

## Chew

By Colin Berry

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In July of my sixteenth summer I try chew for the first time, in the back of the Trojan Theatre with Eric, who has just pried the foil pouch apart and tucked a plug neatly in his mouth.

We have a big cup to spit in.

I trust Eric because he waltzes at the edge of trouble, but is never actually *in* it. He has taken up chewing two weeks ago, and I have known that my time will come.

There are a dozen people in the theater. On the screen, above the pairs of heads, a sign appears, its letters sparkling like a fuse: *No Smoking, Please*.

I open the pouch and sniff the heady sweetness of the tobacco. It smells like the farmers in their denim shirts on Saturday. I pinch into it and the chew is cool and moist, like damp earth or freshly-cut grass, sticky between my thumb and fingers.

“Put it way in the ba’,” Eric whispers, leaning forward to spit. I tuck the chew deep in my cheek, spilling a little. Immediately it starts to burn.

“Uhh—!” Almost instantly I spit a huge mouthful of stringy, sweet saliva into the cup. My whole mouth is filling with it, and it’s as though I can’t possibly spit fast enough to keep up.

The movie starts. We pass the cup back and forth. I spit about three times as often as Eric does. My head seems to have inflated into a long balloon with a plug of tobacco inside, and I can feel suddenly all the spaces in my body, my heart, my lungs, the thick, unruly blood that lurches through my arms and legs. The movie’s soundtrack whirls around me, as though I’m listening under warm water. I feel as though I might throw up, but at the same time the experience is fascinating, delightful.

By the end of the first scene I turn to him and whisper, “I feel like my head is ten feet tall.” This strikes him funny and we snicker quietly, a pair of monkeys in the darkened theater. The film will be forgotten, we know, but we will remember this.

“Just don’t swallow it,” he says.

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Tony Pinskey did, a few weeks later, in the back of Dale Cozner’s pickup. We were driving through the subdivision at dusk, heading down the freshly-blacktopped avenue into town. Somebody passed Tony the chew, and as the truck gathered speed, the sun set behind us, ruffling the sky pink from the foothills to the sugarbeet fields. We were all looking up at the sky when the truck hit a dip and Tony swallowed a mouthful of spit. It amazed us how quickly he threw up, one moment staring at the pink and orange clouds and the next leaning over the side of the truck, wave after wave flowing from him, neat patches equally spaced down the curved suburban street.

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It is late evening at the end of August, and I am standing on the narrow porch of a tiny white house on Emery Street, on the rough side of town. It is the home of Miss Covelli, our student council sponsor, where fifteen of us have met to plan the first-day assembly for the new school year. The meeting is over, and everyone is saying goodnight, copping rides, calling out across the lawns. A mile away, Eric waits for me at the Dairy Queen on North Main, where kids are hanging out, enjoying the last few nights of summer.

Our host is twenty-eight, with bobbed dark hair and a sharp wit. She is pretty in a plain way, a short woman who favors khakis and simple dresses. She is a confidante, a friend to me and others; we call her Linda. I have taken her geometry class a year earlier, and she has been our sponsor for two years. She makes me laugh. She is transferring to the new high school in the fall, and tonight is the last time I will see her.

“Stick around for a little bit,” she says casually. “I have something I need to give you.”

After everybody leaves, I follow her back through the screen door into her living room, where we sit and talk.

At one point she steps into the kitchen, and comes back with a tall glass that she sips from while we talk about the vice-principal.

“Think Van Arsdale will go for it?”

“I’ll call him on Monday.”

We pause. Outside, a car passes. I feel an awkwardness I’ve never felt with her before.

She offers the glass to me, and when I take a sip, my throat tightens: the drink is strongly spiked with sweet rum.

By the time she kisses me, I am in a panic, not so much from what is happening as from the sudden change, our abrupt realignment. I’ve been attracted to her wisecracking, her spirit; I have never fantasized about her, never craved her, her plain body and square hands. I have never considered her this way.

Yet I make no effort to resist, for her small fierce mouth, wet and strong, has ignited within me a current I had sensed but never felt. I am in a new kind of motion, turning a corner, growing, flowering, shedding skin. I am on my way to something I’ve always wanted, never dreaming it would happen like this — with her, now — but riding along, confused and fascinated and entirely unable to stop.

Her hands are on my neck, my back, pulling up my shirt, sliding into the waistband of my shorts. I am powerless to move. It is as though I am looking down on myself, separated, unable to control my own young body. She leads me by the hand to her bedroom, my brain skipping like a needle over grooves, things falling away faster than I can grasp them. I know that this moment — *the* moment — is important, that I should note each detail, but I only capture glimpses: the pattern and texture of her bedspread, the flicker of headlights on the walls and ceiling.

She does everything and I simply lie, electric with life but unmoving in the dim light. I don’t see her motions so much as feel them, like water spilling over me, buoying me, pulling me under with its flow. For a second I open my eyes and her naked body startles me with its cherubic paleness. I recognize her face but she looks at the same time wholly unfamiliar, a stranger smiling and speaking softly, smelling of baby powder and sweat. Incredibly, I worry about contraception, but that too falls away.

Later, as I’m pulling on my clothes, she takes my hand again and places it on one of her breasts. Her nipple is thicker and firmer than those of the girls I have felt before. It seems suddenly maternal, and my uneasiness, briefly suspended, crashes back into me. I buckle my belt, say good night, and hurry out the door.

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The night is windy when I step from the porch. Everything is heightened — the stars brighter, the dogs next door barking louder. The smell of autumn is in the air. I walk to my car and sit in it for a minute, my hand tracing the contours of the switches and knobs on the dashboard. Up on her porch, a moth is swirling around the light. As I start up and pull away from the house, a few leaves blow across my windshield.

I am an hour late to meet Eric. I find him in the parking lot, sitting on his car, talking to some kids I don't know.

“Thought you'd stood me up,” he says. “Want a chew?” He offers the pouch to me. He is angry that I've kept him waiting, annoyed that summer is ending so soon. I shake my head and realize I cannot tell him.

We sit together on the hood as he chews and spits into a bottle. Along the street, kids pass slowly in Chevys and Chryslers, metal music mixing with gasoline and perfume that drift past with each car.

“There's Mark,” Eric says, suddenly sliding off. “Jackson!” He hails a car passing through the lot.

As he kneels and talks to the driver, it strikes me that he and I will soon grow apart. In a week, we will be back in school, the summer fading as quickly as the tans our arms and necks. As I watch, the lights in the parking lot flicker, and for a second, every kid is frozen in darkness. They blink on again and we all glance up at them, our heads identically positioned like the sunflowers in the fields north of town. Eric is looking up, too, and for a second I'm afraid for him, afraid he'll swallow his chew. For a second we are all stuck there together, looking up at the lights, the cars slowly passing.