

# The Prairie Light Review

---

Volume 23  
Number 2 *anti-*

Article 33

---

Spring 5-1-2003

## Brainboy

John Kuharik  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kuharik, John (2003) "Brainboy," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 33.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol23/iss2/33>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact [koteles@cod.edu](mailto:koteles@cod.edu).

## Brainboy

-John Kuharik-

The family calls him JB. They always have.

You call him brainboy. You're the only one who can. He smiles when you say it because he knows your mood from it. One thing he's good at is your moods. One thing you're good at is his secrets.

Automatically, you're a guy's brother for twenty-four years, you know some of his secrets, maybe a lot of them depending on what you got into together, and neither of you ever left town. If he's got brain damage, the kind where he says everything he thinks? Then, hey, you know all his secrets.

Like how you know JB feels guilty watching television.

OK. You feel a little guilty about TV yourself. You hear about couch potatoes and you don't want to be one. Maybe you cut down on NYPD Blue, go to the gym an extra weeknight. Maybe you decide to take a class at COD, or what the shit, just go drinking. Which used to work except they got TVs in all the bars you go to, and you find yourself like last week: leaning against the bar at TGI Fridays, half a Miller Lite in front of you, staring like some dimwit at a hockey game instead of trying to meet people like you went there for in the first place. You don't know, you don't even really like hockey.

So, you figure Brainboy, who can't read anymore because the letters look fucked around, and who couldn't walk for months after he got up from his coma, would be OK with watching TV all day. Like he's earned a free pass for it. What else is there for him, you think? Hey, physical therapy doesn't take all day.

You'd think: Wow, Guilt-free TV. You were him, you'd have twenty-five favorite shows, with Law and Order re-runs at the top of your list. You'd have asked them to put in Direct TV for you by now - or at least hook up cable with the premium movie package.

But not JB. And you know its not because he doesn't have the money either. Settlement from the Fairfield's insurance came in five years late, but it came in.

You try not to think about the Fairfield's. Christ, do you need that pressure building behind your eyes? Five years. Took that long for that agent, Dougherty, to say what you already knew: Jimmy Fairfield's a jerk. Driving that pickup with those high school boys bouncing around in the back like that. You know he forgot they were back there. You know it! Fucking around, head out the window, ogling the Friday night



girls on the square. Forgot about those boys in the back for a second. Didn't he? Damn straight. Happens a hundred times a day. A guy driving on the street locks onto a girl on the sidewalk one hundred percent, for one second. Jimmy Fairfield, show-off shithead that he is, locked on just like that, only then he gunned it.

There's when you get JB and that Stuart kid flopped out onto Colfax Street, right on their heads. And Jimmy Fairfield doesn't even know it until he wheels back around the square. You weren't there to see it. Didn't have to be. You heard girls in tight jeans froze, stood motionless looking at Stuart's and JB's bodies with their hands over their mouths, hands over their cheeks, arms clutched under their breasts. You heard that boys with buzz cuts screamed into cell phones. JB's friend, Bobby Reynolds? He told you it was the first time he ever called 911. Bobby also told you it was JB who bled on the street. They tried to wash it away, but you saw bits of dried pink foam in the gutter when you went there to look. The Stuart kid? Not a drop of bleed. Just died where he hit the curb. Pretty fucking clear what happened. Clear to everyone that is, except Dougherty and his insurance pals.

JB was lucky - if you think that way.

Four-month coma, three years of rehab. He was bald at first from how they shaved him for surgery. That and the scar put you off; gave you a funny pain under your balls. His brown hair is grown back and he keeps it longer than other guys his age. You like to rub his hair; he's taller than you, and it makes him grin and say quit it; but he doesn't try to stop you.

Your father says he's done it so often - driven Ogden Avenue every day for two years, that is - that he couldn't drive to the Downers Grove Halfway House for Brain Injured Adults in his own coma if he had to. He only says it in front of your mother and you when JB isn't around, and he only means it as a joke, but you never laugh. "Isn't it time for everyone to lighten up, for Christ sake?" your father asks, looking directly at you. When you don't answer, he looks at your mother who displays a put, but keeps quiet too. "He doesn't need the walker anymore, he got his driver's license back two months ago. But you two..." Your father shakes his head.

A millionaire now, even after the bills are paid. Yeah, some luck, your brother had. Funny. Brainboy's the one who would have been the millionaire anyway. The way he loved numbers. You always knew it was way beyond he's just good in math; hey, you were good in math. No, JB loved numbers. Number theory. Code Breaker Magazine and the like. How many people you know talk about the number "e," or Fermat's Last



Theorem? See? Most people have to ask some math teacher if they want to know about that shit.

Well, brain injury or not, he's still smart enough that he doesn't sound like a dumbass when you talk to him, and he can do his checkbook again. But he gives you a blank stare when you try to get him talking about the old stuff; ideas about probability waves, or quantum entanglement. Ideas that used to light him up. He doesn't remember how he was; how he glowed talking about that Fermat shit. No, he doesn't remember—and he doesn't even know he doesn't remember.

You? You could cry.

So, why not Direct TV, or the Dish Network, or premium cable for our boy? You know why. You can't waste shit. You have the same mother.

It's like cigarettes. JB never buys them by the carton. He pretends each Marlboro Light will be his last. Like any minute he will suddenly quit, and when it happens, he doesn't want to be stuck with a half-finished carton he paid for. Same with TV. For him, each Seinfeld re-run, each Judge Judy, might be his last show, and he can't stand the idea of having a half-finished subscription to Dish Network, or a half month left on his cable bill.

You're thinking about the secrets again. His secrets. You think you know them all. You think a brain-injured brother can't be alone long enough to get any new ones.

So who's this bicycle-girl you want to know?

You had to hear about her from a neighbor who saw her. First time you ask JB, himself, you get "someone," and a sheepish grin – if you can call that kind of look from a guy with a drooping lip sheepish. You are barely used to that lip. It's frightening to see that on a young guy. Uncle Albert had a droop like that after his stroke, plus he drooled. You were with him, you wanted to reach over with a tissue. How embarrassing was that at Thanksgiving when there's more than family around. And he was sixty-something.

God. If JB drooled, you'd still be crying.

You guess, and later, find out you were right, that he met "someone" while sitting on that bench near the bicycle path behind the house. This bicycle-girl, he tells you her name is Marsha, is riding across the country, and he has been driving to meet her where she stops at night. You've seen those people out on the bike path zipping past in colored shirts like they were on the Tour de France? You never thought about it, and even if you did, you probably never expected some of them might be on their way to Seattle of someplace like that. Hey, you figured the



twenty miles from here to Elgin was a trip.

You get the story from JB in his driveway, at three in the afternoon the day he's leaving for Madison, Wisconsin. He's limping around and you watch him heft a black duffel bag into the van with his good arm. He bought the van with insurance money once he got his driver's license back, which wasn't easy. He tells you he'll be gone at least a week, but probably longer.

"Wait, can't you talk for a minute?" you ask.

He doesn't stop packing the whole time he's telling you the story. She's with a group that's promoting a chain of bicycle shops you never heard of, and they invited him to join the support team. "You'd like her," he says. "She's cute. Ties her hair in a ponytail that sticks out under the back of her helmet." He adds he might follow her all the way to Seattle. "If things get cooking right," is the way he puts it.

"What do they do at night?" You want to know. "They camp along the bike path?"

"Hell no, they get motels."

"You've stayed overnight with them? With her?" You sound so lame to yourself.

"Crystal Lake," he grins

"I don't know, Brainboy."

"What's to know?" He sees you shaking your head. "What have I got to do around here besides watch TV?" It's happening fast: his going away like this. You try to absorb it, but you feel dizzy.

"She likes me," he says, getting into the van.

You worry about this kid driving to the nearest Jewel, and now you got to worry about him driving to Wisconsin? Then, to Seattle? Holy Christ, the Rocky Mountains! But what do you tell him? Really, you think about it, what do you say to him at this point?

You blink once or twice; you take a deep breath. "Send me a picture of her," you say. And you slap him on the back.