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Girls, and the Circle
of Death

Girls.

When we were eleven and even twelve they were just like us.

Sort of.

That is, we could be friends and do projects together in school and some boys could even talk to them.

Not me. I never could. And neither could Orvis. Alan seemed to have worked out a way to pretend they weren't even there and Wayne, who had had that experience with the power supply for the picture tube on the back of the television set,

swore that it didn't bother him at all to speak to girls.

And then we became thirteen.

Everything changed.

Well, not everything. I still couldn't talk to them, lived in mortal terror of them, and Orvis was the same way. But we talked *about* them all the time, how they looked, how they smiled, how they sounded, how they must think, about life, about us, how Elaine was really cute but Eileen had prettier hair and Eileen seemed one day to actually, actually look at me, right at me. But we couldn't speak to them.

Except that now it became very important that we be *able* to speak to them. Before, it didn't seem to matter, and now it was somehow the only thing that *did* matter. I even approached Wayne one day and asked him what he thought about me coming over and touching the back of his television set but he pointed out that (a) it was just luck that it hadn't killed him and (b) it had had some bad side effects for a couple of weeks involving bed-wetting

and strange dreams about a robot made of electricity and chewing gum that I probably didn't want to deal with.

Still, I had this problem because Eileen actually *had* looked at me one day on the way out of school, or so I thought, and on top of it she had smiled—I was pretty sure at me as well—and I thought that maybe I was *In Love* and that it was *For Real* and when I asked Orvis about it he agreed that I might be *In Love for Real* and suggested that I take Eileen to a movie.

Which nearly stopped my heart cold. I couldn't talk to her—how could I ask her to go to a movie? Finally it was Orvis who thought of the way. I would ask Wayne to ask Shirley Johnson to ask Claudia Erskine, who was a close friend of Eileen's, if Eileen might like to go to the movies with me the following Saturday afternoon.

This tortuous procedure was actually followed and by the time I was told that indeed Eileen would like to see a movie the next Saturday, I was a nervous wreck and honestly hoped she wouldn't go.

We met in front of the theater, as things were done then at our age—I couldn't even imagine going to her home and ringing the bell to pick her up and having her parents answer the door. If I couldn't really speak to girls, what in god's name would I do with a set of parents of the girl I was going to take to a movie?

So we met at the theater at one-thirty. I wore what I thought were my best clothes, a pullover sweater over a turtleneck, with my feeble attempt at a flattop, Butch-Waxed so much that dropping an anvil on my head wouldn't have flattened it. I think now I must have looked something like a really uncomfortable, sweaty, walking, greasy-topped bottle brush. (Have I mentioned that with my sweater and turtleneck I had gone solely for fashion and had ignored the fact that it was high summer? Or that the theater was most decidedly *not* air-conditioned?)

But Eileen was a nice person and pretended not to notice the sweat filling my shoes so they sloshed when we walked or how I dropped my

handful of money all over the ground. I had brought all of my seven dollars in savings because I really didn't know how much it would cost, what with tickets and treats, and maybe she was a big eater.

She also pretended not to notice when I asked her if she wanted popcorn.

So I asked her again. Louder.

And then again. Louder.

All because I was blushing so hard my ears were ringing and I wasn't sure if I was really making a sound and so when I screamed it out the third time and she jumped back, it more or less set the tone for the whole date.

We went into the theater all right. And we sat next to each other. And she was kind enough to overlook the fact that I smelled like a dead buffalo and that other than asking her three times if she wanted popcorn I didn't say a word to her. Not a word.

I couldn't.

The movie was called *The Thing*, about a crea-

ture from another planet who crashes to earth in the Arctic and develops a need/thirst/obsession for human and sled-dog blood and isn't killed until they figure out that he's really a kind of walking, roaring, grunting plant. So they rig up some wire to "cook him like a stewed carrot." All of this I learned the second time around, when I went to the movie with Wayne, because sitting next to Eileen, pouring sweat, giving her endless boxes of Dots and candy corn and popcorn (almost none of which she wanted but accepted nicely and set on the seat next to her), I didn't remember a single thing about the movie. Not a word, not a scene.

All I could do was sit and think, I'm this close to a girl, right next to a girl, my arm almost touching her arm, a girl, right there, right *there*....

It was a nightmare. The movie seemed to last two, three weeks; I know I aged at least ten years. When at last it was over and she headed home (I should have walked her there but I didn't dare), all I could think of was the relief. I had done it. I had gone on a date. Though we would never do it

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again—I would never ask her and I'm certain if I had she would not have gone—I had done it. And I had spoken to her.

“WOULD YOU LIKE SOME POPCORN?”

A scream, to be sure, but I had taken a girl to a movie and sat next to her the whole time and I think my arm may have touched her arm somewhere along the way, or at least it felt that way through the sweater and turtleneck and I had finally done it. An extra benefit was that I had also learned just why those things are called sweaters.

But the reason I bring up this whole disaster of my first date, and my fear of girls, is to show that as terrified and shy as I was, as horrified of being with a girl, talking to a girl, as awful as I turned out to be...

Orvis was worse.

He was clinically shy, could hardly even look at girls, and wanted desperately to be able to do so.

So he evolved a method for getting attention from girls: showing off.

Suddenly it wasn't good enough just to make the bikes jump a ramp or do a stunt; he had to do

it in front of girls. And it wasn't enough just to do a stunt in front of girls; he had to do it higher and farther and harder.

And in a more dangerous way.

Here is where Orvis came into his own. Somehow he mixed the ability to do stunts of truly amazing risk with the absolute fearlessness he had demonstrated when he ran into the wall of the gas station where Archie worked. He didn't seem to care if he was injured. As long as a girl was watching he would try anything.

We would jump over two barrels, so he would try to clear three; we would try to get eight feet in the air, he would try for ten. We would try landing with no feet on the pedals, he would land with no hands on the handlebars or feet on the pedals.

He crashed and bashed and flopped and flipped and cartwheeled and somersaulted until even when he was standing still he seemed to be a blur and all we had to do was say, “Look, there's Margaret,” or “Elaine” or “Judy,” and he was tearing off on his bike, bouncing off a curb and flying through the air.

Finally, this led Orvis to the Circle of Death.