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FICTION NETWORK

NEW STORIES

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BAD HABITS

THIS TIME OF year, which is November, Nick Handley drives his older sister Frances to her job at the county hospital, then stops to pick up a tying crew at the old L&N rail yard. Where his father tied tobacco by the weather, Nick ties by the calendar—tying on days towards the end of the month, when his crew's unemployment and food stamps have run low and they're desperate enough that they'll take farm work.

They sit on a stack of abandoned crossties. On top sits Paul Morley, engaged for a few months to Frances some ten years ago, and Nick's occasional back-lot lover before and since. At his feet sit Leon Hughes and Hambone McCugh, black men old enough to be Nick's father.

Leon and Hambone climb to the truck's flatbed. Paul Morley sits in the cab. "Got a cigarette?" he says, before Nick can put the truck in gear. "Or have you let Frances rag you into quitting?"

Nick pulls a pack from his pocket. "So where were you last night. I waited, under the bri[illegible]e. *Two* hours. You promised."

Paul pulls cigarettes from the pack, t[illegible]king extras in his pocket. "I got busy."

"You know how cold it was under th[illegible]ridge?"

"Hey. You wait for the likes of me, yo[illegible]asking to be kept waiting." Paul punches in the da[illegible]ard lighter.

"For Christ's sake, you could let m[illegible]w. You got a phone."

"You want to quit meeting me unde[illegible]bridge, just say the word," Paul says. "I got other fi[illegible]ry, in better places."

The lighter pops. Nick pulls it from the dash and holds it out. Paul Morley pulls out matches, to [illegible]ht his cigarette himself.

At twenty-six, Nick has never lived wi[illegible]lover, but he imagines this must be how lovers figh[illegible]first blow, then the silent treatment, then maneuver[illegible]d the making up. Crossing the cattle guard, he [illegible]a pack of Camels, his last, from the glove compart[illegible]t. "Support the local economy," he says, tossing the [illegible]k in Paul's lap. Paul rolls the pack in his sleeve.

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The crew breaks at ten, filing outside. [illegible]hey line up, backs against the side of the barn, each p[illegible]pping a foot against its gray-weathered poplar planks. Paul Morley

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Fenton Johnson received a Michener fellowship at the Iowa Writers Workshop and a Stegner fellowship at Stanford University. His first published story appeared in Fiction Network *#2. "Bad Habits" is part of a novel-in-progress that received the 1987 Joseph Henry Jackson Award.*

"I think I'll go shoot some pool," Nick says, but he tucks the cigarette behind his ear and picks up a knife, turning it over, bouncing it against the edge of his plate.

Frances pulls the plate from under his stuttering knife. "You're going to meet Paul Morley. You can't fool me."

Nick takes the cigarette from his temple and strikes a match.

"Living in a dreamworld," Frances says. "Surely you can wait until you get outside."

Licking his thumb and forefinger, Nick pinches out the flame. On its quick hiss Frances stalks out.

Nick drives the pickup to the Gaddy's Ford Bridge, where he douses the lights and sits in the dark, smoking. Then he crawls around the pilings, under the bridge, to where he has rigged up a shanty at Paul Morley's direction. Its walls are fashioned from surplus parachute silk and an American flag, and its roof is the bridge itself.

Since Nick was twelve, since before Frances dated Paul Morley, Nick and Paul have met here. Paul smokes his pot and they drink Nick's whiskey and sometimes after they are both loaded Paul lets Nick paw at him, no kissing allowed.

On cold nights Nick brings a Kerosun heater, and he lights it now. He huddles before its orange flame: chest hot, back cold; back hot, chest cold. He smokes and waits and finally breaks into the Wild Turkey. Sometime after eleven o'clock he stumbles up the pilings, to drive the pickup home and park himself in bed.

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The next day, and the next, Paul Morley is not at the rail yard when Nick fetches the crew. Both mornings a smart little sports car with Fort Knox stickers is parked outside Paul's trailer.

On the third morning Paul shows up, stoned and thick and blond. Riding to the farm Nick tries to say, Hi, how are you, getting any. "You're just slumming" is what comes out.

"That is no doubt the may be of it," Paul Morley says. "But I am slumming in a fancy car. A trick I learned from your sister."

At the cattle guard Nick floors the gas, throwing gravel up the drive and spinning the truck sideways into the barn lot. From the flatbed he hears Hambone and Leon cursing. "Shitfire, Boss Man, watch out," Hambone says when Nick climbs from the cab. "I ain't got no more lives where this one come from."

Paul rounds the truck, to pull a cigarette from Nick's pocket. "You think I give a goddamn," he says. "Well, think again. Just a way to pass the time." He taps it down on Nick's chest. "Boss Man."

Nick turns to Hambone. "Sorry," he says. He does not speak to Paul Morley for the rest of the day.

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Now the house is filled with her wanting, so strong the knowledge of it wakes Nick long before sunrise. He lies in the graying darkness, hoping that she will get what she wants: the phone will ring, George Sikes will call, to ask her for a date, to ask her to go away with him, to Lexington, to Fayette.

The first of the month comes. Hambone and Leon pick up their food stamps, Paul Morley picks up his unemployment. The crew disappears from the rail yard. A night comes when it gets late, then later, and Frances does not come home. Drifting off to sleep, Nick tells himself this is what they have wanted.

The next evening Frances pulls Nick from the barn, where he is working alone. She has signed a contract to have the tobacco barn torn down and its lumber sold to a friend of George Sikes, who sterilizes it for sale to city people to panel their living rooms.

Nick pulls out his cigarettes. "Not now," Frances says. "This isn't a cigarette break. I want your mind on business."

"Then lay off me," he says, but he tucks his cigarettes back in his pocket.

"Lord, Nick, I'm not laying *on* you. I'm just trying to help you break a bad habit, which in this particular case is farming." She waves the contract at him. "Nick, talk sense. You know how city people are. This year barn lumber will bring as much as the whole damned farm. Next year it'll be nothing but how tacky barn lumber is. I'll *give* you this money, to do with what you want. You could use it to train yourself to something useful. Look at Jenny Beams, she's computers, or Danny Mason, he's arts and crafts, he learned how to throw clay pots and the last I heard he was doing all right, selling them at Christmastime in Lexington. You could learn something like that, get out of tobacco."

Nick stares over the ridges. Fencerows have grown up in honeysuckle and sumac. Paint peels from farmhouses. Barn roofs are caving in. Stories are making the rounds about coal miners, a few counties to the east, who are back to working homestead seams with picks and mules. "Why are you so hell-bent on selling the farm?" Nick asks. "Why is it so important for me to leave."

"Because I don't want to sit around watching my brother growing old alone. Why would a woman take up with a man with no money and four hundred acres of knobs dragging him down? So she can watch what that does to them both I guess. Wait until you're thirty-eight. See how you feel about it then, only then it'll be too late." Her voice changes; she might be pleading her cause. "Nick, there's any number of women would love for you to ask them out. Ask somebody special out to supper some night. Just let me know. I'll fix a big meal. We'll have a little party."

"Ask George Sikes out to supper," Nick says. "Get him to pay to keep the farm afloat and take you off to Lexington."

"Don't think I haven't considered that angle," Frances says. She thrusts the contract into Nick's hand, folds his fingers shut around it. "Nick, I'm moving to town. Maybe farther, I don't know. George told me they need good nurses in Lexington. I should have done it a long time ago, made that move, I should never have bought this place from mother. I should have taken that money and made something with my life. Well, better late than

pushes himself away from the wall to light a joint. Nick bums a cigarette from Leon and lights it. When no one is looking his eyes take in Paul Morley's thick-muscled arms, the low autumn sunlight skating off the flat smooth planes of his chest. Hambone takes a leak around the corner, where he keeps a pint stashed behind the baling twine. He is of the old school and believes in hiding his vices.

When Hambone comes back, Leon pulls a pack of dog-eared cards from his pocket. "Ante up," he says, "I'm calling. Follow the Whore."

They crouch to a sawed-off stump and put up quarters. Leon turns the cards over, one by one. They bet after each overturned card, while Leon patters through each round and over the betting: "One-eyed john to the Handley man, Old Dog Tray comes knocking at his door. A savanna to Hambone, pair of savannas, looking good, maybe this man is a winner, maybe this man is California-bound. Split-beard kings to the man with the plan, kings up, bound for glory Morley. Dealer four, dealer eight, dealer folds, no inside straight."

"California," Paul Morley says. "It's been known to happen."

He is looking at Nick's sister Frances in her hospital whites, picking her way across the mud, and behind her, this scarlet BMW. Leon sweeps up the cards and the quarters and tucks them in his coat. Nick drops his half-finished cigarette and grinds it beneath his heel.

"Resident pothead," Frances says, talking at Paul Morley. "I smelled you halfway down the hill."

Paul stands, leans against the side of the barn, one foot propped back, thumbs hooked in his pockets. He cranes his neck to look beyond Frances, out over the farm. "Poke your nose in the feedlot and you're going to smell shit."

"Some car you got there, Frances," Nick says. "Where'd you get that car?"

"Some sugar daddy," Paul Morley says.

"Who makes enough money to be a sugar daddy," Frances says. She turns to Nick. "I borrowed it from George Sikes, he's back visiting family. Came in for a sprained wrist. A *tennis* wrist. I'm wrapping it up when he starts telling me how he's in real estate now, in Lexington, how I can borrow this car anytime I want, long as he's staying at his mother's."

"I'm curious as to what his wife would say to that offer," Paul Morley says.

"He's getting a divorce," Frances says.

"And here's his nurse to help make it final," Paul Morley says.

Frances takes up a rake, to poke at the abandoned mud dauber nests under the eaves. "He's got money to throw around, I think, so I figure I'll bring him out to the farm while the crew is working, make a good impression, you know, make him think this place might be a break-even enterprise, maybe get him to thinking a little about buying some cheap land back in his old hometown. Or maybe buying the barn, anyway. This old barn lumber is worth its weight in gold, according to George." She digs a large nest from its niche, knocking it to the ground. "Good thing I stopped by first. Boss Man."

"So you're thinking about selling," Nick says.

"It's my place," she says, and this is true: twelve years older than Nick, she had the job and the salary and the nest egg to buy out the farm and so allow their mother to keep up appearances through her long and expensive dying.

"Boss Man turns around, his sister stabs him in the back." Paul levers himself from the barn. "Won't be the last time, neither."

Frances pauses, the rake poised like a spear. "Lot of tobacco left, Paul Morley," she says pleasantly.

She stands in the barnyard muck in her hospital uniform, clean and white as the angel of God, until Nick takes the rake from her, to jab at the nests. "Don't do that, Nick," Paul says. "Let the lady finish what she started."

Frances peers up into the eaves. "Paul Morley, you never were one to leave well enough alone. I expect that's what turned you into a pothead. Among other bad habits."

"I leave good habits to those that can afford 'em." Paul steps over to the car, runs a tobacco-gummed hand over its scarlet finish, leaving a long brown stain.

"Back to work, guys," Nick says. "We got half a barn left. We wasted enough time."

Frances pulls a rag from the trunk of the car and wipes at the stain, but this only spreads it around. She wads the rag into a ball and drops it in the barnyard. "Next time I come I'm bringing George Sikes," she calls. "See if you can make this crew pretend like they're doing something that turns a profit." She climbs into the car and drives off.

"Good thing she stopped by first," Hambone squeaks. *"Boss Man."* He pulls Leon into the barn. Nick hears them laugh: Hambone, *haw, haw, haw,* Leon's high-pitched cackle, Paul Morley's low snorting that outlasts them all. Nick crouches to the stump, watching the scarlet BMW until it disappears into the oaks and hickories that crowd the ragged limestone lip of Strang Knob.

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At supper, Frances waits until they finish eating before she brings up the subject. "I saw Hambone McCugh after you dropped him off," she says. "If he had been any drunker you could have poured him in the tank for fuel. And I hope you're not paying Paul Morley a full day. I saw him riding around with some girl for a good three hours."

"Hambone might drink less if I let him smoke in the barn," Nick says. "But then he'd burn the place down." He glances at the clock, pushes his chair back, pulls a cigarette from his pocket.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke," Frances says. *"I* quit. *You* can quit. It's like any bad habit. I had a long talk about this very thing with George. He quit himself, right before he left his wife. You just choose to give it up and pick a day and then stop."

never. You figure out a way to make this place make you a living and you can tear this up. I'll sign the place over to you, barn and all. Otherwise, it's got to go. It's the only thing I can see my way to do. I won't watch you waste your future and my money on Paul Morley. Me helping you make a failure out of yourself."

"People in glass houses," Nick says. He stands with his back to her, waiting to hear her walk away. When he turns around, she is sitting on a hay bale, her knees drawn up, her forehead bent to her hands. He drops the contract in the mud and walks back to the barn.

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That night Nick slips out the kitchen door, to walk the Handley farm. He picks his way across the rough clods of the moon-washed barnyard. His boots and pants and shirt are black, and in the barn's black shadow they disappear, leaving his head floating free. He strokes the barn planks, the splintered whorl of a knothole meeting his palm's callused ridges, and the splinters breaking off against his calluses. He smokes one cigarette after another, careful always to deaden the butt's fire against his palm's thick callus: he has done this since he first smoked, he is proud that he can do it, the coal's heat not so much as scorching his hand's hard flesh.

When he was younger and his father lived, Nick thought of killing himself, after doing what he does with Paul Morley under the bridge. But his father died and Nick took over the farm and since then it has been easy to deny himself time to think of such things. The unflagging demands of the animals and the crops are consuming him. What he does under the bridge is a small enough sin to ask in return. So he reasons, in the few silences he allows himself.

In town, in the city, this would change. Any job he found, if he found a job, would turn him loose at five o'clock, free as a jaybird, nothing to live for but himself, nothing but time and conscience on his hands. He is afraid of losing the Handley farm, okay. More than this, he is afraid of himself.

Back inside, he pulls the phone up the hall stairs and into his bedroom. He calls Paul Morley. He steadies himself for a woman's voice, but Paul answers. "Can't work, Boss Man. Not tomorrow."

"I figured that. I was just wondering if you'd want to come to supper. Next week, at our house. Frances asked if I'd like to have you over."

"You're shitting me," Paul says. "Sure, I mean, yeah, I'll come. A free meal is a good meal. Why not?"

Later, Frances asks why Nick took the phone into his room. "You'd think you were talking to some girl. Or up to no good, one."

"One," Nick says.

• • •

Nick has told Frances that he is bringing home somebody special. She leaves work early to cook. When she sees Paul Morley she leaves the kitchen, not to return until the biscuits have burned.

Then she makes a hard, bright entrance. "Burnt biscuits make rosy cheeks," she says. She seats them for

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supper: Nick to one side of the table, herself at the head, Paul Morley at the foot.

They make it through highballs and ham and biscuits and candied yams. Frances talks, about nothing that matters or even makes sense, but talking, talk. Then the words run out. She casts a dark look at Nick. He lets the silence grow.

"So Nick tells me you're bailing out on him," Paul Morley says.

Frances squeezes her lips together before answering. "That's family business. Nick had no call to go spreading it around."

"I wouldn't call talking to me the same as talking to just anybody. More like talking it over with a member of the family." Paul Morley pulls a Camel out, strikes a match on the underside of the table. He lights a cigarette and hands it to Nick.

Frances stands. "Nick Handley, this is my house. I have no need to put up with this man."

"Oh, Frances, sit down and have another drink," Nick says, exhaling to the ceiling. "It's not like this is war."

Frances lowers herself to her chair, knocking her knife to the floor.

"Expecting a gentleman caller?" Paul grins past Nick at Frances.

"And to think I used to wonder if I was right to leave you," Frances says.

"If *I* was right to leave *you*," Paul Morley says. "Let's get our history straight."

"If that's what you need to believe," Frances says. "But I know a few well-placed facts, if it comes to history."

"Yeah, let's talk history," Paul says. "I got nothing to lose but your family's reputation. Which means I got nothing to lose at all." He lifts the cigarette from Nick's fingers, takes a drag, stubs it out. "How 'bout it, brother? You were old enough to know who dumped who."

Frances' neck flushes bright up one side, and her voice trembles. "In him I can understand it. He's a Morley, he has his excuse. But you're a Handley, Nick, you're from good family, good blood. You're my brother."

At the table's center sits an antique bud vase, holding a single dusty stem of dried teasel. Nick takes the teasel from the vase, to stick a sharp spine into the ball of his thumb, but his callus is too thick for him to feel its pricking.

"I'm telling you, you can do it, Nick," Frances says. "Whatever it is that has got to be done. You just do it, is all. You give it up, whatever it is. And it works. You pick a minute out of any day and you say, 'Today I'm taking control of my life,' and then you do it."

"That's what I am planning," Nick says. "That's what I am going to do."

Paul runs his finger along and off the table's edge, to rest his hand on Nick's knee.

The teasel spine snaps, leaving a splinter buried in Nick's thumb. He sticks the stem back into its vase and turns to Paul. "From what I can remember, it was Paul that left you, Frances."

"That's right," Paul says.

"You think I didn't know what was going on underneath the Gaddy's Ford Bridge!" Frances cries. "Why do you think I left him!"

Nick will not look at his sister, but he sees her all the same: sitting on the hay bale in the barn lot, her forehead bent to her hands. "Leave the barn standing and leave me to manage the place. I'll make it work," he says. "Now's your chance. Take up with George Sikes. Clear out of this place."

Paul stands. "Nick, I would surely appreciate a ride back to town," he says. "If it's not too much trouble, that is."

"Don't keep the porch light burning," Nick says to his sister. She picks up the knife. She is still wiping at it with her napkin when Nick eases the door shut.

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On the road, Nick pulls a pint from under the seat. He sucks on the whiskey until the blacktop whines beneath his wheels. Paul reaches for the bottle. "Give 'em hell, Boss Man."

Nick caps the bottle and tucks it under his seat. "I want to stop at the bridge. Right now."

Paul steers his outstretched hand to the dashboard lighter, punches it in, pulls it out to light a joint. "I might have somebody waiting at my place. I don't plan my dates. I just give 'em a key and wait for 'em to happen."

"So are they going to keep happening?"

"Never can tell," Paul says, smoke leaking from his lips. "I never known a single woman to turn me down."

"Frances Handley turned you down flat," Nick says. "Which you know as good as anybody. You think it can't happen twice?"

Paul stubs the joint out against the dash, then pinches the tip and tucks it away. "You couldn't do it. You don't have the guts."

"Times are tough all over, Paul Morley." Nick dodges small golden-eyed animals, a possum, a groundhog, frozen by the headlights against the road's graveled asphalt. After a mile or so he clears his throat, a quiet cough. "You heard what you wanted to hear."

"That's right," Paul says.

"She's moving," Nick says. "I'll bet she follows George Sikes. Maybe she'll move in with him. I'll have the place to myself. You could move out there, save on rent, help me make a go of it."

"George Sikes went back to Lexington yesterday morning, probably to his wife, knowing George," Paul says, his voice flat and cold. "Which Frances knows as good as anybody." He rolls down the window and spits into the wind's roar.

They sail up and over the bone-white flank of Strang Knob. The loose planks of the Gaddy's Ford Bridge rumble beneath their wheels. Paul says nothing. Nick slows, then drives on, to park under the blue hum of the mercury vapor lamp outside Paul's place.

The road is empty, his windows dark. They sit in the truck's cab, Paul silent, Nick sucking on the pint, until

the windshield fogs over and Nick's feet are numb. He has promised himself that he will not speak first, but the words crowd his tongue and they force their way out. "So how about it."

"Maybe tomorrow night," Paul says.

Before Paul can climb the stoop to the trailer door Nick pulls away. He drives to the Gaddy's Ford Bridge, where he sits smoking and drinking, gripping the steering wheel, working the splinter in his thumb. The smoke curls before his eyes. He sucks it in, waiting for the little blood-rush to his temples; building a vision of himself, Nick Handley, a man without wanting and so without weakness, a man in control of his life, a man of power in the lives of those he wounds.

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The sky above Strang Knob is paling when Nick gets home. Frances is sitting at the dinner table, smoking his cigarettes. The dishes are untouched, her own plate is littered with butts.

Nick longs to lay his head on his sister's shoulder, to take comfort from the only person he knows who might give it freely. His wanting grows and it is a hole in his heart that he feels himself falling into.

"You were with him all this time," she says. "The whole goddamned night."

"That's right." Nick takes the pack from the table, but it is empty.

"They're all gone. I smoked every damn one."

Nick pulls a pack from his pocket, shakes a cigarette free for himself.

"I've changed my mind, Nick. I'm not tearing down the barn."

"Fine."

"I couldn't leave you here alone."

"Leave if you want. I'll get Paul Morley to move out here." Nick takes an empty pack from the table, tosses it at the garbage, misses by a long yard. "Don't stick around just to do me favors."

Frances stubs her cigarette into a spoonful of candied yams. "So what am I supposed to do? If I don't do you favors."

"Do what you want to do."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I wanted to do." Her hands roam the table, picking up a pepper grinder, a saltshaker, an empty highball glass, the antique bud vase with its single dusty stem of dried teasel.

He bends to strike a match on the underside of the table.

On its scratching flare Frances hurls the vase at him. It sails past his head. Nick hunches his shoulders for the crash, but the teasel spines catch in the lace curtain's tatting. The vase hangs there, tangled in the curtain, suspended above the Formica. "Who do we have, except for each other?" she cries.

Nick touches the flame to his cigarette.

On the slow sigh of his exhale Frances crosses the room to pick at the teasel spines. The lace is old, and she works the tatting free slowly, loosening the spines one by one. When she has freed the vase from the curtain, she retrieves a doily from the sideboard and sets the vase on it, at the littered table's center. "Leave the mess," she says. "I'll clean it up in the morning." She turns to climb the stairs, then leans her head against her brother's chest.

So this is how you do it, Nick thinks, how you keep them close: not with kindness but with pain, like a choke collar on a willful dog.

Over his sister's head, through the delicate tracings of the window's frost flowers, he watches the sun rising above the lumpy knobs. He stills his breath, the better to feel this triumph. He tenses, waiting, expectant. He feels only his wanting, flowing through his veins like the morning's first nicotine.

He rests an arm around her shoulders, stroking her hair. He takes her hand, kneading her small smooth fingers with his thumb, until the teasel's splintered thorn works through his thumb's hardened callus, to pierce the tender flesh beneath.

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The Fiction of Dorothy Bryant

has been praised as "fresn and engaging" (*New York Times*), "tremendously moving" (*Kirkus Reviews*), "irresistible fun" (*The Nation*), "delightful" (*Publishers Weekly*), and "unforgettable" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Respect for Bryant has been expressed by distinguished colleagues like Kay Boyle ("Wise, witty, but always compassionate books"), Eve Merriam ("an oasis of sanity"), and Alice Walker ("*Kin of Ata* is one of my favorite books in all the world"). Their enthusiasm is perhaps best summed up by the author of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, Joanne Greenberg: "When I pick up a Dorothy Bryant book, I know that I am not going to be settling for less; I know that I am not going to be given useless effects and quick answers. 'Life' in her books is not cheap, but is worth the work it takes."

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