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Tranquility from a Floor Mat

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RRRING-RRRING-RRRING
Rory ignored the alarm clock and continued to stare at the ceiling where a kaleidoscope of bumps and miniature shadows played hide and seek with him. "Now you see me, now you don't. Ha-ha-ha," he whispered.

RRRING-RRRING-RRRING

Footsteps. Someone was coming down the hallway. Now they were at the door. Rory paid no attention to the mystery person because the elephant on the ceiling just winked at him. It wasn't an entire elephant, just the head, but it did wink. "It's our little secret, isn't it, Mr. Elephant?"

RRRING-RRRING-RRRING

The door opened. Hey! It was Dad!
Good old Dad. "Say hello to Dad, Mr. Elephant."

"Rory?"

"Yes?"

"Your alarm clock is still ringing."

"... It is?"

Rory's father reached for the alarm clock that sat on top of the TV and snapped the button down. The ringing stopped, but Rory barely noticed. 'It's soooo quiet in here,' he thought.

His dad was staring at him. Mr. Sandling was all dressed for work; a walking, talking mannequin from a Culwell & Son store. 'I've got a corporate dad,' Rory thought. 'I bet he even has sex by the numbers.' "Hold it, dear, we have to make it for 3.7 minutes, we have to make . . ."

"Rory, are you listening to me?"

"What, Dad?"

Mr. Sandling clenched his teeth. "I said you'll be late for school if you don't get up."

"I'm up, Dad, I'm up. You saved the day, Dad, just like the cavalry in a John Ford classic. Where's your yellow bandanna, Dad?"

But Mr. Sandling had already left the doorway. Sighing heavily, Rory pulled his bare legs from under the sheets and placed his feet on the carpeted floor. He hunched his shoulders as the soreness of the night's rest, imbedded in his joints and muscles, protested his movements. 'Why is it,' he wondered, 'I always feel the worst at the best time of the day?' Pulling himself to his feet, he stretched and shuffled to the bathroom. 'Yet, 7:31 is a darn good time,' he mused as he lifted the seat on the toilet to relieve his extended bladder, 'but 5:47 p.m. isn't too bad either, or 3:42 a.m., and hey, let's not forget good old . . .'

Rory jumped at the noise behind him, splattering the toilet seat and the floor.

"Good job, Corey, real good. I even lifted the seat for you. A lot of good **that** did."

"Why do you always have to pee with the door open? It's so gross."

Rory flushed the toilet and unrolled some toilet paper to wipe away the stray urine. "Listen, sister dearest. As long as I'm

Tranquility from a Floor Mat

By M. S. Chrisman

subjected to the pitiful scene of you measuring the growth of your thirteen-year-old breasts . . . "

"Shut-up."

"... which, by the way, aren't going to get any larger . . ."

"Shut-up."

"... I will pee with the door open, standing on my head, with my back to the stool, if that be my kinky desire."

"Shut-up."

She was crying now, and Rory had to bite his lip to keep from commenting on that. Corey tried to act grown up, but her tears and petulant pout proved that her maturity was still out of her grasp. "Go on, get out of here," he said quietly, "I have to get ready for school."

Rory closed the door with a soft click and turned towards the mirror. He didn't like what he saw, but he never liked what he saw. He brushed his teeth, enjoying the disappearing taste of old cockroach dung that permeated his mouth. As he rinsed, he saw with distaste blood intermixed with the toothpaste and saliva. 'Jesus, are my gums disintegrating?'

At the shower he turned the hot water knob to allow the water to warm before he took his shower . . . but someone had forgotten to change the direction knob from shower to faucet, and ice cold pellets pounded his head, neck, and back. Motivated by discomfort, he fumbled with the knob and succeeded in diverting the water to the faucet. 'At least I'm awake now,' he decided.

With his shower done and his hair in place, Rory selected his clothes with no real discrimination; he didn't really care what he wore.

When he was dressed, he poked his head around the corner

of the door and looked down the hallway to the kitchen dining table. 'Breakfast is on, and Dad is gone. Might be a good day after all.'

Whistling a show tune, Rory walked casually down the dark hallway, through the shadowy living room, and into the brightly lit kitchen. Thursday was the maid's day off, so the family was subject to Mrs. Sandling's limited culinary skill. The thought didn't discourage Rory as he hungrily pulled out his chair and sat down. He became discouraged when he saw the bowl of papier-mache his mother, with tired eyes, placed on the table in front of him. Rory pursed his lips with interest.

"Mom?"

His mother, dressed in her bathrobe, stood at the sink performing another domestic chore. She didn't even turn to face him. "Mmmmm?"

Rory lifted a spoonful of the quagmire, held it upside down, and watched it ooze grudgingly off the spoon and hang suspended before releasing itself and landing back in the bowl with a resounding "splat." "It's oatmeal, isn't it, Mom?"

"Mmmmm."

"Yeah, oatmeal; my favorite." Satisfied that the puddle had been properly identified, Rory began to shovel it into his mouth. It was cold and lumpy, but he didn't care. 'Oatmeal's good cold; not like spaghetti,' he thought, 'But germs . . .' Rory leaned his head back, eyed the oatmeal suspiciously, and then glared at the cylindrical box on the kitchen counter that the oatmeal had come from. The Puritan pictured on the box leered at Rory; that smug, self-satisfied, sadistic smile most often demonstrated by religious zealots. 'Probably planning a book burning,' Rory thought, 'while dreaming of spanking his wife, dressed up in her nightgown . . .'

Whamppp!!!

The force of Corey's books hitting the table jiggled Rory's bowl (but not the oatmeal) and disrupted, in mid swing, the quaker's firm application of his hand to his wife's buttocks.

"Rory, we're going to be late for school."

Rory tore his gaze from the evil box of inquisition and looked up at his sister. She was standing cocked to one side, with a fist resting on her protruding hip. 'What the hell does she want?'

Rory knew from experience that his mother would speak first and that his sister would throw in a concurring shot.

"Rory," Mrs. Sandling said, and his heart leaped. "Rory, don't you think it's time you display some responsibility and see to it that you get yourself and your sister to school on time? I'm tired of this happening every morning."

Rory turned his head towards his sister with hopeful anticipation. 'Come on, Corey,' he silently pleaded, 'Come on. Please?'

Corey cooperated. "Yeah, butt-brain; act your age."

'TOUCHDOWN!!' Rory leaped to his feet with his arms stretched straight above his head. His mother and sister, having shrunk away to avoid being hit, stared at him with furrowed brows. Mrs. Sandling's stare was one of final exasperation;

Corey's was one of emphatic disgust.

His mother spoke first . . . as always. "Rory, if you don't watch it, you won't be going to the dance on Saturday."

Rory blinked twice in confusion. "Mom, I asked not to go to the dance. Are you offering me an incentive program?"

But Mrs. Sandling had retreated to the sink and was putting the dishes through a ritualistic torture.

Rory spoke to his sister while continuing to watch his mother. "C'mon tiny-tits . . ."

"Don't call me that!"

". . . let's go."

"Just don't call me that anymore."

Corey picked up her books, and they both walked to the front door.

"Why should I stop?" Rory asked.

"Because if you don't . . ." Corey's mind searched and then grasped ". . . if you don't," she said with a spreading grin, "I'll tell Mom and Dad what you really do in the bathroom when you say you're washing your hands."

Rory stopped with his hands on the door knob. He turned to face his sister, his lips set and his eyebrows twitching.

"What?" he whispered.

Corey scanned the ceiling. "Oh, I imagine it must be Karen Schlotsky you're thinking about while you do it." Obviously she was enjoying this.

Rory shook his head and opened the front door. "You're crazy," he told her, but to himself, 'Jesus, I need to be more quiet when I'm in there.'

John Weylund High School wasn't new, but it wasn't crumbling either. It was just worn; worn and comfortable, like a favorite pair of jeans that you are afraid of washing or wearing too much. The bricks were still clean and the floors still shiny. It was a goooooood school!

As soon as Rory put the car in park, Corey opened the door, got out, and started speed-walking towards the building. He was used to it by now. At first he thought he would be a status symbol for Corey; the senior brother of a freshman girl. 'But not me,' Rory thought.

He eased out of the car and shut the door, making sure all the doors were locked. Carrying his notebook loosely in one hand, he walked towards the front doors of the school. A notebook was all Rory ever took home anymore; text books were useless. 'Shiny paper and cardboard crap,' Rory thought.

Springing up the steps to the glass doors, Rory looked up . . . and stopped. Nate Bruchen was lounging by the doors with two of his buddies. 'It's too late to turn around now.' Rory continued up the steps, walking now and with his head down. 'Maybe they won't say anything.' Rory was at the top of the steps and twenty feet away from the doors. 'Maybe he got a good warning from Mr. Brister for last time.' Fifteen feet. 'Maybe he doesn't want to cause any trouble.' Ten feet. 'Maybe I'll make. . .'

"What's up, fairy?"

Rory bit his lip and continued toward the doors, but before he could escape inside, Nate and his two Cro-magnum partners blocked his way. An impish grin spread across Nate's face.

"I asked you a question." Nate's tone was threateningly condescending, and his smile was frozen in place.

Rory tried to ignore the fear churning in his gut and the sweat that was beading on his forehead and upper lip. 'God, all I want is to get to class.' Faraway, he heard the bell ring. "C'mon, Nate, let me by."

Nate's eyes narrowed to evil slits. "Are you threatening me?" The anticipation in Nate's voice encouraged this morning's cold and religious oatmeal to rise dangerously up Rory's throat.

"No, I'm not threatening you, but I do know you're not stupid enough to kick my ass on the front steps of the school." Rory **didn't** know if Nate was that stupid or not, but he hoped.

"Yeah," Nate relented. "Yeah, you're safe . . . for now."

Nate turned and walked away, his buddies wandering behind him like subdued cattle. Rory followed them with his eyes, not concentrating on what would happen the next time they met, merely thankful for his narrow escape.

With his eyes still focused on the spot where they disappeared below the steps, Rory grasped the metal handle of the glass doorway and pulled it open. 'I'm late for history already, and I still have to go by my locker, and what is it we're studying anyway. . .

"Hello, Mr. Sandling."

A squeak of a scream escaped from Rory's lips, and his fingers released his notebook to the tiled floor as he came face to face with Mr. Brister, the principal.

"We're a little late, aren't we, Mr. Sandling?"

"Uh . . ." Rory mumbled as he bent down to retrieve his notebook. 'Why is it,' he wondered, 'adults insist on referring to children as "mister" or "missus" only when they're being a smart-ass? How would they like it if we called them by their first name?' Mr. Brister's first name was Maurice. Rory could imagine the humor of going through life with the name "Maurice." Did his wife have a nickname for him, or did she call out that name while making love? "Yes, Maurice, yes . . . give me more Maurice, more . . . faster . . ."

"Well, Mr. Sandling?"

'Oh, go and stick it,' Rory thought. "I'm on my way now, Mr. Brister. It won't happen again."

Maurice continued to look at him with thunderclouds pasted on his forehead. He didn't say anything; he just stared. "I'm sorry?" Rory tried. 'My God, what does he want?'

Mr. Brister clapped a hand on Rory's shoulder and took hold. 'Oh, shit, this is it,' Rory thought. Mr. Brister began to wag his finger at Rory.

"Mr. Sandling, I can tell you that I am less than pleased with your conduct recently, and if you don't shape up, you'll have me to answer to."

'Answer? Answer what?' Rory thought. "I'll try to do better, Mr. Brister,"

Nodding his head and satisfied that he had made the proper impression, Mr. Brister released Rory's shoulder from the death grip it had been subjected to, walked past Rory and through the front doors.

After snaring his history book from his stuffed locker, Rory walked quickly to the classroom, but then paused outside the door.

'I hate walking into a full classroom,' Rory thought. He opened the door and stepped inside. Class was already under way and every head turned to see who was wandering in late, and then they turned away again. Rory was not strange enough to warrant close, disgusted scrutiny, and he wasn't nearly popular enough to command the unadulterated awe that someone like . . . like Nate Bruchen would receive. "Prick," Rory mumbled.

Ms. Chickerlow, the history teacher, glared at Rory through the eyeglasses perched precariously on the edge of her nose. "It's nice of you to join us, Rory," she sniped. "Take your seat, please."

'That's an exquisite beehive you're wearing today,' an internally belligerent Rory returned. Aloud he said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Before we were interrupted," Mrs. Chickerlow said with a last blast of hate at Rory, "we were discussing the bitter fighting in the Normandy region of France shortly after D-Day. Now the British . . ."

Rory's notebook was opened to the page where he jotted his scribbles on history, and his pen was poised to add to the clutter, but his attention wasn't on Ms. Chickerlow's nondescript, *Life*-magazine account of the war in Europe. It was on an attractive female sitting one row to the left and three seats up. Karen Schlotsky. He wasn't in love with her; love to Rory was undetermined and undefined, but he was . . . captured by her.

". . . and so the Americans, with more men and equipment, attacked the hedgerows . . ."

Her hair was frazzled and her complexion unsteady, but he wanted her.

". . . so with help from the French resistance, they were able to beat back the Germans . . ."

'What can I do?' Rory begged, 'What can I do?'

". . . and the fighting was pushed even further inland, to the marshes."

The marshes. Mud. His boots made an evil sucking sound as he crept slowly through the slop. Rory was separated from his squad, but he knew better than to panic. He was an experienced soldier of several battles, and he knew what to do. Up ahead . . .
(Rory)

Up ahead there was a clearing and fifty feet into the clearing there was a farmhouse with a young woman in front collecting firewood. Her looks were slightly marred, but she was still quite beautiful. Rory rose from his careful crouch and allowed himself a handsome, lop-sided grin.

'This has possibilities,' he thought. 'But . . .
(Rory!)

But he heard voices. German voices to the left. A German patrol was approaching the farmhouse, and if he stayed where he was, they could surely cut him to pieces, but if he ran for cover in the farmhouse, he would be endangering the girl's life and whoever else was in the house. 'What do I do?' he thought. 'What do I do. What do I . . .'

"Rory!!"

"Ugh?" A startled grunt gurgled between his lips and raised the level of laughter around him. Everyone was turned in their seats laughing at him. And Mrs. Chickerlow was standing, glaring at him with contempt.

'Where do they get this stuff?' Rory wondered. He was in the lunch line trying to select the least inedible of a multitude of inedible items. He finally selected an unidentifiable sandwich, a canned soft drink, and an inflated bag of off-brand potato chips, manufactured in a remote region of Idaho, and paid the lady at the cash register: an elderly woman who had unsuccessfully applied an overwhelming amount of make-up to her weathered face. 'Looks like the Joker on Batman,' Rory thought.

Lunch was Rory's favorite time of the day, at school or at home, because he could be by himself; really by himself. No one to nag me, yell at me, bully me or bother me,' he said to himself.

WHACK!

Or kick me,' his mind screamed as he dropped his lunch to grab the shin on his left leg with both hands. Opening his eyes, he saw a young man who barely came up to his waist with a furious pair of eyebrows. "What did you do that for, you runt?" Rory roared.

WHACK! The other leg.

The pain in his left leg quickly forgotten, Rory grasped his right shin and, with the assistance of a comforting wall, struggled to keep his balance. He appealed to the runt with wounded eyes.

"Watch where you're going," the midget squeaked. "You almost stepped on me."

Rubbing his dented shins and retrieving his battered lunch, Rory limped out of the building and across the parking lot to the football stadium. On nice days, this is where he liked to eat his lunch because no one else went there. And today was a beautiful day.

He started whistling a tune as he walked through the open gate at the back of the end zone and around the track to the bleachers. He mounted the thin, metal stairs softly, savoring the quiet noontime.

Arbitrarily selecting a spot to eat, Rory sat down and appreciated the heat that spread through his buttocks from the sun-warmed seat. Looking forward to his mystery lunch, Rory began opening the bag that enveloped his sandwich when he heard a soft noise. He paused and heard it again, followed by some frantic rustling and then some quiet whimpers, like an animal in pain. Moving soundlessly, so as not to disturb whatever it was, Rory knelt down and peered through the bleacher

slats to the ground below. Directly below him, with their clothes strewn around them, were Nate Bruchen and Karen Schlotsky, locked in a passionate tempo.

Rising as quietly as he had knelt, Rory sat down again and looked at his sandwich. 'Bologna and cheese. I hate bologna and cheese.' Taking a full bite, Rory stared across the field, not seeing the brown, dying grass, but a foggy, French marsh with a lonely farmhouse sitting at its edge.