



July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Norton, Nathan W. (2014) "There's Only One Apron Left in Aunt Berry's Apron Drawer," *The Laureate*: Vol. 10, Article 27.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol10/iss1/27>

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*Nathan W.
Norton*

There's Only One Apron Left in Aunt Berry's Apron Drawer

There's a revolution going on in my Aunt Berry's basement and I didn't start it. I totally didn't. All I did was find out about it. Well, me and Cheeze, we found out about it. So what are we supposed to do, you know? If I told Uncle God and Aunt Berry, I bet they'd blame me even though for real it was Cheeze who started hanging up the laundry outside on the line, and now I can't find Pretty Penny.

So far, Aunt Berry is the only one who lost stuff. I mean, Uncle God and me lost some socks, but that's really not a very big deal. Aunt Berry lost some big deals. Her really nice silky blue dress that's black if you look at it right. Her I'VE GOT PIE HOPES apron, which is awesome because it's got a pie with wings on it flying through some clouds. Pretty much all her underwears, I guess, which is gross and I'm not going to think about that anymore. And she lost her best jeans too, with the holes in both knees and the patch shaped like a pie sewed awesomely to the butt. I put it on there upside down during my eighth birthday party last year because Pretty Penny dared me to use Aunt Berry's sewing machine. And you don't not do dares from girls, not if you're awesome.

So if you want to know how this thing all got started, I'll go ahead and tell you because it's important to tell people how these things all get started, even though I still haven't told Aunt Berry everything. How do you tell your Aunt Berry you know what's taking all her aprons?

So this is why there's only one apron left in Aunt Berry's apron drawer.

Dead Guy Grim always thought you were his favorite. He has many mismatched socks.

After school, me and Cheeze were going to play some kickheadball out back. Kickheadball is this game I made up where you throw or sometimes kick a ball at each other's heads. The whole point is to angle the shot off your noggin just right so you can hit the power lines and freak out the birds squatting there. And then for extra points you can smash the ball out of the air while it's falling with Nine the Basher, which is a golf club I found in the trash one time. It's a little crooked, but still bashes pretty fine. If you're not very good at the whole angle thing or if you can't aim Nine you'll end up hitting Dead Guy Grim's house right behind mine.

Dead Guy Grim is this real tall, real boney guy who looks dead. Not like a

vampire looks dead, but like a mummy looks dead under the toilet paper. I'm not scared of him or anything, but I don't want to play kickheadball with him, that's sure as snot. I mean, the couple of times he talked to me and Pretty Penny and Cheeze he's been pretty nice and it's not like he smells bad or anything, but I just didn't like his smile. It's crooked like that Stupid Shawn Cisco who's always talking at Pretty Penny and waving and giving her Reese's cups at recess even though he's a whole grade up from me and her and Cheeze. I think I like Dead Guy Grim better than Stupid Shawn Cisco. At least Dead Guy Grim doesn't give Pretty Penny Reese's cups.

Sometimes he sets his chair up right at the window facing us in the backyard. He lights up a pipe that looks like a picnic basket and watches while we play kickheadball. We wave just to see if Dead Guy Grim maybe died while we were playing. He stays pretty much stone still. He always waves back, though, and it surprises me every time.

It was a pretty hot April, but not too hot. Just hot enough for me to show Cheeze my awesome new back-heel-flying-roundhouse axe kick without putting on a jacket. I was going to show Pretty Penny, too. She was coming over to see how awesome it was going to be. Plus, it's not like we could play kickheadball without Pretty Penny. She was our thrower—or kicker, whatever. I was the hitter and Cheeze went and got the ball, so he was our getter. That lardo Cheeze always wanted to be the thrower and kicker, but I always told him that throwing and kicking was Pretty Penny's job. I let him hit sometimes, but there was no way he was ever going to be as good as me at hitting or as good as Pretty Penny at throwing and kicking.

Before we could get to that, though, I had to tell Aunt Berry what I was up to. I have to tell Aunt Berry whenever I fart, it seems like. She's pretty cool pretty much all the time, but she's got this thing where I have to be all, "I'm going to Cheeze's with Pretty Penny to watch James Bond and eat Nerds," even though Cheeze lives right across the street, like literally right there. If I tell her, then she's fine. But if I don't, she worries even though she really doesn't need to. I can take care of myself just fine.

Me and Cheeze threw our backpacks on the fake tile floor, on the corner peeling up like burnt paper. I knew where Aunt Berry would be, but I still called for her.

We could hear her voice coming from the kitchen. When me and Cheeze got in there, she was on the phone. Her black and white hair was pulled back with her gold and silver clip, which meant she was in pie mode. À la mode, she liked to say. Ha. Pie joke.

She had an apron on that had blue swirly designs on it, like flowers almost, and a pie with a gun poking out of the crust. The barrel and the pie were both smoking. It said LIVE AND LET PIE.

She was working on some piecrust. The pan was all white and dusty from flour. Aunt Berry had some white dust in her hair too, but flour wasn't really the reason it was white in places. Her hair was getting pretty old. The phone

was getting all floury, Aunt Berry holding it up to her white-caked face like that. Wouldn't that be a surprise next time Uncle God needed to call Tractor Jack's to fix the lawn mower? Aunt Berry forgets to clean the phone off, Uncle God gets flour-ear.

Cheeze farted and me and him laughed at it. Aunt Berry quieted down right then and all I heard was "praying for her." She hung up and was pretty focused on her pie crust all of sudden, making it all perfect and dimply against the pan with her thumbs.

"Hey," I said. "What was all that?"

Aunt Berry smiled up at me real fast. "Hey, hun." And then it was eyes on the pie. "Listen, have you seen Penny lately?"

She never calls me Buzzard Breath because she says it's not my name. Well, yeah, but it's cooler than my name, so I'm like, what's the big deal, Aunt Berry? But I get pretty mad if anybody uses my dumb name, so she just doesn't say any name ever.

"Yesterday at school," I said, "but she's coming over later to see a wicked new kickheadball kick I got. Why?"

Aunt Berry shook her head and kept working the crust. "It's nothing much. Mrs. McVale was wondering if either of you boys had seen Penny lately. Maybe at school today?"

I sneezed from some flour floating around in the air. "Nah, she wasn't there, but I'll see her when she gets here. So me and Cheeze are going to go do some kickheadball, get a head start before Pretty Penny comes."

Cheeze is shorter than me by a lot so he had to grab the counter to get his nose over the top. "You look pretty today, Aunt Sherri."

I gave Cheeze's flabby arm a good whack because that wasn't Aunt Berry's better name.

"Geez, Buzz!" Cheeze rubbed his arm like a dweeb. "I mean Aunt Berry."

Aunt Berry used her sweet and fake canned fruit smile at the pie crust. "Thank you, Chad," she said.

Aunt Berry bumped her rolling pin and it rolled right off the counter. Cheeze moved pretty much the fastest I bet he's ever moved running over to get it.

"Here you go, Aunt Berry," he said. "You want me to wash it off for you?"

"Just fine," Aunt Berry said. Then back to the pie.

I watched Cheeze look at my aunt for a while. Fatty McDweeb. "We'll be done, like, before pie, but maybe after dinner," I said.

Aunt Berry nodded that kind of nod where you're pretty sure she isn't listening and her bottom lip sucked in her top lip. When her bottom lip sucked up the top one, me and Cheeze knew to shut up, at least for a bit. Pie making is careful work if you want good ones. And I never want to stand in the way of a good pie. And I think Cheeze might die or something if he didn't get Aunt Berry pie at least three or four or five times a week.

Me and Cheeze stood there for a second until Aunt Berry was happy with

her crust ridges. I had to get her okay to go play out back or I'd get in trouble, probably. My eyes kept shooting over to the front door. I was so ready to bolt. My new kick was tickling at my toes, ready to pop, ready to go, like a foot cannon. Aunt Berry, though, she just chewed her top lip like it was Juicy Fruit, like she didn't want Cheeze to ever see how cool my new kick was.

Eventually, Aunt Berry stepped back from her crust and put her hands on her hips. She smiled at the pie pan. Totally perfect. If nobody doesn't like Sara Lee, nobody's ever tried Aunt Berry's Black and Blueberry Pie with special white chocolate drizzle—epic.

She looked at me, then at Cheeze and then she wiped some sweat from her head with a flour-covered arm, then on her apron. I thought maybe she should've done it the other way around, but whatever. "Okay," she said, "but I need you to put the laundry in the dryer for me."

I said, "Aw, Aunt Berry, but—"

She said, "Shush. Laundry switch is your job, mister. It won't take you long. Go and do it, then you can go play. Okay?"

I made a noise. "Okay. Come on, Cheeze."

So we headed for downstairs while Aunt Berry got out the strawberries and cream cheese and sugar and stuff to start working on the filling. She was making Strawberry Scream Pie. Awe. Some.

While she cut the grassy parts off the strawberries I noticed a little water in her eyes, like one time when I was littler and I asked why she didn't just use can filling stuff like lots of other moms did. She had looked at me for a while, and when she opened her mouth to say something, she ended up crying instead of talking. I thought I hurt her feelings asking about fake fruit can filling.

"I'm not your mom, sweetie," she said after I gave her a hug.

I told her I knew that. I wasn't a retard or anything. I knew Mom died when I was teeny tiny, right after Dad went to live at jail. So maybe she was crying because my mom was her sister and it was sad to think about her being dead. Or maybe she was crying because of when the doctors told her and Uncle God that they couldn't have any kids, so it was weird hearing me call her mom, even though I didn't really. Whatever. Now I just don't talk about canned filling.

I jumped down the stairs—skip two, skip three, skip two—and landed hard on the floor. I hit my knee on the wall but it didn't hurt. Cheeze waddled down behind me. He wasn't skinny enough to take the stairs like a fighter like me.

"Go ahead and do it," I said. "You like putting in the goop and hitting the button."

Cheeze tugged on the butt of his pants. "Well, Aunt Berry told you to do it."

"Yeah, well, you actually like doing it. And I don't. And as long as it gets done, who cares?"

Cheeze scratched his arm and started making the laundry switch. I leaned against the inside guts of a wall, watching him. Uncle God hadn't finished the basement, so none of the walls were walls yet—just boards. Like the skeleton of

the house. Uncle God hadn't put the skin on.

Oh hey, so if you want to know why Uncle God is Uncle God, I'll tell you real quick. It's because I never see him, ever. After I went to live with Aunt Berry and him when I was three, I never actually saw him before, and then after a year or whatever, I saw him maybe twice or something. Aunt Berry says the factory never shuts down, so he's lucky he gets to come home at all. She says he only gets four hours of sleep a night, so I guess he's got to be really tired all the time. Whenever I go to sleep, he isn't home yet, and whenever I wake up, he's already gone. A few times I stayed up all night to see if I could see him, but those nights, he didn't come home until after I went to school.

I know he lives in the house even though I don't see him, because of how the sink is never clogged and how the light bulbs never run out. Uncle God keeps real good tabs on stuff like that. Oh, and how there's enough money to buy fresh fruit so Aunt Berry doesn't have to use fake can crap even though Aunt Berry doesn't have a job that isn't pies.

I like Uncle God a lot even though I never see him. Sometimes his loud truck that sounds like a dragon snoring will wake me up when he's leaving early in the morning, but it's okay. It makes me feel like he's out there for me for when I need him, even though for real, there's not a whole lot I can't handle by myself.

Cheeze stopped doing my chore and I got pretty ticked. "What're you doing? Come on, there's a kick you have to see."

"Well, I was just thinking," Cheeze said. "What if we put the clothes out on the line outside? It's real warm out and stuff, and it makes your clothes smell like air."

I sagged my shoulders and rolled my eyes and made a fart with my mouth. "Cheeze! That'll take pretty much forever if you wanted to do that. Just throw the stuff in the dryer. That's what it's there for. To dry stuff. Outside is for kickheadball."

"Yeah, I know, but I think Aunt Berry would be happy to have extra money. You know. It could be a gift from me, sort of." Cheeze tugged on his butt again.

I went *pfft*. "Cheeze, how in the frickin frick is using air to dry clothes instead of the dryer going to give Aunt Berry more money?"

"You know, like energy costs and stuff," Cheeze said. "My mom said it saves money like, every month. So it's not getting money, but it's not spending as much. So it's kinda like having extra. I don't know, I just want to do something nice for Aunt Sh—Aunt Berry."

"Whatever, I don't even care. Just do whatever and let's go."

Cheeze stuffed all my clothes and Aunt Berry's clothes and Uncle God's clothes in a basket and took them outside to the line. It was my kickheadball practice line. Not for laundry. I'd go outside to kickheadball it when Cheeze and Pretty Penny weren't around, to make sure I was better than Cheeze and that Pretty Penny knew it. I put chip bag clips on the line and pretended they were birds. It took a real good swing with Nine the Basher to get one of those things off of there.

The line was just some old rope hanging between some little tree in the

middle of the backyard and some big oak tree with furry vines sticking to it all over at the edge of the yard where it turns into Dead Guy Grim's yard. The trees ate up the ends of the lines like some barky mouths sucking in a spaghetti noodle on both ends.

We waited a while for Pretty Penny to show, but she never did. How were we supposed to play kickheadball without her? It wasn't really kickheadball without Pretty Penny. It was just stupid. I finally let Cheeze throw and kick, but he wasn't any good. I missed Pretty Penny. She had a better arm for throwing and a better leg for kicking than Cheeze and you know you can't be a good hitter like me unless you have a good kicker or thrower. Plus, I was really hoping to show her my new kick. Cheeze asked to see, but I wanted Pretty Penny to watch it, not just Cheeze. Maybe tomorrow.

While we played, Dead Guy Grim watched. We waved and he waved back.

Dead Guy Grim does not think he wants to hurt you,
but he isn't sure. He has many shirts that are not his
size and never were.

I woke up the next morning and put my shoes on without socks because I wondered if my feet would get less sweaty.

When I got downstairs, I saw Aunt Berry eating a slice of quiche for breakfast. She always says quiche is like pie, but for mornings, but I think it tastes like what pie would taste like if pie was gross. "Morning, sunshine." She pointed her fork at me. "You haven't seen my cutie pie apron have you? It's not in my apron drawer."

I knew which one she meant. It was my most favorite apron probably. It was pink and said CUTIE PIE, EVERYONE'S FAVORITE FLAVOR on it and there was a picture of a little girl with crinkly brown hair and bright bright blue eyes holding a pie. She reminded me a lot of Pretty Penny because she was wearing a poufy yellow dress, which is Pretty Penny's second favorite color next to pink, which is her favorite by a ton. She has a lot of shirts that are pink.

I shook my head at Aunt Berry. "Nope. Got to go."

I couldn't find Pretty Penny anywhere at school that day. I looked for her everywhere me and Cheeze knew where to look. The brick wall corner of the school where we liked to look for broken Cobra bottles and sometimes dirty Skittles wrappers. Inside the big cement tube where we liked to eat the Goldfish crackers all our moms—Aunt Berry, I mean—always packed for us. We even looked out in the woods behind the playground where the teachers won't let you go if you ask. So we didn't ask and we went. She wasn't there. We did find a pretty cool little box that said CAMEL and had a picture of a camel on it, though. It was all soggy from the mud we dug it out of, but I knew it would be perfect for holding money once I dried it out. I got the idea for it holding money because we found a quarter in it, so that was awesome.

It would have been more awesome if we found Pretty Penny instead. I'd give a hundred thousand million quarters if she'd come back.

If you were wondering, my feet got even more sweaty without socks.

Dead Guy Grim has been sleeping on the same bed that you have been sleeping on. He has enough sheets to change yours daily.

Aunt Berry is a quiet crier, not one of those loud blubberers, so I didn't actually hear her until I got to the dining room right outside the kitchen. I was up pretty past my bedtime sneaking around the house like a spy. Buzz the Super Spy! They can't catch you! Silent as a ghost! Deadly as poison! If only Pretty Penny could've seen me. Buzzard Breath, Super Cool Super Spy.

So I made this totally awesome scamper toward the dining room table and at the end of it, the quietest roll anyone's ever rolled before. Went right under the table, right around the chairs, like I was born to roll. The long tree-colored table cloth almost reached the floor, so there was no way Aunt Berry and Uncle God were going to see me, not Super Spy Buzz. I was listening in, listening to my enemies' secrets. Talk, you Evil Russian Goblin Elephant Poachers, talk with the good guy right in the next room! Ha!

I could see Aunt Berry sitting at the kitchen counter from where I was, but not Uncle God. He was sitting across from her, but the door jam was covering him up. Aunt Berry said something about that little Penny McVale, about her mom and dad and how they were worried bad, since it was almost three days now and since the cops didn't think chances were looking good. Every day without finding her was like a bigger chance of never finding her.

Uncle God has this huge voice, like he's filling the room with sound thicker than marshmallows even when he's trying to be quiet, so when he said it was a shame and she's such a little angel, I could hear him perfect. Aunt Berry said what if something happened to her. Uncle God told her to shush about that—nothing was going to happen, he was sure. Aunt Berry wondered what should they tell Buzzard Breath. She didn't say Buzzard Breath, but you know. She should've. Uncle God said there was nothing to tell right now and they'd tell Buzzard Breath when they had something concrete to tell him and maybe she'd be back sooner instead of later. Aunt Berry said she hoped so and she hoped Pretty Penny was going to be all right. And then they both laughed because she called Pretty Penny what I call her, only while she laughed, Aunt Berry's eyes got like they would if I ever called her Mom.

I slept under the dining room table the rest of the night because I got to smell Aunt Berry doing a little midnight baking like she does when she's upset sometimes. And besides, I didn't feel like super spying anymore.

Dead Guy Grim does not want you sick, so he will

feed you, and he does not want you uncomfortable, so he will wash you. He started with just socks and things on strings between trees.

Aunt Berry couldn't figure out what happened to her EASY AS 3.141592 apron. She looked everywhere and couldn't find it. It wasn't in her apron drawer, not in the laundry basket, not on the line outside. She never found the cutie pie one, either. No EASY AS 3.141592 apron, no cutie pie apron, and come to think of it, where was her TGIP apron? THANK GOODNESS IT'S PIEDAY. That one. Some of her other clothes were gone too, but those weren't as important as aprons.

For Aunt Berry, every day was pieday, only not so much lately. Without her aprons, she was starting to make less and less pies. So pieday was coming less and less. It was like the aprons gave her pie powers. So because she was making pies less and less, pieday was coming less and less, and so I was eating less and less pies, and I was pretty much mad about that.

I was sick of not having Aunt Berry's Six Berry Attack Pie, so I decided we were going to get this whole apron thing figured out. That little tubber Cheeze was a scaredy cat about it and he didn't want to do it. But I asked him didn't he want Aunt Berry to be making pies more? Duh, Cheeze wanted pies. So that got him to help.

To make the pies come back, we had to make the aprons come back. So me and Cheeze were going to be like detectives. Like laundry detectives. "The Case of the Missing Aprons and Other Laundry."

"You know when you have one sock, just not the other one?" I asked Cheeze. "Yeah."

"Well, I think it's like that. The little Thievers that live in the dryer that take the other sock are getting all mad because the socks aren't going in the dryer anymore. I bet they use socks to build houses and for football jerseys, and to make a lot of tinier socks, and probably even for food."

Cheeze scrunched his nose. "They eat . . . our socks?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why else would they keep taking them? Okay, so these little Thievers take the one sock—"

"How come they don't take the pair, just the one?"

"Cheeze!" I said. "You're like a baby, pretty much! It's cause they don't even know there's pairs. They take what they need for food and clothes and stuff and just go."

Cheeze nodded and tugged on his pants crack.

"So anyway, these little Dryer Thievers really need the socks to live. Socks for them is like pie for us, you know? They just can't live with no socks and we just can't live with no pie. And when you started putting clothes out on the line, taking away their food, the Dryer Thievers thought it was Aunt Berry who did it, so now they're taking her aprons and her . . . like—"

"Her underwears?" Cheeze asked.

"Those are gone too? Gross. Well, yeah, her underwears, I guess. And you

want to know what else?"

Cheeze's eyes got a little bigger. "What else?"

"If you think about it," I said, "right around the time Aunt Berry started losing her aprons, what was the other thing that happened right around here too?"

"Um. I-I don't—"

"Pretty Penny!" I gave Cheeze a good whack on his shoulder for being dumb. "One day she doesn't come over for kickheadball and the next day, Aunt Berry's missing an apron and some underwears! See? The little guys that take the socks are the same guys that are taking the aprons, and the same guys that took Pretty Penny. There's a revolution going on in the dryer. We can save Pretty Penny, Cheeze. Think about how awesome she'll think I am if we find her when she's lost, just like how Aunt Berry will be totally happy to get her aprons back."

"Aunt Berry will kiss us and hug us all over if we get her aprons," Cheeze said.

"Yeah, I guess." I looked at Cheeze for a minute.

His cheeks got all red and he said, "So . . . w-what do you want to do, Buzz?"

"The thing is," I said, "I bet they're taking all Aunt Berry's stuff from the line outside. I bet they don't like the clothes when they're all wet from the wash, so they wait till they're hanging. I bet they're taking them while we're asleep. So we go outside and we wait for the Dryer Thieves."

Dead Guy Grim wishes you would cry less because he likes smiles so much better. He used to only take what came out of the dryer.

Aunt Berry told me about Pretty Penny not being around, as if I didn't even know, and I told her it was okay—I was on it. But then she said there was no way she was going to let us sleep outside. Absolutely no chance, not when there might be a bad man out there taking nine-year-olds like me and Cheeze and Pretty Penny. Well, I tried to tell her there wasn't any problem there because it was the Dryer Thieves who took Pretty Penny, not some bad man. And Dryer Thieves I could handle. Like James Bond taking out a room of Russian bad guys, I could take them all out. But Aunt Berry just told me to shush and that I was sleeping inside tonight, mister, and then she called me my dumb name.

I couldn't let Aunt Berry stop us from saving her aprons and Pretty Penny all at once. Sometimes you just have to do what's best for grown-ups, you know? Sometimes they don't even know. Cheeze tried to say we should stay inside and do what Aunt Berry said, but I gave him a good whack on the back of the head to show him who's boss.

I asked Aunt Berry if me and Cheeze could have some one-person pies since we couldn't sleep outside. I asked with a sad face, because if I know anything about Aunt Berry, it's that she'll use pies to make a sad face happy. So she was all

about making us one-person pies.

I don't know who Carl Sagan is, but something he said once is on Aunt Berry's most favorite apron that the Dryer Thievers took, so Aunt Berry only had two aprons left in her apron drawer. One of them said *BYE BYE, MISS AMERICAN PIE* on it and there was a picture of a lady who looked a ton like Aunt Berry wearing a shirt with ripped sleeves standing in front of an American flag with a bunch of pies strapped on her Rambo-style like they were bullets.

She used that one to make me and Cheeze's one-person pies. Cheeze got Extra Cherry Cherry Cream Pie with Oreo crust, and I got Lemon Lightning with graham cracker crust.

"I always get so messy when I make your Cherry Cherry, Chad," she told Cheeze. She threw the apron in the laundry to be washed and me and Cheeze ran it real fast so we could put it on the line, because it seemed like the Dryer Thievers really liked the aprons.

We waited for Aunt Berry to go to bed before we packed our supplies: Nine the Basher to protect us from aliens or bears, two laundry baskets to catch the Dryer Thievers in when they came, a few bags of Goldfish for emergency snacks, and two Capri-Suns each, because I knew it was going to be thirsty out there.

Cheeze put the laundry up on the line (all Aunt Berry's clothes to really get the Dryer Thievers to come out) and the trap was set. We were ready to catch some Dryer Thievers. I was going to save Aunt Berry's aprons and Pretty Penny all in one night. But we had to wait first, which is always the worst part of anything—especially waiting for pies to get done.

No one ever told me, so let me tell you: the ground is pretty uncomfortable for sleeping. There are sticks and rocks and lumps you don't even know are under the grass, but you can sure as snot feel them when you lay down. So we ended up dragging out all the cushions from the couches in the living room to use for beds. That was a lot better.

We talked a little bit, about what it would be like to have teeth like a shark, or about how it would be totally cool to have scorpion tails, or maybe be able to breathe water like fishes. I wondered if Pretty Penny would like me with a scorpion tail and with shark teeth. Probably she would. It would be completely sweet, how could she not?

We weren't supposed to go to sleep. That was not part of the plan. We were supposed to stay right up the whole night and just pretend to sleep so the Dryer Thievers would think they wouldn't get noticed. I was ready for it, ready for battle if it came to it, if I had to. Actually, I kind of wanted to fight them. I wanted to give them some seriously good whacks for taking Pretty Penny.

She needed me. I missed her a lot. I almost asked Cheeze if he thought she was thinking about me, but I knew she would be. When you're thinking about someone, they think about you too, I think. I think that's pretty much the way it works.

The Dryer Thievers that had her had Aunt Berry's aprons, so Aunt Berry needed me too. I was going to be like a hero, like Batman saving the day, or like Spider-Man—yeah, like Spider-Man. Saving the day with my powers and with my smarts. I was going to save everybody and Pretty Penny would kiss me and Aunt Berry would love me, and Cheeze would want to be like me.

I fell asleep thinking about how that red and blue suit must get right up your butt, like, a ton, especially when you're web-slinging.

Dead Guy Grim thinks you've been good and earned the privilege to sleep without the straps tonight. Goodnight, Penny, and sleep tight.

I woke up really confused. You know how like when there's a loud noise and you wake up and you don't know what's going on? And you know how if you sleep somewhere that isn't your room and you wake up there you wake up going where am I? It was like both of those, but put together.

I got woke up by a freaky girly scream, all high and scratchy. I heard Cheeze yell like that one time before, when a grasshopper jumped on his face while we were trying to find pie or sword-shaped clouds. I shot up like I was on springs and sure enough, there was Cheeze, standing under the clothesline. No grasshoppers, though. He was pointing at Dead Guy Grim's window.

"Cheeze?" I tried to rub a little of the tired out of my eyes.

Cheeze was all white in the face. "Buzz, Buzz, I saw Penny! In Dead Guy Grim's house! I just saw her."

I was sleepy right up until Cheeze said that. I woke up pretty quick. Was she watching us, like Dead Guy Grim sometimes watches us play kickheadball? Watching us sleep out there, trying to catch the thievers that stole her up? She was watching me try to save her. Well, that was good, but she needed to come and throw me the ball so I could hit it and Cheeze could go get it. I needed my thrower and kicker back. Without Pretty Penny, we couldn't really play right. Nothing was right without her. I wasn't right. Was she there? I'd rather not have pies than not have her.

"Pretty Penny?" I looked over to Dead Guy Grim's window. There wasn't anybody there. No Pretty Penny, not even Dead Guy Grim.

I rubbed the rest of the sleep out of my eyes and looked a little harder at Cheeze. "I don't see her, Chee—"

I stopped talking because I saw the clothesline was missing some clothes. My eyes cleared all the way and I saw that Cheeze had Aunt Berry's green sweater and some of her Sunday skirts and her MISS AMERICAN PIE apron all piled in one of his arms. He had a bunch of her underwears over his head.

"What are you doing with Aunt Berry's clothes?" I asked.

The moon was bright, making Cheeze look like a white zombie.

"N-nothing, Buzz," he said. "But hey, look, I saw Penny! I don't know where

she went now, but just a second ago, I swear, Buzz. We got to tell Aunt Sherri.”

I figured it out right then. I did my looking, like a good laundry detective, and I found the thief. I was mad. How mad I was at Stupid Shawn Cisco for giving Pretty Penny a Reese’s wasn’t even a little bit of how mad I was at stupid, fat Cheeze.

“You’ve been taking Aunt Berry’s aprons and all her underwears and stuff?” I said.

“No. Well, yeah. I mean, sort of. They smell like Aunt Sherri. And pie.”

“You’re the Dryer Thievers?” I watched Cheeze’s eyes watch me get Nine the Basher.

“But I saw Penny,” Cheeze said. He started crying like a fatso. “I saw her right in there. We have to tell Aunt Sherri, Buzz. Come on. Come on, let’s go.” He took a few steps toward the house.

“You’ve been taking Aunt Berry’s clothes, and so you took Pretty Penny, too?” A dragon was snoring over in the driveway. “You stole her so you could be the thrower in kickheadball or what? Why’d you take her away?”

Cheeze was a loud blubberer.

I ran at him and he was too much of a slow chubber to get away. The neck hole of Aunt Berry’s MISS AMERICAN PIE apron was hanging down a little and Cheeze tripped on it when he was running, so I caught him no problem, even though it’s not like he had to trip so I could get him.

I was like Spider-Man swinging down. I gave Cheeze a good whack in the back of the head with Nine and told him to give Aunt Berry’s aprons back. He told me to don’t, kept saying don’t, and he was blubbering. I gave Cheeze another good whack and then a few other ones. I told him to give me back Pretty Penny and gave him the best whack I had.

I heard Uncle God’s big voice say my name and I got grabbed. He’s a whole lot bigger than me, so he took Nine away no problem. He kept saying his own name over and over again. I was over his shoulder so I couldn’t see his face, but what I could see was Dead Guy Grim’s house. Dead Guy Grim was watching in the window with a crooked smile. I waved and he waved back.

So that’s why there’s only one apron left in Aunt Berry’s apron drawer.