.' You know, that's the song Dawn danced to when she won her dance contest when she was thirteen years old."

She pointed with her chicken drumstick at Dawn's ballerina trophy that was at the top of this big bookcase in our living room.

"You know, she got her talent from me," she said. "I used to dance and could have been famous, but I decided to have a family instead."

Then my mother dropped her drumstick onto the aluminum platter and said, "I'm the one who taught her the routine."

My mother got up from her seat and started dancing to the television and pretending that she was spinning a baton. Then she kicked one leg a few times and spun around. She threw one hand in the air and said, "Dawn stole the competition by holding her right leg in the air with one hand and twirling a baton with the other. She could throw the baton in the air and then catch it with her mouth. It was really amazing and I think Dawn could have danced in Vegas if she wanted.

You'd think they would have given her more than that trophy."

Happy Days came on and so my mother sat back down and stopped talking and I looked up at Dawn's dance trophy. It was a shiny, gold-plated ballerina standing about a foot tall on one toe, on top of a green aluminum base. The top of her head was about six inches from the ceiling, and it was taller than anything else on the bookcase, including the television and my mother's music box.

If you opened the lid of the music box, a ballerina popped up from shiny, dark pink fabric that was the same color as our living room walls. The ballerina stood on one toe with her arms stretched out and spun around in circles to music. It almost looked like she wanted to fly, but since she couldn't, she stayed there and danced.

Sometimes my mother would take it down and wind it up and watch the ballerina dance. And sometimes she'd even dance with the ballerina and let me watch her. When I was a little kid, I saw that movie *Peter Pan* and I thought maybe the ballerina in the box was a fairy like Tinker Bell. I pretended that a witch had put a curse on her so that she had to live in that box. It made me sad that she had to live there and couldn't fly away and play with other fairies. So sometimes I'd pretend that if I wound the music box up all the way and whispered, "Fly," she would stop dancing and fly up in the air.

I had never tried it though, because my mother wouldn't let me touch the music box or even get close to it. I figured out, when I got older, that the ballerina was just a plastic doll and that she wouldn't fly away if I wound up the music box as tight as I could and whispered, "Fly." I still kind of wanted to do it, though. Just to make sure.

Anyway, during a commercial break from *Happy Days*, I took a deep breath and was about to ask my question, when my mother started crying. She said, "The Lord took Dawn because he needed another angel in the sky."

I imagined Dawn up in heaven with a chipped front tooth from a bad baton catch and wearing a white ballerina costume with wings on her back. She was standing on a tall white column and God was looking up at her while she held one leg in the air and twirled a baton with her other hand.

I was staring straight ahead thinking about this and it made me notice a picture of Dawn on her eleventh birthday. She had a blindfold on and was wearing a pink tutu and was trying to pin the tail on a picture of a donkey. I knew it was her eleventh birthday because she was wearing a T-shirt that said, "Kiss Me! I'm 11!"

It made me smile and I guess my mother saw me looking at the picture and smiling instead of looking at her.

She yelled at me, "Don! This is important. Listen to

us when we speak to you. Dick, tell him that this is important."

"This is important," my father said without looking at me, while scratching his underarm.

So I looked at my mother and saw her eyes were almost closed and her mouth was half open like she was going to cry. But then her favorite commercial came on and her eyes opened and her mouth closed.

It was a laundry detergent commercial about this Chinese couple who owned a laundry service, and when a customer asked how they got their clothes so clean, the Chinese man answered, "Ancient Chinese secret."

When the commercial was finished, my mother said, "I would love to go there because I heard that those Chinese ladies give a flawless pedicure for next to nothing. Anyway, so, Don, it's very disrespectful not to listen to me when I talk to you. Dawn would never disrespect me like that."

I looked at my mother and said, "Okay, ma'am."

When I was sure she wasn't going to talk to me anymore, I turned and looked at the television. A cake commercial came on and so I started smiling and watching my parents to see if they were thinking the same thing that I was. That there was a cake hidden somewhere in the kitchen for my birthday.

My mother looked at me and then back at the television and said, "I wish they had Chinese people in this town because we could really use a good restaurant like

the one we used to eat at in Shreveport. You know, I want to move back to Shreveport and eat Chinese food."

I started thinking that maybe my mother had bought me a Chinese cake and that's why she was talking about Chinese food. I tried to imagine what Chinese cake looked like, but I couldn't, and then I started to think that maybe my parents had gotten me a Chinese clown.

But then I stopped thinking about that because my mother started talking again.

"Dick," she said, "can you stop off at an Oriental nail shop in Lafayette tomorrow and bring me back some red polish?"

My father looked at my mother and closed his eyes and then he opened them wide like he was surprised and said, "I'm not going to Lafayette tomorrow. I'm going to Baton Rouge for an aluminum siding convention and I'm going to have to spend a couple of days there."

"When were you going to tell me this?" my mother asked.

My father stared at my mother with a blank face until she yelled, "Answer me, Dick!"

Then *Happy Days* came back on. I wondered if my father was going to turn back and watch television, or break the rule of no talking during regularly scheduled programs and answer my mother. He looked back and forth between the television and my mother as if he were watching a tennis match.

After almost ten seconds he said, "I was going to tell you tonight. I just forgot about it."

"So I guess that means I'm going to have to take care of those rodents," my mother said real loud.

"Yes, dear," my father answered her. "You will have to feed the chickens."

For the next fifteen minutes my mother and father didn't speak. I knew that because my mother had to feed the chickens, my parents would have a fight. Because they always had a fight when my mother had to feed the chickens.

So after *Happy Days* was over, I got up from my seat, threw away my aluminum platter, folded up my tray, and excused myself to my room.

But before I got to my room, I heard my mother shout, "I hate it here!"

"Quiet," my father said. "He'll hear you."

Then my mother screamed louder, "I don't care if he does hear me! To think I gave up that dancing job in Las Vegas to marry you and end up on a chicken farm. I used to be Janice Remington, Dancer. I traded that in for Janice Schmidt, Chicken Farmer. I'd be famous right now if it weren't for you."

My father must not have liked that because then he yelled, "You weren't a dancer! You were a waitress at a drive-in where the manager let you dance for people's birthdays. I'm the one who was in college and had to drop out and do the honorable thing and marry you!"

I heard something that sounded like someone was

getting slapped, and right after, a dog food commercial and then the theme song to *Laverne and Shirley*.

I never understood what my father meant by "do the honorable thing and marry you." I knew what *honorable* was. It's like if someone drops their wallet and you find it. So I figured that my father had dropped his wallet and my mother found it and returned it to him and so since she had done the honorable thing, he did an honorable thing back and married her.

Anyway, right after the theme song to *Laverne and Shirley*, I heard my father say, "I'm sorry I yelled. But you know we can't go back to Shreveport."

"Why not?" my mother asked real loud. "Why can't you beg for your old job back?"

"Well," my father said, "for one, businesses don't usually hire back people they fire; for two, we're just starting to get out of debt and can't afford a move; and three, I couldn't stand to face any of our friends because I'm embarrassed about everything that happened."

"You know it's your fault!" my mother shouted back. "If you had taken family dance classes with us, this wouldn't have happened."

"Come on, Janice!" my father screamed. "It's my fault because I didn't run around in polka-dotted leotards and high heels, clopping like some wounded satyr?"

"A wounded satyr?" my mother yelled.

And my father shouted back, "I call them like I see them!"

Then I heard another slap and footsteps that sounded like they were going toward the kitchen. So I opened my door, stepped out into the hall, and tiptoed into the living room. I could hear pots hitting the floor and plates crashing into the sink. This happened in most of the fights even though we ate out of the TV trays and never used the pots or dishes.

After a few minutes, the pot and plate sounds stopped. That's when I walked out of the living room and into the foyer. I knelt behind a bookcase and right when I did, I heard my father say, "Listen, I'm sorry, Janice, but don't blame me for what happened. That's cruel, and I'm just as upset as you."

Then it sounded like a hundred forks and spoons fell on the floor and my mother let out this really loud scream. It kind of scared me and I wondered if I should run back to my room and lock the door.

But I didn't because then my father said, "I promise that next year when the house becomes ours, we'll sell it and move to another city. Until then, it's all we've got. We spent all of our savings on Mr. Munson. So if you'll be a little patient, this will pay off. And I can buy you that convertible you always wanted."

My mother started crying and my father said, "Everything is going to work out, Janice. I promise."

Nobody talked for a few minutes and then my father asked, "Would you like to go to New Orleans this weekend and get your hair done at one of those fancy salons?"

"Can we go to a dance club?" my mother asked.

"Yes," he told her. "We can go to a dance club."

"Oh, thank you, Dick," my mother said. "That would take off some of the pressures I have."

The arguments happened I guess every month from as far back as I can remember. The one on my eleventh birthday started because my mother had to feed the chickens, but sometimes they were because the weather was too hot or the townspeople were too stupid or because the hair salon didn't have banana-pineapple-scented shampoo. But during all of them, my mother always screamed, "I hate it here!"

When the arguments first started happening, I would sit in my room and listen to them like their voices were coming from the radio. When I first started learning to write, I copied some of the arguments in a notebook. I was about six and since I couldn't write out the whole argument, I'd write the words I knew like *the*, *hair*, *dance*, *job*. The words I didn't know the meaning or spelling of, I'd sound out and then look up in the dictionary. I found the words *leotard* and *honorable* easily. I could never find the word *satyr* in the dictionary, though, because when I'd sound it out, I imagined it to be spelled *sat tire*, or *satire*, but never *satyr*. I found out at school one day that a satyr is a thing that is half man and half goat. We also found out that a centaur is a thing that is half man and half horse. I think that would have been a better word for my father to call my mother, because a horse clops more than a goat.

Anyway, after each argument, I'd look at my notes from the one before and compare them with the new one. I couldn't always hear what my parents were saying. Some months I'd hear, "It's my fault because I didn't run around." Then other times I'd hear, "didn't run around in polka-dotted leotards and high heels, clopping like some wounded satyr?" After a while I could write the whole sentence out and then the whole argument and that's when I started to realize that maybe my parents were hiding something from me.

After I was sure that the argument on my eleventh birthday was over, I walked real fast to my room. I hadn't had a chance to ask my parents my question and they still hadn't given me a cake or birthday presents or a Chinese clown. I thought that at any moment they would call me to go and meet them in the kitchen where they would be waiting to wish me happy birthday. I didn't want to look like I was waiting for them so I changed into my pajamas and lay in my bed awake. After a few minutes I heard a knock at my door.

This is it, I thought. They were going to call me into the kitchen and give me a T-shirt that said, "Kiss Me! I'm 11!"

The door opened and my mother stepped into my room and I looked at her and smiled. She didn't smile back or say, "Come to the kitchen" or, "Happy birthday."

Instead she said, "Don! I'm turning off your light. It's past your bedtime."

I lay awake for the next hour thinking that she was

trying to fool me. She'd never surprised me before on my birthday, but I was sure that this was the year it was going to happen because the picture of Dawn made me think that eleventh birthdays were a really big deal.

An hour after my mother turned off my lights, I fell asleep and dreamed about a Chinese clown. It didn't look that different from a regular clown.

But anyway, when I walked into the kitchen the next morning, my parents were sitting at the table. My father stared straight ahead while he ate a banana and my mother bounced around in her chair while she ate a donut.

When my mother finished eating, she said, "Don, your father and I have an announcement to make. Don't we, Dick?"

My father nodded and scratched the bald spot on his head and then my mother said, "We're going to New Orleans this weekend, so you'll be staying with the babysitter."

My mother stood up and walked over to the radio and said, "I'm so excited. I need to practice dancing for New Orleans."

She turned on the radio and the song "Love Will Keep Us Together" by Captain and Tenille was playing.

I closed my eyes and tapped my fork against the table and moved from side to side with the music until my mother said, "Don! Stop tapping that fork. You're messing up my rhythm."

I opened my eyes and saw my mother spinning

around. She looked like she was in a good mood so I decided I would ask her the question I'd wanted to ask the night before. I took a deep breath and was about to ask if I could start taking care of the chickens. But something else fell out of my mouth and I said, "Yesterday was my birthday."

My father turned and looked at me. My mother, who was kicking her leg in the air, froze for a few seconds. Then it was like she melted, and she dropped her leg down and said, "Oh. Happy birthday. You know, I'm sorry, we forgot. I don't always have time to remember these things. I mean, I cook and clean all day, every day. You mustn't try to make me feel bad about this. Dick, tell him not to make me feel bad about this."

My father looked at me for a couple of seconds and then at my mother. He did something funny with his eyes that made him look like he was thinking. Then my mother crossed her arms in front of her and looked at him. My father closed his eyes and then said, "Don, don't make your mother feel bad about this."