

Douglas J. Lane, whose first published story was the masterful “Mr. Eddie” in TOTU #27, is back with a story equally dark, but very different in setting, flavor, and characterization.

Tacklesmooches

by Douglas J Lane

Two of them held Joey’s shoulders while Donnie, hand on the back of Joey’s head, pressed his face half into the water, half against the porcelain. One of them slapped the handle. Joey’s struggles were fruitless. He could only be glad that it was just the pink puck in his face, that one of them hadn’t primed it with piss before deciding to “baptize” him on a whim. They’d tried it that way one day, and only the arrival of Mister Martin, the custodian, had derailed their plan.

The roar of the flush faded, and for a moment Joey thought of the urinal as the world’s worst seashell. Three sets of hands yanked him backwards. Donnie punched him once in the stomach before they pitched him to the tile. Martin, one of Donnie’s cronies, spat on him for good measure.

“Are you gonna talk about Claire again? Are you, you little fresh meat jagoff??”

Joey hadn’t said anything about Claire. That was the hell of it. Joey made a point of steering clear of Claire and her gaggle of giggling idiots, but the girl labored under a defect Joey hadn’t figured out yet. When he paid her attention, she used it to tear him down. When he ignored her, it somehow made things worse. He’d ruled out a crush, that love-hate thing girls did when something about boys interested them. There was no innocence in her eyes when she threw him under the Donnie bus. It was calculation. Malice.

Denial was only going to get him kicked, and he wasn’t willing to find out if Donnie would get away with that too. Joey shook his head against the onslaught both received and expected. “No. Never again.”

He hated himself for caving in. He wasn’t afraid to scrap, even though Donnie had six inches and forty pounds on him. He’d gone swing for swing with bigger, meaner, smarter than this one. His mother stayed his hand. She had enough to worry her since his father’s

cowardly, open-ended trip out for smokes, getting evicted and having to come live with Aunt Sarah. Joey hated the cast to his mother’s eyes when she retrieved him from the principal’s office, the sad glance that pitied him for being unable to avoid trouble, and the glimmer of guilt he saw, as if she’d somehow failed him.

To Joey, giving in to the Donnies of the world tasted like soot. Uncle Bernie called it “taking one for the team.”

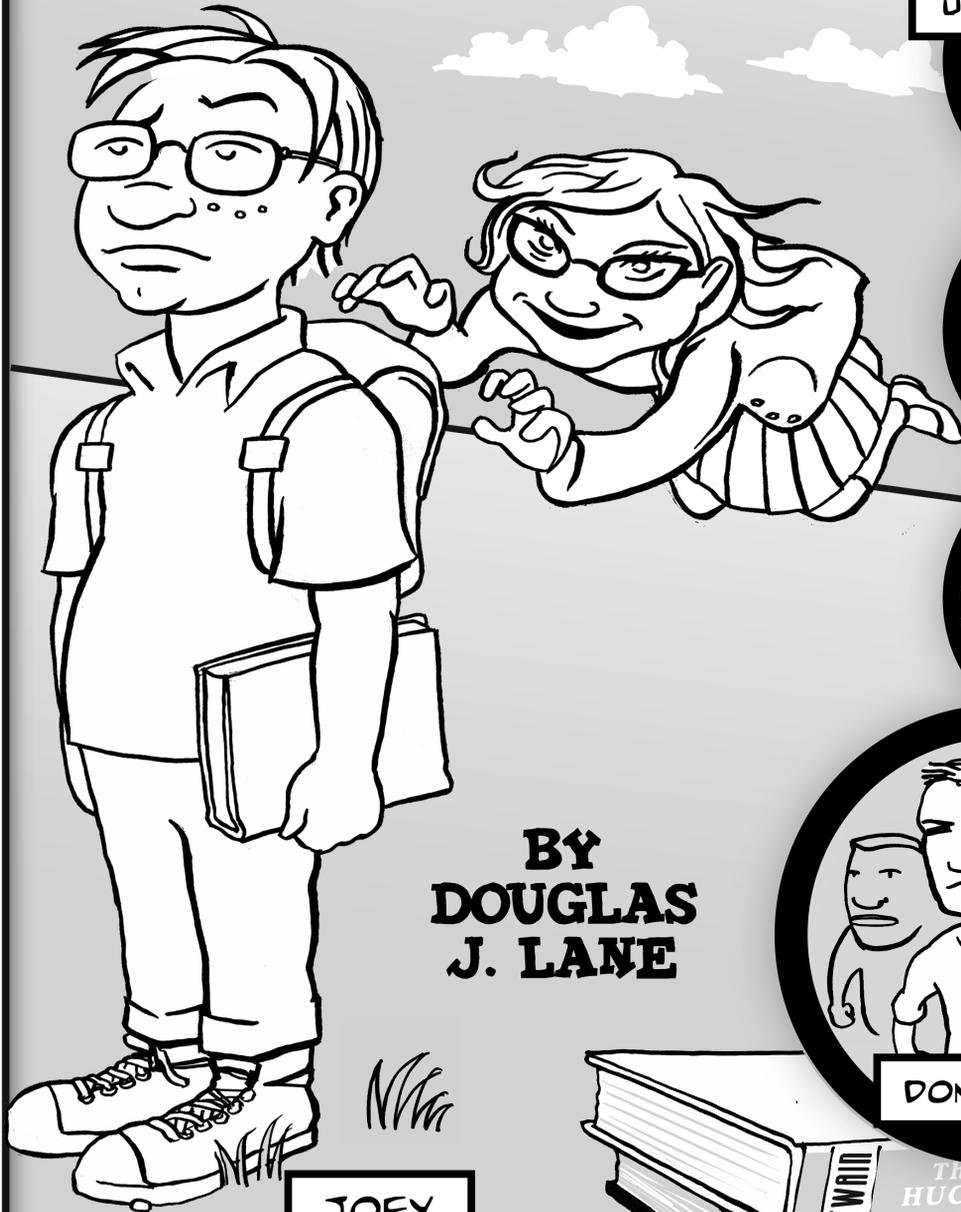
Donnie smiled down at Joey, but it was something he hadn’t mastered. One corner of his mouth pulled higher than the other, forming a misshapen rictus.

“Tomorrow, jagoff,” Donnie said—part threat, part promise, the same refrain every day. Whether Claire had a pot to stir, or Donnie needed to scratch his sociopathic itch, Donnie always managed to make tomorrow happen, every day: wedgies, books knocked from Joey’s hands, his lunch money pilfered, his jacket thrown in the mud, things vanishing from his locker. It helped that Donnie’s aunt, Miss Kiefer, was the hall and recess monitor. Joey’d tried to appeal to the woman before he knew who all the players were. To call her assertion that Donnie would never, ever do what Joey accused him of doing “harsh” would have done a disservice to abrasives.

Joey studied his face in the broad bathroom mirror. The oldest ten year old on earth stared back at him.

He was a mid-year transfer, dropped into their midst after alliances had been won and friendships forged. He was short for his age. He wore glasses and the part in his hair was crooked. He was husky, not fat like Buddha-belly Nelson in the fourth grade, but with a faint stomach that spoke of occasional over-indulgence, exacerbated by too much TV. Joey was fresh meat in Mrs. Bolan’s fifth grade class, with its zero tolerance policy for strays, and once they realized they could get a rise out of him, it was all over.

FACKLES MOOCHES



JOEY

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