

Ron's Home

by Randy Smith, English Senior

"He must be home. His laundry is here," Mrs. Curtis said as she stepped in the back door and stomped the snow from her black clasp boots. She was looking at her son's suitcase and the multi-colored blizzard of T-shirts and blue jeans crawling out from the washing machine.

"I bet he didn't do any wash the whole semester. Ronald, RONALD! Are you home?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm upstairs."

Ron lay stretched out on his old bed with his arms crossed behind his head as he had for the last hour and a half, not seeing his Earl Campbell poster. He sighed.

"Well, come down and let me look at you."

Ron tromped down the bare carpeted stairs as his mother wrapped her scratchy scarf about her heavy gray coat and hung them up. She smacked him on the cheek and hugged him as he stood with his hands buried in his pockets.

"How were finals? I'm sorry I wasn't here when you got home, but I was at my Weight-Watchers meeting," she said as she grabbed a cellophane-wrapped carmel from the porcelain green leaf bowl on the counter. "Can you tell I lost a pound since you were home last?"

She popped the carmel in her mouth and turned sideways to present her profile. She ran her pudgy hands down her bulging form and dropped back a step.

Before Ron could mumble something affirmative, a whirling tornado of fangs and fur rose from the rug and attacked her leg.

"Lancelot. Stop that. Lancelot!" Mrs. Curtis screamed. She stiff-kicked the cat against the crystal cupboard where it fell in a stunned lump with its tongue sticking out.

Lance's reflexes are getting slow, mused Ron.

"That lazy cat. I wish you could take it to school with you. Oh, you never did tell me how your classes went."

"Ok, I guess. I had some tr--"

"My goodness, will you look at the time. I better get supper started. You know how your father is if he comes home and there's nothing on the table. That's good to hear about your grades." She padded out to the kitchen and began to butcher some spaghetti.

"You know," she called from the kitchen, "not too many people know about Dietall Cola. . . ." Ron plopped on the gray print sofa as his mother expounded the wonders of the new sugar free soft drink. His eyes roamed across the row of black metal plates from different states that lined the south wall. Why hadn't Lisa returned his call?

"Why, with so few calories in each can, I can drink eight a day."

Ron got up and pulled on his snow clomper boots. Not much hope of thinking with his mother around. He strangled the laces about his ankles. He pulled on his thick blue parka as he opened the front door.

"Ronald, where are you going?" his mother asked as she stepped through the wood archway back into the living room carrying two pounds of hamburger squishing between her meaty fingers.

"Be back for supper," she called as he banged out the door with no reply.

He trudged along where he thought the sidewalk was, watching his boots plow through the powdery snow. His breath streamed behind him. She was such a bitch anyway. What had he done? Her roommate had said she would be right back. Why hadn't she called?

"Hey Ronnie. Ron Curtis, how ya doing?"

In front of a quiet snow-laden, half brick house, standing next to an ill-shaped mound of snow, stood Quincy Adams. Ron wished he hadn't walked this way. Quincy was one of the biggest idiots of Ron's graduating class last year. Not exactly

an idiot. He got good grades and everything, but he never took anything seriously. Of course his real name wasn't Quincy. That was just what he wanted to be called, for some unknown reason.

Quincy crossed the white lawn that was pocked with his footprints and scrapings to where Ron stood shivering.

"Hi Quincy. Home for Christmas, huh? How was school? Well, I suppose I better be getting home to supper."

"Whoa, Ron. I haven't seen you in ages. Do you like the snow elephant I'm making?" he puffed through crimson cheeks with a smile as he pointed at the mound.

Quincy was always doing strange things. He wore Hawaiian shirts in the middle of winter to class. He purposely fell down stairs for laughs. In a composition class in high school he wrote a story about a distant planet. The scientists of that planet, Galens he called it, had devised a method of safely pulling atoms apart. The correct directional stress applied to the start of an elemental chain caused the atoms to "unzip." After several successful laboratory experiments, the scientists moved to field test the process on a wide, barren plain. The chief scientist said, "This shall be a great day in Galens' history" as he tripped the switch. The entire planet unzipped into so many particles of everything floating about in space.

Ron had asked him why he did stuff like that.

"That's why," he answered.

"What?"

"I do the things that I do so people will ask me why I do them," he said.

So Ron knew better than to question the snow elephant. He complimented Quincy on it and stood and listened to a string of old jokes and laughs. Finally, through chattering teeth, he told Quincy that he really had to get home for supper.

Ron hurried back shivering. He dumped his parka and tromped to the dining table. His mother was seated, halfway hidden behind a curtain of tomato sauce and spaghetti. He sat down and helped himself.

"Oh Ronald, where have you been? HAROLD! Your son is home! He's in the study with his head in the tube again. Another football game is just starting. I even think that he said that it was your school. Why don't you go in and eat with your father and watch the game?"

At the words "your school," Ron winced. He never really felt he belonged at a university of science and engineering. He just couldn't relate to all those quasi-geniuses. And his grades really dropped after he started going out all the time those last three weeks. She seemed so close then. Now . . . Maybe he could talk to his father. Lancelot limped out of Ron's way as he walked to the study with his piled plate of spaghetti.

"Hi Dad," Ron dropped crosslegged to the hardwood floor by his father's green, stuffed easy chair.

"You haven't missed anything yet, the pre-game just got over," Mr. Curtis said, eyes riveted on the set. "This 24 hour sports station is great. Nothing like cable TV."

"WELCOME EVERYONE to tonight's exciting Midwest Conference matchup," the set screamed. The camera panned across the mobs of mad fans in the crimson and gold that filled the stadium with cheers and banners.

"And here come our own Red Demons . . ." The home Red Demons burst from the concrete canyon between bleachers and immediately broke into calisthenics on the north end of the field. They received a thundering ovation from the crowd and Mr. Curtis, who urged his son to join in.

The defending conference champion Red Demons had little difficulty. Following the opening kickoff, the Demons drove sixty-seven yards to the goal line where the towering fullback smashed through the churning bodies for a touchdown. An occasional string of spaghetti flew into Mr. Curtis' mouth. The Demons, overall, controlled the tempo of the game. Ron cleared his throat during commercials but he couldn't seem to get his father's attention.

When the score was 35-0 late in the second quarter, Ron thought to interrupt, since there was little doubt of the outcome. But his father jumped up and started screaming at an obvious missed clipping call following the Demon's fifth kickoff. Perhaps Ron could talk to his father later. He went to his bedroom where he spent most of the rest of the weekend, his head wrapped in his stereo.

Unfortunately, Ron's uncle Bill called during supper Sunday night. He had heard that Ron was home and suggested that they go fishing together just like old times. Ron remembered the numerous summer days wasted watching some lake evaporate with his uncle. He tried to talk his way out

of it, but his mom insisted that he go. He shouldn't sit home all the time. She could tell he was moping over something but he never told her anything, his own mother.

Monday morning Ron and his uncle Bill drove over the snow covered gravel roads to Diamond Lake in Bill's silver blue, four wheel drive Blazer. Bill was a large man packed in enough coveralls to clothe Vermont. They bounced onto the ice covered lake and pulled up next to Bill's small plywood fish house.

Within moments they were inside and Ron was freezing his toes. Bill laughed heartily and told of the three good sized walleye he had caught just last Wednesday. Bill had more trophy fish mounted, in his head, than anyone alive. He took first through fourth place in a fishing contest Ron's junior year even though he couldn't produce the fish for the judges. Probably they awarded him the prizes for being the best liar on the lake, the equivalent of being the best fisherman.

Bill blew his nose with a violent honk and his glasses did a somersault on the end of his nose. He offered Ron some thick, dark coffee from his thermos.

"You need good strong coffee on days like this," Bill said with a chuckle over his steaming cup. "Here, have one of these sandwiches your mom sent."

They sat and anxiously watched their fishing lines descend from their spikes through the two black holes in the ice, but Bill kept his eyes open. If she had only explained. Who was he trying to kid? She dumped him. Nothing made sense. He had been popular in high school. He had been an honor student. Now, nothing. Ron looked up at his uncle hopefully.

"Yep, any minute now — wham — they'll start biting," Bill said.

A few minutes later Bill went to answer the "call of the wild, heh, heh." When he returned he said, "Ron! Where's my line? And yours?"

Ron shrugged innocently.

"You weren't paying attention. Your mom said there was something on your mind. She thought maybe we could talk about it."

"Well, it's kind of hard to talk about. Personal, you know. You see, I met this girl at the end of October. We

started seeing a lot of each other and my grades slipped. Anyway, now she. . . .”

“I know, they must have been pulled clean into the water. The lines, I mean. Man, that must have been some fish. He probably hit my minnow, then got tangled in your line and jerked them both clean under. Yup. Had to be a muskie. Probably 5, 6 pounds. What do you think, Ron? Yup, if I know fish, it had to be a muskie.”

All the way home, Bill kept talking about that elusive muskelunge. By the time they got to Ron’s house, it had grown to eight pounds. When Bill and his wife, Jean, came over for tea on Christmas Eve two nights later, the muskie must have been 9, 10 pounds.

“I swear, the muskie must have been 9, 10 pounds. It was a good thing I wasn’t holding onto the line. Zing, my fingers would have been sliced right off. Huh, Ron? Yeah, boy.”

“Would anyone like some more eggnog? Or some cake? There’s more cake?” said Mrs. Curtis. No one spoke up, so she helped herself to just one more piece. The four adults sat around the circular dining table on the spindle backed chairs. Ron sat off to the side, slouched on the sofa with his heels digging into the rug.

“That’s interesting, Bill. You didn’t happen to catch the Orange Bowl Sunday did you? Iowa State and Florida? Now there was a game. Florida was ahead by a point going into the fourth quarter. . . .”

“We have ice cream. Doesn’t anybody want ice cream? It’s no trouble. Right over there in the freezer.”

“No thanks, nobody wants any ice cream. As I was saying, Florida was leading . . .”

“Ron wants some, don’t you dear? I bought it just for him because he never gets any at school.” She brought the ice cream to the table and piled herself a dish.

“At bridge club yesterday we had the most delightful” started Jean, Bill’s wife.

“Don’t start talking about that dumb bridge club again,” Bill cut her off. “Bridge, bridge, that’s all you talk about. Anyway, I think I’ll head back to Diamond tomorrow and see if I can’t nab that muskie.”

Ron slipped away while his father returned to the fourth

quarter exploits of the Orange Bowl. He screwed himself up, stepped into the study and picked up the telephone receiver. Trembling, he dialed a phone number from his wallet. The connection clicked and Ron's heart jumped as the phone rang at the other end. Then again. He let it ring seven times before he gently set the receiver down.

He walked back through the dining room with his head low. The adults were paired off and his mother was talking of snow to his aunt. Ron bounded up the stairs to his room.

"You know, that Adams boy called up yesterday and offered to shovel our driveway. I asked him how much he wanted and he said he didn't want to be paid, he just wanted the snow. He's building some kind of snow sculpture or something. So anyway, I baked him some cookies because he's such a nice boy. I put them in the jar and wouldn't you know it, they're just about gone now. You can really tell when Ronald comes back home. There he goes, up to his room again. I don't understand why he doesn't sit and talk with us."

"Touchdown!" Mr. Curtis exploded. "He just outstripped the defenders. I couldn't believe it. You should have seen it. The instant replay . . ."

"I don't watch much TV on Sundays, usually only the Virgil Ward Show," said Bill.