

## Bent

It's always like this: the sun, the endless road construction, the rest stops for cigarettes and sodas and trips to the bathroom. Kip steers his Jeep around the orange pylons, then speeds up once the construction is past, bouncing in and out of potholes on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Jean-Luc sits beside him. In the back Fanelli flips through a box of CDs, blocking Kip's rear view with his large head.

"Fanelli, will you sit down?" says Kip.

"Dude, I'm sitting."

"Move your skinny ass. You're blocking the mirror, man."

"Geez," says Fanelli, "Don't blow a fruit." He drags his butt across the seat so he's directly behind Kip. Kip is about to say something about Fanelli's bony knees against the back of his seat, poking him in the kidneys, but he keeps quiet.

Ever since they were kids, Kip Cullen has shared his family vacation with Mike Fanelli. It's a raw deal, since the Cullens always get a cottage on Cape Cod and Fanelli's family never goes anywhere.

Kip and Fanelli are friends in the way next-door neighbors are friends. Century 21 picked them for each other. At ten they'd built tree forts in the woods behind Kip's house and defended them from each other, landing each other in the emergency room for stitches in the head. At twelve they'd snuck beers from the Fanellis' refrigerator and discovered Mr. Fanelli's stash of eight-millimeter pornos – amateur flicks, by the looks of them; made in somebody's basement. All summer long they'd watched fleshy,

unattractive girls perform sex acts on skinny, hairy guys. There wasn't any sound and some conscientious film editor had covered the actors' eyes with black bars, but Kip didn't mind. By now the actors were probably his parents' age; he'd rather not recognize any of them in the grocery store.

It's been a long time since he and Fanelli spent an afternoon watching pornos or doing anything else. Fanelli still lives with his parents and takes classes at the community college, but Kip only comes home from Northwestern twice a year. He hasn't seen Fanelli since winter break, when Fanelli insisted on showing him the basement full of secondhand stereo equipment he'd acquired. Stretched out on the old sectional, Kip could barely keep his eyes open as Fanelli tinkered with the bass and treble and acoustic expander -- as if they made any difference at all, with the kind of synthetic techno shit he listened to. Finally Kip escaped, thinking how three hours a year was all the Fanelli a person could stand.

Up ahead the traffic slows. Kip slams on his brakes.

"Shit," says Kip. "More construction."

The Jeep rolls to a stop. The air is heavy with exhaust. In the back seat Fanelli stands, shading his eyes.

"It's backed up for miles," he says. "We're going to be here all day."

Kip glances over at Jean-Luc, who's caught the eye of the girl in the next car, a redhead in sunglasses and a halter top. A sticker on her rear windshield says Mount Holyoke College.

"Relax, man," says Jean-Luc. "It's not so bad."

He motions for the girl to roll down her window.

They arrive at the cottage in Truro by mid-afternoon, an hour ahead of Kip's parents, whose Lincoln Town Car they passed way back on the Mass Pike. Kip lights a cigarette with Jean-Luc's antique Zippo, thinking how nothing ever changes here: the crazy traffic circles, spinning like a carnival ride; the rose bushes; the old lady in the rental office who gave him the key, wearing socks and sandals like always. From the porch he sees two boys swimming out to the buoy the way he used to with Fanelli. Their skinny arms slice through the water, looking disembodied and frantic. The bay is gray and choppy and, no doubt, as freeze-your-nuts-off cold as every other year. He realizes he's happy here, on this porch. He wishes Fanelli and Jean-Luc would disappear for awhile instead of standing in the bedroom squabbling like girls.

“What's the problem?” he calls, squashing out his butt in the Chase and Sanborn can that's been on the porch his whole life. Inside, the cottage is the same: the dingy plaid cushions on the fold-out sofa, the dinette table that pulls out from the wall, the smell of citronella candles that will fill their suitcases and follow them back to Connecticut next Saturday.

Jean-Luc and Fanelli are in each other's faces.

“Where's he going to sleep?” says Fanelli. They've both put their duffels in the room Kip usually shares with Fanelli.

“Someone's going to have to sleep on the floor, and it's not going to be me.”

Fanelli sits on the bottom bunk, smacking his head on the bed above.

Jean-Luc hoots. “Are you all right, man?” he says, laughing.

“Shut up,” says Fanelli, his Dago skin turning red from neck to hairline. Kip suddenly feels bad for him, Fanelli with his long scrawny limbs and enormous head, not made to fit in a Jeep or a sixty year-old cottage on the Cape, from a time when people were smaller.

“You guys sleep here,” says Kip. “I’ll take the couch on the porch.”

“You’ll freeze out there,” says Jean-Luc.

“I’ll be fine.” Kip heads back out to the porch. He’s done babysitting these two, at least for the moment.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be just Kip and Jean-Luc, Kip’s buddy from Northwestern, a French exchange student he befriended last term. Jean-Luc the formidable pool player, the gentlemanly drinker, the skilled thrower of darts. Jean-Luc the genius with women, who seem hypnotized by his movie star looks, the cheesy accent that gets thicker when a female is present. For months Kip has imagined himself and Jean-Luc cruising the bars of P-Town and Martha’s Vineyard, hooking a different pair of suntanned college girls each night. He doesn’t mind that Jean-Luc always chooses the better-looking girl for himself. In Kip’s experience, hot girls travel in pairs, like nuns; and even the plainer of the two he’d pick up with Jean-Luc would be a huge step above the type he’d attract on his own. Why, he isn’t sure, though he’s spent some time analyzing the French guy’s moves: the calculated twinkle, the slow smile that makes his eyes crinkle up at the corners. The special silent laugh he reserves for girls who try to be funny: mouth open, eyes closed, hand touched lightly to his chest as if he were overcome with mirth. It’s nothing at all like Jean-Luc’s real laugh, which is just a normal laugh. It seems like a strange way to attract women, but the guy clearly knows what he’s

doing. Kip thinks of the Holyoke girl on the Mass Pike. Frenchy gave her some line about wanting to see America; a moment later she handed him her parents' number in Boston. *If you're ever in town, she said. I'll give you the tour.*

Of course, Kip knows that Jean-Luc needs him too. The guy's conversational skills are limited: he runs through most of his English in the first ten minutes, which is where Kip's self-deprecating wit comes in. Jean-Luc might open a few doors for Kip, but Kip is the closer. Where Fanelli fits into this picture isn't clear. Tall and skinny, prone to hives and postnasal drip, he's the kind of guy who recites baseball statistics and loves talking about his allergies – to corn, peanuts, milk. Fanelli is famous for telling long, pointless stories; he knows a hundred unfunny jokes that make girls roll their eyes. Kip has observed it many times, what he calls the Fanelli Effect. Pick a girl, any girl: in Fanelli's presence, she'll go from warm and flirty to bored and irritable in under a minute. Kip tried twice to un-invite him to the Cape; both times he lost his nerve.

He already knows it was a mistake.

They're halfway through their second beers when Kip's parents pull up in the Town Car.

"Back here," says Fanelli, stashing his bottle behind his chair.

"You're kidding, man," says Jean-Luc. "I am not going to be hiding my beer for one week. It is ridiculous."

Kip shoots Fanelli a look. "Relax. We're not fifteen. They know I drink beer."

"Whatever," says Fanelli, retrieving his beer. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Kip watches his parents unloading the absurdly large car, rented especially for the week at the Cape. It's an old habit from the days before Kip could drive, when he and

Fanelli squeezed in the back seat with Kip's sister Heather. He's been bringing his own car for the past couple of years, but his parents continue to rent the big boat, as if they haven't noticed.

"Pop the trunk, Dad," Heather yells. She comes plodding up the steps carrying a backpack and a large duffel bag.

"That's a heavy one, no?" says Jean-Luc, springing to his feet. "Let me help you."

"Thanks," says Heather. "At least somebody here has manners." She is three years younger than Kip, too young to know anything, but just old enough to think she does. Kip's only been home from school for two weeks, and already he'd like to throttle her.

"It's your own fault for bringing so much crap," says Kip. "What do you have in there, anyway?"

"It's Mom's," says Heather. Kip is always amazed by how many suitcases his mother brings to the Cape, even though she wears the same khaki Bermuda shorts for seven days straight. "All I brought is one stupid backpack. A bikini and a toothbrush, that's all I need."

"Cool," says Jean-Luc, taking the bigger bag and following Heather into the cottage. "My kind of girl."

Kip looks over at Fanelli, who has helped him abuse Heather ever since she learned to walk. Fanelli rolls his eyes. This pisses Kip off.

"What's your problem?" says Kip.

"Nothing," says Fanelli.

Kip watches Heather dragging her backpack through the living room. Her skinny legs are like tent poles, without knees, calves or thighs like a regular girl would have.

“Are you kidding?” says Kip. “She’s a troll. You should see the babes he pulls on campus. Why would he bother?”

Fanelli shrugs. “I don’t know. What do I care?”

Kip gets up. “I need another beer.” He sees that Fanelli is empty too, but he doesn’t offer, and Fanelli doesn’t ask.

That night they drive into Provincetown, to a bar called Outer Limits. It’s a hot night, yet Jean-Luc wears a black jean jacket.

“What do you need that for?” says Fanelli. “It’s going to be a hundred degrees inside.”

Jean-Luc shrugs. “For the beach, man. There’s a breeze, and girls get cold on the beach.”

Shit, Kip thinks. I should have brought a jacket.

“Whatever,” says Fanelli, rolling his eyes.

At the bar, Kip and Jean-Luc smoke cigarettes and keep their eyes on the door. Fanelli, who doesn’t smoke, describes a TV program he saw about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge.

“It was, like, a hundred years ago, and they sent all these immigrant guys down there to work in caissons. When they brought ‘em up, they were all bent over, like this.” He demonstrates, hunching up his skinny shoulders and contorting his face.

Kip looks over his shoulder, hoping nobody is watching. “Amazing,” he says.

“The bends, man! It was from the pressure changes, from coming up too fast. All those bridge dudes, they got bent!”

Kip looks at Jean-Luc, who isn't listening. He's watching a girl across the bar, a cute blonde in a short denim dress. “I'll be right back,” he says. Kip watches him slither through the crowd and finds himself thinking of cockroaches, how they can squeeze their bodies through cracks a person can't even see.

Fanelli watches too.

“I don't get it,” he says. “Why do you hang out with that moron? You can't even have a conversation with him.”

“That's not true,” says Kip, although at the moment, he doesn't care if it's true or not. He watches Jean-Luc touch the girl lightly on the shoulder. He says something that makes her face light up like a circuit board, then extends his hand, as if he's about to sell her an insurance policy. Kip has never seen an American guy shake hands with a girl in a bar, and for a moment he's afraid Frenchy has made a tactical error. But no -- when the shaking is over, he's still holding the girl's hand, leaning toward her so his mouth is close to her ear.

“Look at that,” says Kip.

For once, Fanelli says nothing. They watch as the girl introduces Jean-Luc to an even hotter girl, a very tall brunette in tiny white shorts. In a moment Jean-Luc makes his way through the crowd. He pulls the girls behind him, like a lifeguard rescuing a couple of drowning swimmers.

“Ann, Beverly, this is Kip.” He drops the denim girl's hand. She looks disappointed for a moment, but smiles graciously at Kip.

“I’m Mike,” says Fanelli, stepping up as if he’s about to bat.

The dark-haired girl leans close to Jean-Luc and whispers something in his ear. He laughs his soundless laugh, crinkling, twinkling. Her long hair brushes his shoulder.

Frenchy, Kip thinks, you are a machine.

After last call they walk along the pier -- in front, Jean-Luc and the hot girl, wearing his black jean jacket; then Kip and the blonde. Fanelli brings up the rear.

“There used to be a sea monster in Provincetown Harbor,” he says.

Shut up, Kip thinks, closing his eyes. Please shut up.

“A what?” says the blonde.

“A sea monster. Like the Loch Ness monster. It had the head of a lion and floppy ears, like a beagle.”

The blonde giggles. “Come on.”

“No, really.” Fanelli moves closer to Kip and the blonde, until he’s practically between them.

The blonde smiles at him. “How big is it?”

“That’s an excellent question, Beverly,” says Fanelli, in a professorial tone that makes her giggle. “The guy who saw it first said sixteen feet long. Then, eighty years later, a fisherman saw it and said it was over a hundred feet.”

“Wow,” says the blonde. Her pace slows until she and Fanelli are walking together. Kip, somehow, is walking alone.

“Have you seen it?” she asks.

“Not personally,” says Fanelli. “But there have been plenty of sightings. Ben Franklin’s grandfather saw it.”

Up ahead the hot girl stops. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

Fanelli glares at her. “It’s true. There’s documented evidence.”

Change the subject, Kip thinks. Somebody change the subject.

“Wow,” says Jean-Luc, pointing at one of the boats in the harbor. “What a beautiful boat.”

Yes, Kip thinks. Frenchy to the rescue.

The hot girl shrugs. “It’s just a little sunfish. My father has one just like it.”

“Catamaran,” says Fanelli.

She gives him a drop-dead look. “Excuse me?”

“It’s not a sunfish, it’s a catamaran.” Fanelli speaks very slowly, as if she’s deaf or retarded. “There’s a huge difference. If your dad owned one, you would know that.”

The hot girl turns to Jean-Luc. “Your friend has an attitude. I wasn’t even talking to him.”

Jean-Luc whispers something in her ear. She pulls the jacket tight around her chest.

“Can we leave?” she says.

Jean-Luc looks at Kip, then back at the girl.

“Where do you want to go, *cherie*?” he asks.

“I don’t know. Let’s just drive.”

“Do you have a car?” Jean-Luc asks.

The blonde pipes up. “No car. We’re staying in town. With my mom and dad.”

The hot girl stares at Jean-Luc. “You don’t have a *car*?”

“I do,” says Kip. “We came into town together.”

The hot girl laughs, a little burst of air that blows her hair back from her face.

“I’ve got to go,” she says, peeling off Jean-Luc’s jacket and handing it back to him. Her shoulders, Kip notices, are spectacular.

“What’s the matter?” says Jean-Luc.

The hot girl shrugs. “I’m not into this. I want to go home.”

The blonde turns to Kip. “Sorry.

The boys watch them walk away down the pier, toward the lights of town; their long hair blowing in the damp breeze.

“What a bitch,” says Fanelli.

Jean-Luc stares at him. “You’re kidding, right?” He roots through the pockets of the denim jacket and pulls out a tin of breath mints. “I don’t even want to start with you.”

“What are you doing?” says Kip.

Jean-Luc opens the tin. “I’m rolling a *conique*, man.”

“Here?”

“Yes, here.” Jean-Luc peels the tinfoil off a half-bar of hashish and sniffs it.

“You’re crazy,” says Fanelli.

“Me?” says Jean-Luc. “I am not the one who chased away two beautiful girls.” He turns to Kip. “I’m going to roll a joint, and then I’m going to smoke it. If you don’t want me to do it here, take me somewhere else and I’ll do it there.”

Back at the cottage, the boys sit on the porch. For once, no one is talking, and Kip is not irritated. The joint they smoked on the beach helped. Did Kip imagine it, or was Jean-Luc pissed when Kip passed it to Fanelli?

Kip drains his beer and stares out across the bay. Moonlight spills across the water; in the distance, the lights of Provincetown are pinpricks in the night sky. He thinks of the blonde in her denim dress, the bright promise of the evening squandered. For no reason he remembers the vacations of his childhood, when his parents took him and Heather to the drive-in movie at Wellfleet. Exhausted from the sun and sea, they fell asleep in minutes; the next morning Kip barely remembered being carried into the cottage by his father and put to bed in his clothes. His parents have been asleep for hours now; they'll wake at dawn and clatter around the kitchen, making a huge breakfast.

Kip glances at Fanelli. In the dim light his face looks swollen, distorted, like a reflection in a carnival mirror. Kip blinks a few times, trying to clear his vision. But Fanelli's face still looks wrong.

"Dude," says Kip. "Are you all right?"

"Huh?" says Fanelli. "What are you talking about?"

"Your mouth. It looks kind of swollen."

Fanelli puts his hand to his lips. "It's nothing. My allergies. Must be something I ate."

Kip turns on the porch light. Something very strange is happening to Fanelli's face. His lips are thick and puffy, his nose red and bulbous, as if he's been hit.

"Mike," says Kip. He's surprised to hear his own voice quavering. "I think you should go look in the mirror."

“Why?” says Fanelli. “What’s the matter?”

“I told you. Your face is swelling up. Man, I’m serious.” He takes Fanelli by the arm and pulls him inside the cottage. They go into the bathroom where Fanelli stares at the mirror, his eyes so wide the whites glow in the dark room.

Kip switches on the light.

“Turn it off,” says Fanelli, barely whispering.

“Let’s go,” says Kip. “Let’s get you to the emergency room.”

“No!” says Fanelli. “I told you. It’s just an allergy. I’m fine.” He goes back out onto the porch and lights a cigarette, his swollen face lit for a moment by the Zippo lighter. Kip grabs the car keys from the kitchen table and follows him outside.

“Come on,” he tells Jean-Luc. “We’ve got to take him to the hospital.”

Jean-Luc frowns as if he doesn’t understand.

“Hospital,” says Kip. It’s the same word in French, he thinks.

“How far is it?” says Jean-Luc, rubbing his eyes. “Man, I am beat.”

“Hyannis,” says Kip. “An hour. Maybe less.”

“Forget it,” says Fanelli. He puffs carefully on the cigarette but doesn’t inhale.

“I’m not going.”

“Why not?” says Kip.

“Think about it,” says Fanelli. “The first thing they’re going to ask is, what did we eat and drink, did we take any drugs. What are we going to tell them? That we were out drinking with fake I.D.’s? That we’ve been smoking hash all night?”

For a long time nobody speaks. Every few seconds Frenchy touches his lips and cheeks, as if he’s afraid it’s contagious.

Finally Fanelli stubs out his cigarette. “Enough drama for one night,” he says, heading into the cottage. “I’m going to sleep.”

When Kip wakes up it’s still dark. It’s freezing on the screened porch; he’s wrapped in an army blanket on the wicker sofa. The blanket is itchy, but he doesn’t mind. Its musty smell reminds him of the beach. He and Fanelli used to bury the corners of the blanket in the sand to keep it from blowing away while they played Marco Polo or dug for crabs. They used to bury Heather up to her neck and hold the crabs inches above her head, until she cried or Kip’s mother intervened. Then Kip remembers Fanelli’s face, his swollen cheeks and lips. He pulls on a sweatshirt and goes inside.

The living room is dark except for the old black and white TV. The sound is turned off; Jean-Luc and Heather sit on the couch, shoulders touching. There are a couple of open Heinekens on the coffee table.

“What’s going on here?” says Kip.

Jean-Luc stands. He wears jeans and nothing else.

“Hey, man,” he says.

Kip glares at Heather. She wears shorts and a bikini top, not a good idea with her sad Cub Scout chest. “Since when do you drink beer?” he says.

She takes the afghan from the rocking chair and wraps it around her. “Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?”

“Shut up,” says Kip. It’s all he can think to say. “Go back to bed.”

She gets up off the couch and goes into her bedroom, still wrapped in the afghan.

“I can’t believe you,” Kip says to Jean-Luc.

“What’s the matter, man?” He reaches for his shirt.

“What’s the *matter*?” Kip notices for the first time how skinny Frenchy’s arms are, how easy it would be to break them in half. “She’s my sister. She’s fifteen years old.”

Jean-Luc shrugs, a quick movement of his shoulders. Kip thinks of the Holyoke girl on the turnpike, Ann and Beverly at the bar. For Frenchy, Heather is simply another girl.

Jean-Luc runs a hand through his hair, still perfectly in place. “I’m going outside.”

Kip starts to follow him – to do what, he isn’t sure. Just then he hears a noise: a loud thud coming from the bathroom.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters. “What the hell is going on?”

He goes to the bathroom door and knocks. Beneath the door is a crack of light.

“Hello?” he whispers. “Anybody in there?”

He opens the door. Fanelli sits on the bathroom floor in his pajamas, his back against the toilet, his hands over his face.

“It’s okay,” he mumbles. “I just fell.”

“Let me see,” says Kip. He has to pry Fanelli’s hands off his face. When he does, he’s stunned. Fanelli’s face reminds him of a baseball glove. His eyelids are nearly swollen shut; his lips seem to be turning inside out.

“My God,” says Kip.

Fanelli breathes loudly, as though it’s a struggle. Kip offers him a hand.

“Get up,” he says. “We’re going to the hospital.”

It's morning when they get back to the cottage. The emergency room doctor gave Fanelli a shot. In a few minutes he was breathing easier; after an hour the swelling was nearly gone.

In the kitchen Kip's mother is making pancakes. It's their standard breakfast at the Cape: blueberry pancakes with maple syrup.

"I called your mother," she tells Fanelli. "She's very worried. I told her we'd bring you home."

"Thanks," Fanelli mumbles. His face is still red, his voice nasal, as if he's got a bad cold.

"Want some pancakes?" says Kip.

"No, thanks," says Fanelli. "I should go pack my stuff."

He disappears into the bedroom, where Jean-Luc is still sleeping. Kip stares down at his plate. He remembers the time he and Fanelli ate fourteen pancakes apiece and threw up in the rose bushes. Then he thinks of the doctor examining Fanelli's throat.

*How long has he been like this?* the doctor demanded.

*A few hours,* said Kip.

*What took you so long?* said the doctor. *This is a serious allergic reaction. He could have died.*

Kip finishes his pancakes and goes out to the porch. Awhile later Fanelli appears with his duffel bag.

"I guess your dad's ready to go." He looks like he's been punched in the mouth, and his nose is red and swollen. Otherwise he isn't any uglier than usual.

"Man, it's too bad you can't stay," says Kip. As he says it, he realizes it's true.

Kip's dad comes out of the cottage and starts the car; Kip watches Fanelli toss his duffel in the back seat.

"Later, dude," he calls.

"Yeah," says Fanelli. "See you later."

The car pulls away. When it disappears Kip lights a cigarette; he waves to the old lady watering the rose bushes. In the distance he picks out Heather jogging on the beach.

The screen door opens. Jean-Luc comes out to the porch, his eyes bleary from sleep.

"It's freezing out here," he says, hugging his sweater around him. "In August. I can't believe it." He sits and lights one of Kip's Camels. "Man, the Cape sucks."

"Yeah," says Kip. He looks out at the bay and thinks of him and Fanelli swimming out to the buoy, freezing their nuts off, gasping for breath. They spent the whole week in the water then, no matter how cold. At night they slept deeply, dreamlessly; sleep that wiped away everything and made the world new.

"It never used to," he says. "It used to be cool."