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# HOW SHITHEAD GOT HER NAME

Gabriel Welsch

I knew better than to go on a television show with a woman I partied with a couple times and who'd just had a kid. But those were my drinking years, a while before one of my saws got into my leg and woke me up.

When the man told me the girl was mine, Lacey started bawling and running around the stage holding that squirming baby and the audience started hissing at me and throwing things. In the bright lights, I knew I was crying and didn't care. I threw up down the front of myself and heard a guy say we should go to commercial.

People swarmed me, spray bottles and paper towels to wipe me down. They slapped my cheeks. Then Lacey was screaming in my face, saying I better come up with some money. I threw up again.

I was flown home, same day, into Harrisburg, and drove to Daleville with my windows down because of the smell. For three nights I drank at Brothers', sleeping it off in my truck bed before going back in each morning, until Brother himself woke me up with a hose on the third day, spraying me down and telling me I stunk too much to be in there.

I went home and shaved. I got so into shaving I shaved my entire neck and the back of my neck and then decided to just shave the whole damn thing and so cut off all my hair and shaved my head down to the skin. When I showered, the hot water got into all the small cuts over my head. I squeezed my eyes shut and let my scalp sting.

The phone rang while I was drying off. When I found the phone, it showed I had many messages. I knew she'd just keep it up. Stubborn, I'd give her that.

Our call was short. She was driving to town for some money, and I was to play with the girl. I was to get to know her.

"My friends think I shouldn't let her even see you," she said. "They think I should make sure you never know this girl. I don't know what I think about that." I think she was crying but trying to sound mad. "Suppose you show me what I should do."

Normally, I would have said she should go fuck herself. But with my scalp stinging, my place stuffy and wrecked, my gut yelling for food, there was no room for anger. At least not then.

It went that way for weeks. She'd show up and I'd take the girl and we'd sit. At first, I'd just hold her and we'd just look at each other. I'd give her a bottle. We'd listen to music, mostly Beatles, because everything else I had was not appropriate. Covering my old couch with a blanket, I'd pile pillows around so she could nap and not roll onto the floor. I learned how to walk quietly in that creaky, falling-apart place. And when Lacey came by, I'd say to her *time to take this little shithead home*.

At first, she'd tell me not to do that. Then she'd just shake her head. After a few months she started sending her dad over with the kid. I called her Shithead and the dad would laugh.

That spring I had to fix the porch. It got me out of a few months of rent, so I was happy to do it. I had to replace the posts, repoint brick, re-shingle the roof, and replace rotted boards. While I worked, Shithead would toddle around the yard, grabbing dandelions, chasing the neighbor's mess of a cat. I kept having to unplug tools so she didn't end up grabbing a drill or something.

One week Shithead's grandpa told me Lacey was pissed. The kid's first word was mama, but the second word sounded a little too much like Shithead.

"Well, her mom should watch how she talks around the house," I said. He wasn't laughing, so I laughed enough for both of us.

"You gotta make this work for her," he said, pointing at the little girl who was now standing by his truck, "or I will beat your skinny, useless ass. You got me?"

Shithead went through a princess phase, showing up in gowns with magic wands. Then she went through a Buzz Lightyear thing, then an obsession with those big Legos for little kids, then thinking she was a cat. I never knew how she'd show up.

One day I was replacing plumbing in the kitchen and she ate the last bite of a PB&J and said, after a long quiet, "Mommy says you shouldn't call me Shithead."

I laughed. "Yeah, well, your mommy says a lot of things."

She said, "What do you think my name is?"

I wanted to say *Shithead*. I wanted to laugh and make her laugh and have us laugh together. I wanted to say I never had a chance to think about giving her a name. I couldn't land on an answer to the question.

And this was an easy question. She was like this house—I kept discovering new stuff here. New problems—rot, foundation issues, bad wiring. She was going to get smarter, more curious, other kids would say things, ask *where's your dad*.

"I think your name is real pretty," I said.

She grinned, the way she did for pictures, when we both forgot about the rest of the world for a minute. "I do too!"

"You know I call you Shithead just to be funny, right?"

She hopped off her chair and ran outside. The day was sunny and the neighbor cat skulked around. I could hear her talking to it. She called it Shithead.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel Welsch is the author of a collection of short stories, *Groundscratchers* (Tolsun Books), and four collections of poems, the most recent being *The Four Horsepersons of a Disappointing Apocalypse*. His work appeared widely, in journals including *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *THRUSH*, *Moon City Review*, *Lake Effect*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Red Rock Review*. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his family, and works as vice president of marketing and communications at Duquesne University. He also drives a 2015 Chevy Traverse and has found YouTube quite helpful for repairing the thing.



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