

Astronaut Food

Number One



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Credit for the [cover art](#)

Sandstorm

The room had more people crying at one time than anywhere he had been before. All girls. And him. John kept expecting them to give some indication that they recognized him, but they didn't. Their red and swollen faces were blank, hideous. Their crying, high pitched and violent, seemed to blend into a single sound as though they had been coached to do it together. He hadn't been prepared for this when Principal Bogdanski had made the announcement that anyone who had known the kids could go to Room 115.

It had been hot that morning, and by what John would have guessed to have been 10 a.m., he'd already sweat enough for his oversized Deftones shirt to stick to him. He hated the Deftones now, but he'd liked them last year when he got it. Picking at his shirt made flaky white things float to the ground. A splotch of toothpaste next to the shirt's image of a screaming cat reminded him of the warped tube of Crest he'd found on Christianson's bathroom floor that morning. John had brushed with his finger before he and Ian had left.

They'd woken hungry and exhausted, their mouths dry, their adolescent skin broken out from having not washed. Since he'd graduated last year, days at the shop started early for Christianson, so he was gone by the time they'd gotten up. They

hadn't bothered to check who else was still sleeping it off from last night's party before leaving. There was never anything to eat at Christianson's place, so they had stopped in Gottimart to swipe breakfast on their way to school.

As they passed through the door to Gottimart, Ian adjusted his Yankees hat by taking hold of it from the back where he had written something in whiteout. This made their entrance feel formal, as though Ian had thought to doff his cap upon entering the building.

Gottimart's few short rows of items were lit by an old lamp plugged into the wall next to the cash register. The rest of the store was dark. Bob, the owner, used it for storage. Things were piled around: a ladder, old cigarette advertisements, stacks of shipping containers for soda bottles, a flat tire. Stopping at the counter, John put his hand on one of the store's three bottles of oil. The plastic was hot. The bottle felt like it would cave in if he pressed too hard.

"I just threw up," Nick Gulatti, who everyone called John Gotti, said from behind the counter. Gotti, the reason everyone called it Gottimart even though he only worked there, had graduated last year with Christianson. An odd guy, he didn't come around much; his nickname came more from similarities in name than temperament with the mafia don, though he did have the bulging stomach of a Mafioso. He looked like a mechanic. Once John found Gotti's entry in Christianson's yearbook. The paragraph below his picture, where everyone else had friends' initials and allusions to inside jokes, was one sentence: "My favorite Person: Whoever Gives Me My

Paycheck.”

“You threw up? Just now?” Ian said with what John thought was exaggerated incredulity.

“Out there,” Gotti said, gesturing with his head toward the staff door behind him. He stood a few feet back from the counter with its ancient cash register and lamp. It made him seem hesitant to be there.

They looked to where he had pointed, but no vomit was visible. “Everywhere,” Gotti said as if saying that it had happened even if they couldn’t see it.

“So, this is just something you do?” Ian said, looking at the racks of candy. John followed his gaze. Not much to choose from. By the time he got to school he would be able to steal lunch from the cafeteria anyway.

Gotti looked at him like he was crazy. “It’s because of what I heard.”

“What’d you hear?” Ian asked as he stepped toward the counter and swiped some Skittles.

Gotti got a funny look on his face.

They traded the bag of Skittles back and forth as they walked. Gotti wouldn’t say what he’d heard or why he’d vomited, which John attributed to him being histrionically loyal to someone who’d asked him to keep quiet about something no one cared about. People with no friends made a big deal about things like that.

The walk to school was a couple of miles. As they went, John picked out the

places where he had partied. Partying had sealed off everything behind it. Getting drunk spoke to him as a person. The absurdity of being drunk matched the absurdity of how everything else felt.

The heat made it feel like the school year was about to end, but they still had a month to go. He'd probably have Ms. Morin's class when he got to school. She'd said something weird the other day. Seeming bored while waiting for the class to line up, she'd asked what Ian's plans were now that he was going to graduate. "Waste of a brain," she'd said when he told her Ian wanted to go into the army. "Waste of a brain," she'd repeated, but before he could ask her what she meant, she'd gotten distracted and started yelling at some kid in the hall.

Waste of a brain.

"Everyone is saying you got a 'A' on some big test, or something," he said.

"Test?" Ian said and then burped. "Oh, the SAT. Don't worry about that, John, you'll get something sort of high. It's real simple: answer what you know, don't answer what you don't," Ian said.

"Nothing to it. Nothing to anything."

Ordinarily, Room 115 must have been a teachers' lounge. A sink was in back with a green-streaked bottle of dish soap next to it. In the center of the room, smaller rectangular tables had been arranged to make one big rectangle that they all sat around. The teachers must have panicked trying to figure out what to do with so

many crying kids.

He stared at the floor. At first, to have something to do, he'd rubbed Krystal's shoulder, who'd ended up sitting next to him, but he'd stopped after she gave no sign that she knew he was there, which made it seem awkward and almost sexually indecent to keep touching her.

His hands felt sweaty and swollen. He moved his fingers around in his lap before then switching to tugging his hair, which was already thinning. It was greasy, and the top felt matted down. When that started to hurt, he put his hands back in his lap again, before making the change to pulling on the uneven patches of his facial hair. The hair on his chin had grown in nicely, but his sideburns were still just a few wiry black hairs. He could kind of taste the Skittles from Gottimart that he'd had for breakfast. He hadn't ended up having time to go to the cafeteria and was hungry.

He wondered what Ian was doing up at the high school. He'd probably gotten a ride with Wayne, who could buy beer because he looked old. A few nights before, Wayne had thrown up in Christianson's room and then used an empty thirty-pack box to catch the vomit. Trying to help, someone had brought him water that he'd poured all over his face, which got the thirty-pack box wet and made it start to leak. Christianson told him to go outside, but Wayne kept giving him the finger and saying, "Don't dictate terms to me."

Don't dictate terms to me. John smiled.

"So, who did you know?" Mrs. Lowry asked, interrupting him. He didn't know

Mrs. Lowry. Bogdanski had probably asked her to watch the kids because she was the guidance counselor. He looked at her and then at the ground. He thought about his answer for a long time. He could have said any of them. “Dave,” he said finally.

“Oh! But Dave’s *okay*,” she exclaimed.

He shrugged and gave what felt like a watery smile. “I guess I...” He looked down. He wished he hadn’t come. Somehow it had seemed like this would be better than going to science.

Mrs. Lowry turned from him. This helped because not having her watch made it easier for him to get up from the table.

He ended up at the payphone by the front office. The hall felt quiet and peaceful. It seemed insane now that he had put himself through the experience of sitting in that room. A secretary laughed and it sounded like someone was using a photocopy machine. Through the window, he could see a few cars driving down Main Street.

Dave answered the phone after the first ring. It was crazy to think that amidst all of this he was just sitting at home.

The conversation was short. Dave asked if people seemed upset and if anyone had asked about him. He asked if any girls had seemed upset. He suggested they meet at the bridge near the school. Dave said Ian was already on his way down from the high school and if John waited outside, they could walk to the bridge together.

He left the payphone and walked toward the exit on the other side of the building. Justin, a kid from science, came out of the bathroom when John passed it. John nodded. Justin smirked when he saw the direction John was walking and gave him a knowing look. John kept his face flat.

He exited through the door by the music room. Inside he heard Mrs. Root saying that she didn't expect them to get up and dance naked, just sing. That was always her line: *you don't have to dance around naked, just sing*. Sometimes in music when she said that, he would say, "No one wants to see *you* dance naked" under his breath and everyone would laugh. The door next to her room opened to Tuttle Road, which was the one Ian would take coming from the high school. He could hide in the bushes until Ian came.

But, then, he didn't wait in the bushes. He flung open the door and continued down Tuttle alone before taking a left onto Main Street.

Walking, he thought of a book he'd read in school a few years ago, maybe fourth or fifth grade, about a kid who'd made himself photosynthetic doing his science homework. Being outside reminded him of the part when the kid described the feeling of first going into the sun and realizing he was being nourished by it.

He was the first one to get to the bridge. He dragged his hand along its thick cement edge. He peered over the side. Someone had put their cigarette out in a pool of spit on the ledge and his Deftones shirt got in it when he leaned over the side to get a better look.

Below the bridge, a thin black snake sunned itself on a chunk of brick that jutted up out of the water. He used to go down there with his little kid friends and wade through the stream to play; more recently he would go down there with the guys to smoke.

He watched the snake. Reaching down, he picked up a handful of the soft, fine sand that was on the sides of the bridge. Other than its odd golden color, it kind of reminded him of the sand they put in ashtrays at the mall. He wondered how it had gotten there.

He caressed it. Soft. He held his hand out over the side of the bridge and opened it. Sand rained down on the snake, which lazily slithered off the brick and into the water. It darted left and then right before swimming downstream.

The sand left a yellow coating on his hand that made him think of how gold looks in cartoons. It sparkled. He reached down for another handful, but with the snake now gone he instead threw it in the air. He tossed another handful a little higher. A mild wind scattered it as it fell. He tossed a little more, and then more, first with one hand and then with both. The wind picked up. Its force was strong, and it blew the sand back on him as he threw it. Sand hit his face and got in his eyes.

He threw more, higher, and pictured waves of it coating his body and getting into his mouth. He kept going. His mouth felt full and started to overflow with sand. It got so packed that the sand hit against it before falling to the ground, where it started to pile up and cover his shoes. As he kept tossing it up, it piled higher and higher. He

gagged, choked. Trying to keep pace, he inhaled lungfuls of it, devouring it as if each lung were a separate stomach with its own mouth.

Unable to breathe, he made circles with his arms as he tossed more and more in the air. It whipped around him, burying everything: the bridge, 115, Mrs. Lowry, Gottimart, the whole town. The accident got wrapped up in it, too, and of course so did he.

He kept trying to flail his arms long after he couldn't move them anymore.

Home

He uses the rearview mirror to glance at the spot in the backseat where he'd found Josh. No stain. Some people have so little blood in them, he thinks. Since they were kids, that was how it had always been with Josh: almost no blood at all. Only a millionth of a droplet would come out if Josh cut himself shaving. If he cut himself with a knife, then a whole droplet might emerge. Josh's heart was lazy because it was spoiled. After all, it only had to pump a few droplets of blood a day.

He turns his attention back to the road. Driving through town feels like looking at old pictures of a place you still go to, he thinks. Peering from side to side, he tries to take in as much as he can. He has been imagining this drive since getting here. He drives slowly, creeping along and swerving. He sees the bell tower, the old church lit up, the little Pickle and a Pig restaurant. In only a few days, it has all become so familiar that it feels like home. Some people might say a few days isn't long enough for a place to feel like home, but he knows better. Why, he's had some places become home in just a matter of minutes—seconds, even.

He doesn't notice the cop car in the other lane when he goes to merge. Almost hitting the cruiser, he swerves back into his own lane and presses the brake. He slows to let the cop pass, but for some reason, that crazy guy just slows down, trying to get him to go in front. When that doesn't work, the cruiser zooms ahead and tears into a

frustrated U-turn.

What can he say? He's a fast actor and a smooth operator. After all, he'd pulled over and rolled down his window before the cop had even had time to put his lights on.

Is the registration in the glove compartment? The insurance? Would Josh have paid them? Josh had been behind on rent, and if he'd been behind on rent, then he had probably been behind on insurance. Josh had been forgetful. Maybe it was because his heart was so lazy.

"Is there a *reason* you almost sideswiped me?" is the first thing the cop asks him when he finally gets to the window.

A reason for a thing like that? His mind wanders. Once, in middle school, the guidance counselor had asked him why he had his arms folded. "It's comfortable," he'd said. "But is there a reason why it's comfortable?" the guidance counselor had asked. Reasons. Reasons. It's always "reasons" with people.

He'd love to answer the cop, but he's kind of busy, so he doesn't say anything. The cop seems impatient. "You're sweating profusely," the cop says. He extends his finger and taps it with the other as he ticks off his observations. "You're sweating profusely. Then, while sweating, you sideswipe me."

He didn't actually sideswipe the car, but pointing that out seems pedantic, even though the difference between hitting a car and not hitting a car isn't.

The knock had surprised him that first night, but he wasn't surprised by who had been at the door. Why, Josh's friends. He'd invited them in.

After that, they had come most nights. He kept to drinking and smoking, and they kept whatever drugs weren't drinking or smoking in the bathroom. They would go into the bathroom in small groups, trading out with each other as the night went on. It was a small bathroom, but Josh had it set up nice.

One time, the bathroom door had locked behind Courtney when she went to get her cigarettes in the living room. When she couldn't get in, she'd knocked on the bathroom door with a hand of painted nails and said, "It's me." "It's me," she'd said again, louder. The door opened a tenth of an inch, and she flattened herself so that she could get in. It was amazing how she could make herself as thin as a sheet of paper. You had to give it to her, that Courtney, she's one of a kind.

It was a moving sight, really. He was touched by it. They had told her she could come in, so all she had to say was "it's me" when she wanted to go in. In the end, she was just being polite anyway because if she wanted to, she probably could have gotten in through the little space between the door and the floor. Recognizing that made him appreciate their camaraderie and her candor even more.

They partied most nights, which was a relief after spending the first few days alone in the apartment with beer from the gas station's Beer Cave. He'd walked over and bought it with money he'd found in Josh's bedroom. Every time he spent Josh's money, he would do something like walk over to the public library to return Josh's

DVDs or throw away all of Josh's things. It was only fair.

"It's me," they'd said at the door that first time. "It's me," he'd said.

He'd searched the parking lot before finding the car, having gone the long way around and entering the apartment complex from the far side in case the maintenance worker had come back. The guy hadn't wanted to unlock the door in the first place. The rack of keys in Josh's apartment had itself been shaped like a key, which seemed like a nice touch. You gotta know how to pick 'em.

Did Josh have a car? None of the keys on the key ring had a logo on them. A yellow number had been stenciled on each of the parking spots. 545, 544, 543.

506. Parking space 506 for apartment 506. You had to love those nice little touches.

He'd seen Josh's body slumped over in the backseat before he'd even gotten in. He'd fumbled with the keys, trying several before opening the door and then searching its interior with his fingers instead of his eyes. You couldn't argue with a guy who had fingers for eyes.

After unlocking the door and getting in, he'd noticed that there were no keys inside. Somehow, like a magician, Josh had gotten in, locked himself in without a key, and then died. Maybe Courtney had taught him how to make himself flat, and he had climbed in that way. They can probably all do that out in the Midwest. Maybe it's like a local tradition.

Come to think of it, he hadn't had a chance to see much of the town yet. Given that he'd finally tracked down Josh, why not all go for a drive?

What a pair they made. They went all over that town. It took a while, but eventually he found the perfect spot: a covered bridge. It was a walking bridge, not one for cars. Josh would have liked it there. That was what he was thinking as he dragged Josh's body down to the stream that ran below the bridge.

He decided to head home. It would be a short visit: he would only stay for the sweet beginning and the sweet end. He wouldn't give the middle enough time to get rotten.

Again, he explained to the cop that he would need a second to find the registration. It was his friend's car, you see, so he would need a minute to track down everything. Sheesh, sometimes he felt like all he ever did was repeat himself.

The cop left had his lights flashing, which felt like an intrusion, as though the door had been left open during a private discussion.

As he searched, he tapped the glove compartment twice and grunted, so the cop would know he was a hard worker. He wished he had learned Courtney's trick so he could get out of the car without having to open the door. If he'd practiced hard, he might have been able to sneak through the keyhole by now. He thinks about it and frowns: on second thought, the cop probably would have just gotten him when he came out on the other side.

The cop asks a lot of questions about reasons and keeps repeating some of them. I guess deep down we're all the same, he thinks. We all repeat ourselves.

Is there a reason why you almost sideswiped me? Is there a reason why your friend's not here? Is there a reason why you're here? Where is home, and is there a reason why you're not there?

Sometimes you can say "it's me," and saying it doesn't help you at all.

Sick Like Glass

“So, this is the new place. Try not to laugh,” Stone says. He gives the door a light tap as he passes through. Linda makes an almost inaudible sound as she enters the apartment.

“Stoney-Baloney’s place. The king of the castle,” he says, gesturing expansively.

She nods and looks around. He looks with her. He’d semi-straightened up that morning.

“It’s nice, Robert,” she says. She’s dyed her hair chestnut red. He has to admit that she’s held up well at 35.

“It’s not so bad, right?” he says. “I say to myself: ‘Stoney, you’ve done all right for yourself.’ King of the castle!” he crows.

“Yes, Robert—Stone. It’s nice, Stone.”

He sits in the padded rocking chair over which he normally drapes an old floral print sheet, retrieving the bag of Skittles he’d left open on the bed. She sits on the rocking chair’s ottoman, which is where he sits when he eats at the card table that he uses as a kitchen table. Tilting his head back, he lets a handful of Skittles tumble into his mouth. He holds the bag out to her, and she declines with a tight shake of the head. He cranes his neck to look out the window.

“What are you looking at?” she asks.

“I put my bike out there, locked up to the telephone pole. Usually I bring it inside, but I think with both of us in here at the same time there might not be enough room for a bike,” he says and laughs. “Would you believe after I first moved in here, some guy reached right into my grocery bag and pulled my soda out when I was on my way home. I said to him, I said, ‘I hope you *choke* on it.’ And you know, he said, ‘What’d you say to me?’ Just like that: *what’d you say to me?* You know, they’re all out there thinking that there’s a new whiteboy in town, and they all want a piece of that ass.”

“Robert, why would you talk to a man like that?”

“Hey, if he wants a piece of Stoney’s ass, he’s gonna get an earful.”

She turns her head to the side and speaks in a monotone without looking at him. “Just be careful here, Robert. Call the police when something like that happens.”

“That’s how it’s gonna go if they want *Stoney’s* ass” he mumbles. The bike had been a gift from Bear. After seeing it in Mike’s Bikes, he’d called Bear that night. The next day, Bear had called to say he’d sent him a check, and Stone went back to Mike’s Bikes and put the bike on credit card.

Linda had already heard about the bike. On their way into the building, she’d had asked how he got to work. He’d told her about his ride: the hills, the cars that drove by so fast, the big suburban houses. Those neighborhoods felt familiar and immediate, but also weirdly foreign when he considered that he couldn’t even afford to ride the bus.

What he hadn't told her was that he hadn't been to work in over two weeks. He was suspended because of Alicia M, the less attractive of the two Alicias. Alicia M had told Doreen that he'd said something sexual to her. "For Alicia M? God, no. Maybe for Alicia S," he'd said to Doreen in his defense when she took him off the phone to meet with her in the conference room that smelled like Sulphur because the bathroom next to it always had its door open. For some reason, all of the water at Tech-Light smelled like Sulphur.

He hadn't looked at Doreen when she'd told him that he was suspended until further notice. He'd stared at the conference room's whiteboards, which no one ever used. Having the whiteboards there made him feel good about working at Tech-Light.

"She's a liar-in-training, *bitch*-in-training," he'd said to Doreen about Alicia M that day. Both Alicias had graduated from high school the month before. Doreen had said she would call him about when he could come back.

He still technically had a job, so he wasn't lying when he said he did. He'd been using his credit card to buy food at the convenience store. He wanted to tell Bear that he needed money, but Bear didn't want to hear anything from him now.

"I found some of your old things from the show down in the basement," Linda said. Acknowledging his past was a gift.

"The old show," he said smiling. "At the rate I'm going, I'll be back in the saddle before you know it. I've been coming up with some stuff to pitch. I'm telling you, people are going to *love* what Stoney's got up his sleeve for them this time."

Linda smiles faintly.

He *was* getting better. He was getting better as fast as he could. The problem was that the world was so impatient. We all get sick, he thought. Maybe being sick was just a way of saying that some people healed slower than others. What some people might heal from in seconds could take him months or even years.

In middle school, Greg Lantos had told him that glass was a liquid and not a solid. It just moved so slowly that it seemed like it was solid. “Maybe it’s not that glass moves so slow, but that *we* move so fast,” Stone had said with his finger raised, feeling proud of his insight. Greg Lantos hadn’t seemed impressed.

Linda had brought a paper bag in with her that she’d put down on the table. He’d noticed it outside but hadn’t offered to take it from her. A loaf of bread sticks out. She sees him looking.

“A few things to help you get established. Some of those candies you like,” she says, smiling conspiratorially. She doesn’t hand him the bag or uncross her arms.

She stands out to him against the background of the dingy apartment. Her scarf is nice. She’d looked sloppy before—like the middle-school teacher she is, he’d always thought. She looks better now, he thinks. Classier. The apartment smells like mildew, sweat, and dust mixed with the sharp bleachy smell of the soap he got from the dollar store. Being in the apartment would probably make her smell like it. When he leaves the apartment, he can smell it on himself. Sometimes when he eats, he can taste it on his food.

“Thank you,” he says. “I could use that. Things have been tough since they had to cut down on my hours at the call center.”

“Well, you’ve got this to get you going. You’ll be fed.” She chirps a short, awkward laugh, picks up the bag, and puts it down a foot in front of her in his direction.

He can hear silverware scrape a plate in another apartment. There’s no privacy here. It reminds him of growing up in his parents’ house. When he was twelve, he’d first realized how much he liked spending time outside when he’d wandered out to a patch of trees near the highway overpass. He’d walked down the slope and gone under the bridge. He’d poked around down there for a while, kicking old bottles and trying to read the graffiti, before he’d started crying.

“You know, we really had a good thing together. If I moved back in, we wouldn’t need to be together like ‘together.’ You wouldn’t have to pay for everything yourself, and I wouldn’t have to live in this, *this hovel*.” He laughs, but she doesn’t. “I’m much better now. I can pitch my new show. It would be like old times,” he says.

“Just like old times,” Linda says distantly, sounding muffled like she’s behind a pane of glass.



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