

Sacrifice

by Joe Williams

S-A-C-R-I-F-I-C-E

The word, spelled out letter by letter, chilled me.

Rick said, “You mean an offering? Some incense or something?”

NO

On the other side of the coffee table, Brandon sat with his fingers glued to the little block of wood. “Do you mean a blood sacrifice?”

YES

“A human sacrifice?”

YES

“Come on guys,” I said, a bit freaked out. “Quit fooling around.”

Brandon grinned, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses even in the half-light. “This isn’t a joke, Jason. Captain Crunch wants a sacrifice.”

The evening had started like any other. With her parents on a hunting trip, Nina had invited us over for some fun and games. She immediately sent her little brother to his room and we broke out a game of Risk. Brandon won just like he always did,

building up his armies in Australia and then wiping us out one by one. I'm always the first to go. Rick softens me up and then Brandon does the coupe de grace. Rick, he came in second, so I guess that's good enough for him.

Then Nina brought out an Ouija board and that's when things got weird.

Rick and Brandon sat with the Ouija board on the coffee table between them, their fingers on a triangular piece of wood. As it moved across the board on three felt pegs, the hole in the center framed the letters to spell out a message. I had the recliner staked out while Nina sat curled in a rocker, smoking a clove cigarette and sending out fragrant tendrils of smoke.

The little girl from the Exorcist had her malevolent spirit guide, Captain Howdy, and Nina had hers. She called him Captain Crunch.

"Crunch wants a sacrifice," Brandon repeated, turning his sunglasses on Rick. To set the mood, Nina had lit the living room with so many candles that sunglasses didn't seem like such a dumb idea.

Rick grinned stupidly through a cluster of zits. Twenty-one and he still had 'em as bad as a teenager. "Cool. Crunch rules."

Brandon didn't smile. "We're gonna give Crunch what he wants."

I laughed, a bit shrilly. "I think this game's gone far enough."

Brandon shot me a frown. "It's not a game." I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but I could see his mouth, and it didn't have its usual grin. The absence of that smirk told me he was taking this way too seriously.

I refused to buy into Brandon's somber mood. "Sure it is. You move a block of wood and say it's a ghost. Big deal."

Brandon whipped off his glasses. Ice-blue eyes glared at me, their centers

quivering with reflected flame. “Are you saying I moved it?”

“Okay, maybe not you. But Rick could’ve.”

“I did not!”

“Maybe not consciously.” Rick was so eager to please Brandon that he might have done it subconsciously.

Brandon hooked his finger at me. “Come here.”

“What for?”

“I want you to talk to Crunch.”

“Yeah.” Rick nodded like a dashboard Jesus. “Come talk to Crunch. Once you feel the way this thing moves, you’ll know it’s real. It’s like someone’s got you by the wrists and all you can do is keep up.”

That didn’t sound like fun to me. “I’d rather play Monopoly.”

Brandon sneered. “I’m sick of kicking your butt at kid’s games.”

You wouldn’t win so often if Rick didn’t help you.

I kept my thoughts to myself. I looked at Nina, hoping for her to bail me out but knowing she wouldn’t. After all, she was the one who hauled out the Ouija board in the first place.

Her pierced bellybutton winked at me from beneath a spaghetti-strap pullover, yet it was her hungry eyes that fascinated me.

Her parents named her Nancy, but she insisted we call her Nina. A post-modern Madonna, more ethereal than material, she was kinda weird but hot enough that it didn’t matter. I’d had a crush on her since high school. Still, I knew better than to get my hopes up. She was Brandon’s girl.

Brandon, sitting on a cushion on the floor, folded his sunglasses and laid them

aside. “Don’t be rude, Jason. Come say ‘Howdy’ to Captain Crunch.” Brandon shoved Rick from the beanbag chair, tumbling him to the carpet. “Get out of the way, asshole. Give the man a place to sit.”

I didn’t want to do it. Stalling, I took a sip from my can of warm beer.

“What, you think I’m a cheater?” Brandon stepped over to the recliner. I could feel him looming over me, the crotch of his jeans inches from my face, but I refused to look up. Instead, I looked at Rick. He grinned back, his chest jerking with a stifled snicker.

Brandon braced his hands on his hips. “Nina, play with our friend here. He doesn’t trust me to keep my hands to myself.”

Scooting off the rocker, Nina took Brandon’s place cross-legged at the coffee table. Her black-lace skirt rode up the inside of her thighs. She smiled and swung her hand at the empty beanbag across from her. “Come on, Jason. I promise you’ll have a good time.”

I swallowed, looked at the block of wood, and imagined our hands on it, fingertips touching.

“This is a stupid game,” I muttered, sitting on the beanbag chair.

For the first time I looked closely at the Ouija board. This wasn’t some toy bought at Toys R Us for \$19.99. This was a homemade job, the letters of the alphabet hand-painted on an oak board and then lacquered to a smooth finish. The “Yes” and “No” at the top were in red.

“I mixed a drop of my blood in the paint,” Nina confided.

She put her fingertips on the heart-shaped block of wood. “Just rest your fingers lightly on the planchette. Captain Crunch will do the rest.”

“If he’s so powerful, why doesn’t he move it himself?”

“He’s a disembodied spirit, silly. He can only work through us. Don’t try to move the planchette, but don’t resist it either. Just go where it goes.”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans, then put my fingertips next to Nina’s black fingernails. “Do I close my eyes?”

Brandon laughed. “Just hold on, buddy. Crunch is strong. You just have to keep up with him.”

“Don’t be nervous. Just relax and let me do the talking. We’ll start slow.” She raised her voice to the unseen entity. “Captain Crunch, are you a good spirit?”

The planchette moved. My fingers snapped off it like it was on fire. I gaped at Nina, wondering if she had moved it.

Brandon laughed harshly, and Rick echoed his laughter with his own bray. Nina smiled sympathetically. She let go of the planchette and it stopped moving. She reached across and squeezed my hand. “Isn’t it wild? I’ve never felt a spirit this strong.”

“It kept moving after I let go,” I said. “While your fingers were still on it.”

“Captain Crunch doesn’t need two bodies to do his work. He does just fine with one.”

Brandon leaned over my shoulder. I could smell the Scotch on his breath. “So what now, smart guy? You think Nina was moving it?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe Nina would trick me. Besides, it didn’t feel right. For a moment it was like my mind had split and my hands weren’t my own, they belonged to this other part that had awakened inside me. It wasn’t like I had been taken over or anything. This other part had always been there, locked away. It’s what an alcoholic feels when he takes his first drink, or a gambler makes his first bet. I wondered

if this was what people with multiple personalities felt.

Nina took both my hands in hers and guided them back to the planchette. “Let’s do it for real, this time. And no pulling back just when it’s getting started. I want to go all the way.”

She held my gaze with her green eyes, keeping me fixed on her, consumed by her eerie beauty as she asked, “What will you give us if we give you a sacrifice?”

Again the planchette moved. Letters appeared one by one in the hole in its center.

E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G

The block of wood stopped. I took my hands from it and wiped them on my pants. They weren’t sweaty, but they felt dirty. Nina smiled at me, her eyes dancing in the candlelight.

The silence lasted a long time. I wondered if the others believed some unseen being could give us anything of value. But then, it had already brought me within a hand’s breadth of Nina.

Brandon broke the silence. “So who are we going to sacrifice?”

The question startled me with its implication of unvoiced agreement. “You believe Crunch?”

“It’s a trade, Jason.” Brandon circled behind Nina and rubbed her shoulders with his strong fingers. “We give Crunch what he wants, and he gives us what we want. People have been doing it since the beginning of time.”

Nina lifted her hand to trace the structure of his knuckles. She said, “The Druids, the Aztecs, almost every culture in the world makes sacrifices. Even the Christians. What do you think Jesus was?”

“Let’s be sensible about this. How can a spirit give us anything when he can’t even move a piece of wood on his own?”

“Ask him,” Brandon kissed Nina long and wet on the shoulder. As his lips moved up to her neck, she placed her fingers on the planchette and nodded for me to do the same. My clumsy hands found the block of wood.

In the golden glow of the candles, all I could see was Nina. Her black pupils crowded the color from her eyes, urging me to ask my question.

I swallowed as once more I invited that force into my hands. Looking into her eyes, I said, “How do we know you can deliver?”

9-7-3-2

I smiled at the gibberish, until Rick whispered, “It’s my ATM number. Nobody knows that number but me.”

Again the block of wood moved, quicker this time. A-B-O-R-T-I-O-N

Color touched Nina’s pale cheeks. “That would be for me.”

I couldn’t believe she would reveal such an intimate secret. Brandon stared intently at her, not with the surprise I felt but with cool comprehension. I wanted to take her hands in mine, tell her how sorry I was, but I didn’t have the nerve. Before any of us could say anything, she asked, “Captain Crunch, what’s Jason’s best kept secret?”

V-I-R-

I jerked the planchette off the Ouija board. “Virus,” I said. “I get cold sores. The doctor says it’s not contagious, but it flares up sometimes. Not a big deal.”

Of course I was lying. I never got cold sores. It wasn’t *virus* Crunch was spelling, but *virgin*.

It’s not like I never had a date. I’d had a few girlfriends, but they wanted to be

friends more than girls.

My virginity put me in the same class as Rick. A twenty-one year old freak. I didn't want Nina to know I had never slept with anyone but my right hand.

"Maybe Crunch knows things," I admitted, crossing my arms and refusing to touch the block of wood. "How is that going to help us?"

"Information's power," Brandon said. "Wanna know who killed Kennedy? Or Bill Gate's account number? I'm telling you, Jason, this is the real thing. Anything we want to know, Crunch can tell us. All it's going to cost is a little blood."

Nina's lips parted in a delicate laugh. "It's not like we're asking for your blood."

"You're one of us," Brandon nudged my shoulder with his fist. "We'd never sacrifice one of our own. Right?"

I nodded. Mention of the sacrifice reminded me just how crazy this sounded. But, as uncomfortable as it made me feel, it was just talk. I'd known Brandon for years and he'd said lots of nutty things. He'd shown me plans for pyramid schemes with him on top and blueprints for pipe bombs that he never made. When you've known someone for years and they say something crazy, you just laugh and wait for them to come to their senses.

I admit I felt a twinge of excitement. I had communicated with unknown forces, and I'd done it with Nina.

Rick rubbed his face, worrying one of his zits. "Who're we gonna use?"

Brandon helped Nina up and led her to the couch, where they sat together, hip to hip. "Maybe we could find us a homeless drunk. Promise him a bottle of Gallo and get him to come here with us."

Nina recoiled at the suggestion. "Ugh. You're not bringing some filthy drunk into

my house.”

“But Nina,” Rick whined, obviously eager to defend Brandon’s suggestion.

“Getting a sacrifice isn’t like ordering a pizza.”

“I like that idea.” She smiled brightly. “We could order a pizza and nab the delivery boy.”

But Brandon shook his head. “He’d be missed, and he’d be too easy to trace.”

“Who cares if he’s traced to us?” She waved her hands with growing excitement. “We’ve got Captain Crunch to protect us. You think he’s going to let us get caught after we’ve given him what he wants? He can give us *everything*. I don’t think police immunity is asking too much.”

Dumbfounded by her argument, I snapped closed my gaping mouth. “You’re not serious.”

“Nina’s right.” Relaxing into the sofa, Brandon draped his arm around her. “We can choose anyone we want. Crunch knows how to protect us. A few embarrassing secrets about the DA’s personal life and we’ll walk free.”

Rick finished with his zit and rubbed his face. His eyes darted about the room. “So, who’s it going to be?”

Nina sat up straight. “I know! Kevin’s upstairs playing some stupid video game. We can sacrifice him.”

“Come on,” I said, amazed she would even joke about such a thing. “Your own brother?”

“Sure. He always bugs me. He’s such a computer nerd. And I have to share a bathroom with him.”

“But--”

Brandon cut me off. “No, this is great. We don’t even have to lure someone over. Our sacrifice is already here. Rick, go upstairs and get the goat.”

As Rick headed for the staircase, I struggled up from the beanbag chair to follow him. Even through my beer buzz, this was getting way too real.

From an upstairs bedroom came the 16-bit explosions and screams of a video game. Kevin sat at his computer desk, the stone corridors of a first-person shooter swimming across his monitor. Rick stood behind him, wheedling and whining.

“Come on, Kevin. We’ve got cookies downstairs. You don’t want to miss out, do you?”

Kevin didn’t even glance over his shoulder. “I want to finish this level.”

Rick looked at me through his thick glasses, clearly exasperated and desperate for help. I grinned, glad Brandon had sent Rick to fetch Kevin. Even a ten-year-old knew better than to follow Rick.

I waved pimple-face over and he followed me into the hall. I closed the door to Kevin’s room.

“He’s not coming,” Rick pouted. “Brandon will be pissed at me.”

“Don’t worry about him. I wanted to talk to you about what’s going on downstairs. You don’t really believe all this stuff about a sacrifice, do you?”

An incredulous snort burst from Rick’s nose, bringing with it a slimy trail. He wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand. “I hope it’s true. That’s good enough for me.”

“Rick, they’re talking about killing Kevin.” Just saying it made me sick.

He grinned, and that answered me more clearly than any words he could have spoken. This clumsy whipping boy *liked* the idea of killing someone.

Before I could shake some sense into him, Nina lithely topped the stairs. “What’s taking so long?”

“Jason’s being a chicken. Squawk!”

Nina glanced at me, her eyebrows knitted. She opened Kevin’s door and stuck her head inside. “Kevin! Go downstairs with Rick.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Put your game on pause. It’ll be here when you get back.”

I wanted to warn Kevin not to go, but I couldn’t do it in front of Nina. I looked at my shoes as Kevin slouched from the room.

Rick put his arm around Kevin’s shoulders and steered him to the steps. “Come on, kid. There’s someone we want you to meet.”

I started to follow, but Nina said, “Jason, you have a minute?”

I looked over my shoulder. She stood in Kevin’s room, leaning against the doorjamb, her arms folded beneath the curve of her breasts. I’d often wondered what those breasts would look like without the stretchy material of a black pullover in the way. Not that she left much to the imagination. She never wore a bra, and even now I could make out the buds of her nipples.

As I stepped over, she drew back into the room. Before I knew it, I was in the room with her.

She turned off Kevin’s computer and sat on the bed. She leaned back on alabaster arms, one knee raised, the shadows under her skirt drawing my eyes. I stared at that dark place between her legs, wondering if she wore panties. If she did, they must’ve been as black as the rest of her outfit. I couldn’t tell if what I saw were panties, shadows, or something else.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked.

I didn’t realize I was smiling. “I’m just happy to be here.” I didn’t want to tell her how sexy she looked, her body draped on tangled sheets covered in Star Wars characters.

She patted the bed next to her. “Come sit with me.”

I glanced at the door.

“Don’t worry about the others. They’ll be busy with Kevin. And don’t worry about him, either. I promise nothing’s going to happen until we get back.”

I did as she asked.

In a nest of blankets, we leaned back together. Nina rolled toward me, her breasts brushing my arm. My stomach rolled with excitement. I was terrified I’d do something to ruin the moment, that I’d belch and Nina would come to her senses.

Nina’s cool hand turned my face to hers and her mouth pressed against mine. Her tongue swirled around, tantalizing me. My senses narrowed to those few inches of contact, tightened until her lips encompassed my entire world.

I tasted her in my mouth, swallowed her.

Her kiss broke into a dozen soft strokes until I was left lying there with my eyes closed and my mouth half-open, dreaming she was still kissing me.

“Everything,” she whispered.

Cool fingers encircled my wrist, guiding my hand lower. With no panties to get in the way, I felt her warmth and wetness, the swollen need of her secret dark place.

“Everything,” she murmured, her mouth against my ear, her voice husky. Her hips rocked against my hand. “That’s my promise to you.”

I might not have believed Captain Crunch, but I believed Nina. Unable to speak, I

simply nodded.

She took my hand and led me downstairs.

We found the others in the dining room, the bright overhead lights drowning out the candles. Rick and Brandon had bound Kevin to a chair, using duct tape to pin his ankles and arms. Kevin struggled as much as he could, but they'd used most of a roll and he wasn't going anywhere. A piece of tape muzzled him.

I retrieved my warm beer from the living room and drained most of what was left. As I lifted the beer, I could smell a seductive musk on my fingers where they had touched Nina. I wanted to taste her. I wanted to lick my fingertips and know the flavor of her before it dried away.

My hand was partway to my lips when I realized how suspicious it would look to the others if I stood there sucking my fingers. I sat on a kitchen stool and said nothing, afraid Brandon would ask me what I had been doing upstairs with his girlfriend for what seemed like hours.

Nina sat next to me, her knee brushing my thigh with a secret promise.

Brandon didn't seem to notice. He pulled a long carving knife from the magnetic rack over the stove and handed it to Rick.

Rick gaped at him. "Really? You're going to let me do it?"

"Sure. You're my main man, right?"

Rick played with the knife. "I don't know, Brandon. What if I screw it up?"

"I trust you."

I watched, horrified yet silent, as Rick walked to the sacrifice. Kevin squirmed fiercely, his eyes wide with fear, his chest hitching with muffled sobs. He used to greet me with unrestrained happiness, always begging to join in the games we played. No

matter what the game, he was better than Rick and almost as good as me.

He used to be a cute kid. Now he was nothing more than a terrified, wiggling animal.

Rick huffed with frustration. "I can't get a clean cut."

"Jason," Brandon said, "make yourself useful and hold him."

My hands turned ice cold. Suddenly the center of attention, I rubbed my arm against my mouth, hoping to remove any lingering trace of Nina's kisses.

She watched me, the corners of her mouth lifted in a knowing smile. This is the deal we had made. If I wanted everything from her, I would have to help Rick murder her brother.

It wasn't like she was asking me to wield the knife. I just had to hold Kevin and try not to get any blood on me.

It didn't sound like too much. Whether I helped or not, they were going to do it. *Everything*, she had promised.

So I slid off the stool and walked behind Kevin. "Just sit still," I whispered to him. "Let them finish up fast."

But I knew I didn't say it for his sake.

Kevin wasn't fooled either. He fought with a strength surprising for a kid his size. I held the chair while Rick considered what to do. Rick had the expression of a man picking out a sports car--full of expectant glee tempered by cautious discrimination.

Rick turned to Brandon for guidance. "What do I do?"

"Kill him, Rick. That's all."

Rick held the knife against Kevin's throat. The boy stopped struggling. Any movement would send the knife-edge snicking through his skin and the frantically

beating artery beneath.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the blood.

But Rick hesitated. “Do I cut his throat? Or do I stab him in the heart like in the movies?”

Brandon sighed in exasperation. “It doesn’t matter. Just do it.”

“I don’t want to do it wrong,” Rick muttered.

I opened my eyes, realizing I might still be able to stop this lunacy. I said, “We sacrifice him the wrong way and Crunch won’t help us cover it up. We’ll have a body here and no way to explain it.”

Brandon sat on the stool next to Nina, his arm around her shoulders. “Just cut his goddamn throat!”

Nina, bless her, pulled away from him. “Wait. Jason’s right.”

I was glad to hear her say that, but I wasn’t glad to hear her next words.

“We should ask Captain Crunch. He’ll tell us what to do.”

We all stood frozen, Rick ready to slice Kevin’s throat, all of us looking at Brandon. He threw up his hands. “All right! We’ll kill the wimp later.” He stormed to the living room and grabbed the Ouija board and planchette.

“I hope this doesn’t take all night,” Rick grumbled. He laid the knife on the kitchen counter and went to the fridge to pull out a beer.

Relaxing, I returned to my stool next to Nina. She patted me on the leg. I avoided looking at Kevin. The tears glinting on the duct tape made me hate myself.

Brandon slammed the Ouija board on the dining table and put his fingers on the planchette. Rick went to help him, but Brandon slapped him away.

“Ask him how to perform the sacrifice,” Nina suggested.

“I know what to ask him.” Poised over the Ouija board, Brandon said, “How should Rick kill Kevin?”

NO

Brandon gaped at the planchette, the word “No” centered in the hole. “No? What the hell does that mean?”

“It must be broken,” Rick suggested. Clearly enraged, Brandon lashed out and smacked him.

“Crunch must’ve changed his mind.” I took the last swig of my beer. Relieved, I set the empty can on the counter and smiled with growing contentment. It was over. Crunch was done playing with us.

The others stared at me. Not at me exactly, but at my hand holding the beer can, the same hand that had touched Nina’s dark place. It moved across the counter, not because I moved it, but because something within me wanted it to move. The beer can slid across the counter as smoothly as the planchette across the Ouija board. I wanted it to stop, but it moved with a will I could not control.

The beer can slid to where Rick had left the carving knife.

Nina gasped.

Brandon chuckled, deep and mirthless. “It looks like Crunch wants you to do the honors.”

“No way.”

“But Jason,” Nina’s hand touched my arm. “It has to be you.”

“What about me?” Rick demanded. “I thought I got to do it! Jason’s a chicken. But I *want* to do it.”

“And that’s why you can’t,” Nina said.

“But Brandon promised--”

Brandon snapped at him. “Shut up and stop whining. Crunch wants Jason. That’s good enough for me.”

I pulled my arm loose from Nina’s grip and wrung the hand that had betrayed me. “Rick’s right. Let him do it. I won’t stop him. But don’t ask me to . . .” The thought of cutting the boy’s flesh turned my stomach.

“But you have to,” Nina insisted. “The rest of us want Kevin dead. It wouldn’t be a sacrifice if we did it. It’s only a sacrifice if you kill someone you don’t want to die.”

Nina shoved the handle of the knife into my palm. “Do it for me, Jason.”

Those red lips, partly open.

Everything. It wasn’t a promise, it was a demand.

I looked at Kevin and I saw not the sacrifice, but the knife. The true sacrifice was me. No matter what happened, I lost. If I killed Kevin, I gave up my soul. But if I refused, I gave up Nina.

The knife trembled in my hand. I remembered what I had so recently fondled, the warmth and moisture I had caressed with such intensity I could almost see every detail of what my fingers had only touched. I longed to feel Nina’s wetness once more.

Standing behind Kevin, I imagined his throat as a watermelon and the blood as juice released on a summer day. How easy to slice open a watermelon. How hard to end a life.

Nina watched me, her green eyes willing me to do it.

The part of me that had awakened at the Ouija board stirred, an unfamiliar force eager to take control. The blade slid closer. Kevin, sensing what I was doing, wedged his chin against his chest. I braced my left palm against his forehead and pulled his head

back, exposing his neck.

The blade pressed against Kevin's throat. A bead of blood swelled on the knife-edge.

I expected the knife to move on its own. Surely Crunch, who could slide a block of wood, could move a kitchen knife a couple of inches and save me the torture of slitting Kevin's throat.

I stood there for a long moment before I realized Crunch wasn't going to help me. The sacrifice was mine to make.

I'd already sacrificed as much as I could. I gave Nina a last lingering look, the kind that fills romance novels, and then started cutting the tape around Kevin's arm.

Brandon lurched toward me. "What the hell . . ."

"Crunch won't let me kill him," I lied. "He's the wrong victim. I think, when Crunch said 'no' to killing Kevin, he meant we should sacrifice someone important to us."

Brandon's cruel mind embraced this idea. His gaze slid over to Rick.

Rick, shaking his head, stumbled against the wall. "Hey, buddy. Don't even think it."

A smirk crossed Brandon's lips. "You're my main man, Rick. Losing you would be like losing my right hand. It'd be hard living without you."

Rick pointed a shaking finger at Nina. "What about her? She's your girlfriend. That's the kind of sacrifice Crunch wants."

Nina laughed, obviously enjoying herself. She hopped off her chair. "Let's ask Captain Crunch if he wants something spicy," she curled her lip at Rick, "or something oily."

She sat across the dining table from Brandon and they put their hands on the planchette. Before she could ask her question, Rick squeezed his fingers on the third side of the wooden triangle. They hunched around the Ouija board, eyeing each other like rats in a too small cage.

Nina bowed her head. "Captain Crunch, who should we sacrifice?"

While they waited for an answer, I peeled the tape from Kevin's mouth. "Some game, huh?"

Kevin rubbed the stickum from his cheeks. "Game?"

"Yeah. Had you going, didn't we?"

His voice shook. "This was a stupid game." He touched the red nick on his neck and stared at the blood on his fingertips.

"Sorry about that. Let me make it up to you. What do you say we go to the arcade?"

He looked at me with suspicion. "Really?"

"Yeah. My treat." I helped him to his feet--he still wasn't very steady--and steered him toward the kitchen door, the one that lead out through the garage. Let the others kill themselves. I was getting out.

"Jason."

I turned and the Ouija board slammed into my face. Stunned and bleeding, I flopped on my side and clutched my face. A flood of tears blurred Nina's image.

She held half an Ouija board in each of her hands. The blow to my head had broken it.

My tongue wouldn't work. Blood ran down the back of my throat, choking me, and my nose bled like a spigot. Simply breathing drove spikes of pain through my head.

Kevin jumped forward to help me but Brandon pulled him back.

Kneeling over me, Nina planted a kiss on my mouth. “Take it easy, baby.” Her pink tongue slipped out and licked the blood from my lips. She put her mouth to my ear as if sharing a secret. “Captain Crunch wants a virgin.”

Rick giggled. His fingers clenched and unclenched on an imaginary knife.

“Go for it,” Brandon told him, still holding Kevin.

The world spun and if I wasn’t already on the floor I would’ve fallen. They were going to do it. And I was too groggy to stop them.

Pimple-faced Rick looked around the floor. “Where’d he drop the knife?”

I felt the handle press against my palm. Maybe Kevin kicked it into my hand. Maybe it slid there on its own.

Half-blinded by blood and pain, I lifted the knife, ready to warn Rick off. The wretch saw the knife and panicked. He jumped back, shoving Nina between him and the blade. She fell and the knifepoint penetrated her perfect breasts in a spurt of crimson.

Her mouth popped open in surprise.

You’d think Brandon would’ve gone to help her, but he danced away from the spreading pool of blood while Kevin, now free, screamed hysterically. I caught Nina and laid with her on the dining room floor, cradling her, her beautiful eyes locked on mine. I felt a warm wetness on my hand. I smelled my fingers, catching not the musk of her sex, but the copper of her blood.

Eyes closed, I kissed my fingertips just to know the taste of her before it dried.

“Does that count?” Rick asked no one in particular. “That oughtta count!”

Of course it didn’t count. Crunch was just playing with us.

I had murdered Nina. Maybe she didn’t love me, and maybe I didn’t do it

intentionally, but there she was just the same, dead in my arms. If only I hadn't gone along with them. If only . . .

Sacrifice. The dead don't know its meaning. But the living do.

The End