THE GIRL WITH POMEGRANATE CHEEKS

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Salmon Tinted Afternoon

Today I learned that some guy named Salmon wrote a book that began with two men falling from the sky. And I always thought that salmon was a fish, until my dad, who knows more than I do, told me it was a man who’d once been in a lot of trouble with someone from the government. I began thinking about what it must be like to fall from the sky, and how it would hurt to land on the ground, more or less, depending on how far you fell.

I fell out of the tree once, when I was playing pirates with Johnny Appleseed. My brother Henry came along and threw a water balloon at me, and I slipped and fell. It hurt like hell. For a month, I wore a big white cast that turned brown, and everyone called me Thumpy because we’ve got hard wood floors and two feet of hollow space between our house and the ground where rats like to scamper, so I couldn’t even imagine how much it would hurt to fall from the sky, even if you were wearing cowboy rodeo jeans. But then I started wondering if the men who fell were dead or hurt already, or if they opened what they thought was the bathroom door on an airplane and got sucked out, and if not, how they got into the sky in the first place, and it made my head hurt so I ate some cookies dipped in lemonade.

On the day my Dad told me this, Johnny was out of town and I don’t have any other friends, so I went to the lake to throw bottle caps and pennies. I found I kept looking up at the sky to see if two men were falling, and that book by that Salmon guy was about me, but the only things falling from the sky were bottle caps and pennies.
Sometimes I gave the bottle caps names and titles before I threw them into the lake, like King Tinman, or the Duchess of Foil, and this entertained me for a bit, but I couldn’t help feeling lonesome, so I decided to write a book myself. I figured if a man who didn’t have enough sense not to swim upstream could write about two guys falling from the sky, which is about as preposterous an idea as I’ve ever heard, then I could certainly write a book myself.

I chucked the rest of my pennies and bottle caps into the lake, and they jingled like Christmas bells before sinking to the bottom. I found a stick and a good patch of dirt, ’cause I didn’t have any paper, and began to write. I started off writing about myself and quickly realized I don’t do much except sit on the porch and watch the dog bark at the wind and scratch his huge ears, and so I changed it around so that I was a prince voyaging across the sea in a boat made of bottle caps and pennies. A boat kept afloat by ten thousand inflated rubber boots. In the story I was looking for a princess, a sweet one with pomegranate cheeks, who’d been kidnapped or stolen or run away – I wasn’t sure ’cause there’d been no message.

I got about halfway across the sea, and then I thought I should wrap it up quick ’cause the dirt was turning into grass, and my hand was sweaty and cramped from writing with a crooked stick. I nearly found her before I decided there’s too many happy endings already. So the boots disappeared while I was asleep and I sank with my bottle caps and pennies and got tangled in some seaweed and drowned and cried for love. But at that point I didn’t care and I thought Salmon could have his preposterous book and keep it. The sun was nearly down on the horizon, and the evening breeze came off the lake and made me shiver with goose bumps. A lot of people don’t know it, but this is the best time
to go into the lake – it’s quiet and the water is still and the parrots are swoop back and forth among the cottonwoods and feed their young. So I stripped off my jeans and shirt and left them in a pile on my book, and ran and jumped from the dock.

And it was like falling from the sky.
Memorial Day

When I woke up on Memorial Day the sky was red, white, and blue. Even though the stars were supposed to disappear with the moon, a few of them stuck around for the barbecue and apple pies. Dad had hung the flag from the wooden pole that juts at a forty-five-degree angle from our porch and opposite the tree that isn’t there. We had the biggest flag in the neighborhood because Dad was an Eagle Scout. And the tree wasn’t too shabby either. Our flag was six feet long and ten feet wide, and a certificate complete with a carved wooden frame and the autograph of a senator hung in the hallway and declared for all the world to see that the flag once flew over the state capitol. When the wind picked up and blew through the cottonwoods the flag batted around and sounded like a giant bird flapping one wing. Every once in a while, when the winds blew from both sides of the street, from Lake Fancy and the cottonwoods to the east and from Downtown to the west, the tallest branches of tree that isn’t there just scraped against the dithering flap of the flag, and for a minute it looked like they were holding hands. I’ve tried to snap a picture on several occasions, but the camera is a hand me down from Grandpa McGrew, and there isn’t any film, so no one believes me that it happens.

“We’ve got to be on the road by seven thirty. Up and at ’em.” Mom poked her head in my room and called. I’d been up for half an hour already, watching the shadows change in the front yard and a couple of sparrows chase each other from perch to perch. “Wake up Henry and Jim, I’ve got to finish making the lattice top for the apple pie. You know how Grandma loves apple pie.”
I hated to wake up Jim and Henry because they always got sore at me, like I was the one forcing them to go to Grandma’s when all of their friends were playing over the line and swimming down at the lake. Both of them were pretty sound sleepers. Their rooms sat across from one another down at the end of the hall on the first floor. Once you got past the bathroom, the sound of their snoring hit your ears like a couple of trash compactors beating each other with chains. It reverberated through the walls and out into the darker parts of the corridor and made my toes scrunch up. There was a painting of a creek on the wall by Jim’s room. In half of the painting the water trickled amidst a forest of lush green trees, bright yellow sunshine, and three smiley-faced children stood and fished with their uncle from the sunny side of a wooden bridge. On the other side of the bridge the sky turned dark. Heavy clouds gathered in covens above moss covered trees that dipped down into the violent whitewater torrent that swallowed the trickling stream. At the far edge of the picture, the water disappeared into a cave and the entire right edge of the canvas is pure black except for the author’s illegible signature, scrawled in gray across the bottom corner. Dad bought the painting at the estate sale of a man who’d gone mad and cut his wrists with a butter knife. It was from his personal collection. He didn’t especially like it, but it was too much of a deal to pass up.

Mom said it was amazing none of us had slit our wrists, with a picture like that in the hallway.

When Jim was at the zenith of his snoring, the times where he sounded like he’d choked or stalled the engine of an old tractor, the edges of this picture rattled and the rapids sloshed up and out into the hallway and got your socks all wet. Today was one of those days.
I cracked the door to his room and saw him curled up on his bed with a mouthful of pillow and a river of slobber hanging from the corner of his mouth. The saliva gave his snoring a moist and slippery sound, and I decided that I’d let the dog do my dirty work for me. The dog’s real name was Smoochy Poochie, but no one called it that except for Mom. The rest of us just called it “the dog.” I don’t know exactly what kind of dog it is. It’s a mutt I suppose, but Mom says it’s too ugly to even be called a mutt. It has the head of a Bull Dog, the body of a Bichon Frise, and the perky ears of a German Shepherd. Dad says the dog is blind because it caught a glimpse of itself in the mirror once, but the vet says it was born that way. Good thing, says Dad. Even though it’s blind it has a paranormal sense of smell. I heard at school that the same is true for humans, if you lose one of your senses, then the other ones get stronger to compensate. There’s a kid at school who can’t hear but he’s always writing me notes about how a flea is crawling through my hair. And I don’t know how he sees it, because he sits on the other side of the classroom, but he’s right and my head always starts itching after I get the note. The dog’s nose worked like that. He pawed at the fence for five minutes before the man who drove the steak truck comes down our street. He did this even though he knew we weren’t going to buy him any steak. Hell, steak for us was two swipes of peanut butter on our lunch sandwich.

In the summer and spring, the dog slept out on the back porch. He curled up in a ball and his big German Shepherd ears flopped down over his eyes like a garage door while he slept, to keep it dark, though I suppose it was more for show and warmth than anything else. Usually he slept in because he couldn’t hold down a job and didn’t have to wake up early. In the kitchen Mom wore her apron and rocked back and forth to the
oldies station on the radio. The smell of apples and cinnamon and sugar and dough filled
the house. For a minute I wished I was the dog so that I could have a super sense of
smell, but then I realized that already my mouth was watering and that if I had super
smell I might drown in my own saliva. I crept to the kitchen cupboard tippy toe style.
Luckily the dog food was kept in the cabinet by the hall, and Mom liked her oldies loud
so she didn’t have to hear the snoring, so that covered up the squeak in the hinges as I
reached in and grabbed a can of beef cutlets in their own juice.

The aluminum was cold in my hand and I tip toed back to my room where I kept
my army knife in a drawer by the bed. It wasn’t a great army knife. It was a hand me
down from Henry and the blade was bent and you couldn’t close it all the way, but it had
a can opener that worked just fine. It was a lot slower than the one in the kitchen, but
Mom was too close to the utensil drawer, and it wasn’t worth the risk. So close her rough
blue bathrobe rubbed against the drawer as she bobbed in time with the music. So close
the can opener winced. When the can was halfway open, I heard the scrape of the dog’s
claws against the wood porch and a low whine. It was tough to hear over the oldies and
the rustling of the leaves, but it was there like the squeak of brakes on Dad’s old Dodge.

I crept down the hall towards Jim and Henry’s room. The rapids in the painting
spilled over into the hall. My socks got wet and I could hear the people on the bridge
warning me not to do it. The uncle pulled his line out of the creek and cast it at me, but he
only had a five pound line and I weighed at least ninety pounds. My socks were wet but
that was the only way to do it. Bare feet squeaked against the hardwood hallway.

Jim was still curled up in a ball when I got into his room. The air seemed thicker
in there. It smelled like socks and he had strips of black ribbon hanging down from the
ceiling because he read that his favorite rock star did the same thing and I felt like I was walking into an armpit. Jim’s bed was against the wall on the far side of the room, and as I snuck over, I had to avoid broken RC cars, gatherings of dirty laundry, and seventeen number two pencils. Jim wasn’t especially good in school, and he got frustrated when he couldn’t write a composition and broke his pencil so he won’t have to. Mom said he’d be a fine lumberjack someday.

There was a slight squeak in the floorboards as I got close to him and Jim rolled over and snorted. For a minute I thought he was going to wake up and see me standing over him with an open can of dog food, and I figured I’d get a whooping ’cause everyone knows I’m not allowed to feed the dog anymore on account of I used to eat half the can, but he just rolled over and farted and everything was okay. The fart wasn’t so bad considering the overpowering stench of the socks and I was glad again that I didn’t have super smelling powers.

Slowly, I dumped the beef cutlets in their own juice along Jim’s arm and up towards the back of his neck. He stirred a little, but the snoring was even and he didn’t notice the sticky flow of beef juice along his neck. I took the can from the cabinet because the cold dog food in the fridge always wakes him up. I usually stay away from his face because the cutlet juice is pretty potent when it gets into your nostrils, but I knew that he and Henry were going to be pinching my arms and legs once we got in the car, so I didn’t care. I dumped the rest in a pile on his pillow and tossed the can in Henry’s room under the bed. I figured that if I could get them mad at each other, I might not have to deal with either of them. When I passed the painting the uncle smiled at me and suggested I turn on the light in the bathroom and run the shower so I’d have an excuse.
The dog was pacing back and forth on the porch now and the whine had turned into excited barking. I heard the dog bump into the swinging bench because it’s blind.

“I’m taking a shower, Mom,” I called. “I’ll wake up Jim and Henry afterwards.”

I closed the door real fast so she couldn’t say no, even though when I closed the door I was in the hallway and sneaking towards the back porch.

“You better wake them up first...” Mom said, but she trailed off after she heard the door close and muttered, “That boy,” and continued slicing her dough.

Through the window I saw the dog bouncing up and down and pawing at the door. I knew Beef Cutlets were the dog’s favorite, and with its powers of super smell, the dog was going crazy with ravenous hunger. I opened the door and the dog sprinted by me and knocked into the wall and dazed itself for a minute. This gave me just enough time to get into the bathroom and hop in the shower before the dog recovered and galloped down the hall and into Jim’s room.

Before my clothes were on the floor I heard Jim scream in a deep lumberjack tenor. The walls shuddered with the thuds of Jim’s thick right shoulder as he tried to loose the dog from his arm and neck. The dog made no yelping sounds, and even through the walls and over the ceramic thump of warm water hitting the bathtub, I could hear the excited yips he made while consuming beef cutlets in their own juice. I thought it odd that Jim, who pinched my arms and legs, slapped me in the ears, buried me up to my shoulders in compost, and forced me to eat liverwurst covered in fish oil before spinning me around on the tire swing until I threw up, would be so gentle with the dog. Rather than slap at the dog, or ram it against the bedpost, Jim slammed himself into the wall in an effort to dizzy him and make him fall off.
The dog, on account of its blindness, had sensual vertigo somethin’ fierce, and passed out into a dead sleep whenever it hopped onto the swinging bench or when the girl with bread cheeks who lived next door dressed it up like a baby and pushed it around the neighborhood.

My hair bubbled with soap, and my eyes began to sting because Mom always bought the cheap shampoo from the 99-cent store that looked like vanilla pudding and smelled like ammonia and steamed zig zag waves when you opened it. You can’t rub your eyes when they sting either, that just makes it worse, so you sit there with your eyes open and turn the water on cold and pray for rain. When my eyes stopped burning I didn’t hear the yipping of the dog or the thudding of Jim’s shoulder anymore, but I felt floorboards rattling, and I figured Jim must be in Henry’s room showing him what was what.

“Don’t give me that, the can is in your room!” Jim yelled.

Then more pounding and the click clack click clack of Mom’s heels as she ran down the hall. I heard a slight alteration in her stride, and I figured she had the rolling pin in her left hand. Jim and Henry had both gotten so big and thick eared that they couldn’t hear Mom when she told them to stop fightin’ anymore, so now she just went in with the rolling pin and started whacking.

It came through the wall muffled, and I turned off the water to listen to what sounded like a baseball bat hitting a side of moldy beef. Jim gave a wounded wombat whimper and crawled back to his side of the hall.

“I don’t care who started it or what happened or where or when or whose going to get it later. It ends now! I don’t want to hear about it anymore!”
“But…” said Henry.

“The only butt you need to worry about, mister, is your own if you don't stop acting like a couple of polar bear cubs. Now get dressed, wash up, and get ready for Grandma McGrew’s. We’re leaving as soon as the pie is out of the oven. That’s thirty minutes. Now move.”

Grandma McGrew lived on the other side of town. So far on the other side of town that she was actually two towns over and we had to get on the highway and drive past the two gas stations, Mr. Hopperton’s General Store, and the bank just to get there. Mom complained about the traffic, but most of the time it wasn’t anything more than Trevor Lindman and his friends crossing the street from the gas station, where they play video games, to Mr. Hopperton’s, where they buy candy. I wasn’t allowed to play video games or eat candy because one was bad for your mind and the other was bad for your hips. When we slowed down to let the kids cross, and I could see their pockets bulging with Chocolate Reindeer and Sheffield’s Rainbow Drops, I stuck my tongue out at them, even though I wished I was the one playing video games. When they saw me they mouthed “Sausage Butt” because my shorts were too tight and I looked like the middle of the sausage.

My shorts were too tight because I had to wear the shorts that Grandma McGrew bought me over Christmas. I tried explaining that to the kids who made fun of me, but it didn’t work so well and for a week everyone at school called me Grandma’s Little Sausage. Even Miss L, who was contractually not supposed to laugh at stuff like that
chortles and covers her face with the Living Section of the paper when she hears Trevor Lindman whisper at me in class.

I couldn’t help it though, Grandma McGrew always bought me the scratchy shorts they stopped making twenty-five years ago. They felt like they were made out of old burlap sacks, and were always a size too small, and my brothers made fun of me for smelling like potatoes. They said when I stuck my tongue out that all I needed was a fake moustache and I could be Mr. Potatohead. There was no end to the mockery with those shorts, but Mom said I couldn’t get new ones until I outgrew the old ones, and I tell her I outgrew the old ones before they were new ones. Then she gave me the cheek freezing Mom glare and told me I needed to remember that we weren’t yet members of the British gentry, and that we had to get by on what we had. I never said anything back to the Mom glare, but I thought someone should tell her that no one called Henry or Jim “Grandma’s Little Sausage.”

Because I was the youngest, I always got the middle of the back seat. One cheek on each seat belt buckle, and after any trip longer than ten minutes it looked like my butt was made from Legos. Dad had an old Dodge that Mom always insisted he drive into the lake so that we could collect the insurance. She wanted one of those new foreign cars that got better gas mileage and didn’t take quite so long to warm up. But Dad said he wasn’t going to buy a foreign car, and Mom said they make a lot of foreign cars in the U.S. nowadays, and Dad just spun the engine a few times and pretended he couldn’t hear. Dad bought the car long before I was born, and there were black and white pictures of him from when he first bought it second hand, shortly after Jim came along.
In the picture Dad wore a black suit and gray tie and stood tall and proud with his arm across the roof like they were brothers. Beneath the bushy moustache that covered the corners of his mouth you could nearly see Dad smiling, but the picture is taken from a distance and is off center. If you were a casual observer you might not notice the smile at all, you might think my Dad was a serious man taking a serious photograph, but I knew he was smiling because he always smiled when he was around the car, except for when Mom told him to drive it into the lake. Mom took the photo. She was never very good with technology anyway, but Jim always said she took the picture far away and off center on purpose so there’d be no proof of the love Dad has for his Dodge. No physical photographic proof anyway.

I heard once that there is no physical photographic proof of love, not even in the dirty magazines or on the covers of those romance books that Mom always tried to stand in front of at Hopperton’s so we didn’t see them. I don’t understand what all the hoopla is about, I’d never grow my hair out that long or wear a shirt ripped into a million pieces like that anyway. I never understood why a girl wanted to kiss a guy that looked like he’s either just escaped from a mental hospital or dressed himself in a tattered old pirate sail.

Deep down I thought Mom loved the car too because when she didn’t think anyone was looking, I saw her smile when it took Dad two or three tries to get the Dodge running.

I, on the other hand, had no love for the car. I guess you couldn’t have any physical proof of not loving a car either, but I tried to frown every time Dad sat me behind the wheel or had me pose with the tire iron and grease smudges on my cheeks. The inside of the car smelled mostly like Dad’s aftershave, a blend of what Mom calls
Smokey Mountain whiskey and real man. But personally, I thought it smelled like corned beef hash and pine needles.

When I sat in the middle, both Jim and Henry sat with their legs spread wide and I had to smoosh mine together. With my short shorts and no air conditioning, my legs were always sweaty and red by the end of the drive. Jim and Henry used to reach over me to smack each other in the back of the ear, and I’ll get elbowed in the side of the head and slapped in the ears too. When I complained to Mom they pinched my thighs and whispered under the radio that I should stop being such a sissy. I told them I wouldn’t be so much of a sissy if they weren’t twice my age and three times my size, and that as a citizen of the United States I was entitled under the Constitution to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Then Henry said:

“All you’ve got the right to is bare arms,” and he and Jim rolled up my sleeves and pinched the floppy part of my triceps and said, “Turtle bites” even though I’ve been bit by a turtle and it doesn’t hurt nearly as much.

By the time we got to Grandma’s on the other side of town, my arms and legs were red and it looked like I’d been attacked by a flock of mosquitoes.

Grandma’s house didn’t have any neighbors, not for a mile in either direction. Grandpa McGrew and his dad and so on back for a couple of generations were farmers, and the house is surrounded for acres and acres by overgrown cornfields. All sorts of mice and rodents lived there, and they burrowed and scampered, and it got to be so bad you couldn’t run through the cornfields for ten feet before you stepped in a hole and
twisted your ankle, or stepped on a rat and had to get a shot. They stayed away from the house though. Grandma had twenty-three cats.

There was a thick grove of live oak trees that circled the house and provided shade, and during certain parts of the year the leaves were so thick that it always seemed like night. During time like these, Grandma burned candles and the ceiling was smoky black. All of the trees were oak except for a huge banyan tree, which Grandpa had imported from Hawaii. I liked the banyan tree because it looked like it had more than one trunk, like it was made of wax and someone melted the trunk and drizzled it over a bunch of sand piles. There were good places to hide and fine branches and vines hung down all over the place. It was always cool in there, and during the summer there was no better place to fill a thermos with lemonade and play monkey or Magnor the Ape-man for a couple of hours. At the top of the banyan tree, there was a giant tree house that Grandpa built when Dad was just a little boy, and you could only get to it from the second floor bathroom window.

The tree house itself was made of oak and had a carpeted drawbridge that lead to the bathroom window, and that, in theory, you could raise or lower according to your whim. The drawbridge hadn’t been raised in years because the hinges rusted over when we had the winter of acid rain, and then the rust rusted over, and there was a two inch thick layer of rust that felt like sandpaper and stained your shorts. The rust mixed with sap and you couldn’t knock it away with a crowbar, so we just left it down all the time. The inside of the tree house was decorated with Dad’s whittled wooden army men and Aunt Josie’s paperclip collection and rubber band ball. There was an old straw mattress in one of the corners, and miniature dining tables and chairs, and a secret window
covered in leaves with a pair of binoculars for spying on the cornfields. The binoculars were rusty around the eyeholes.

Grandma’s house was designed and built by Great-great Grandpa McGrew. He was a bit of an “eccentric,” at least that’s what Mom says, because he built trick stairways that led to the ceiling, doors that opened up into walls, and all sorts of secret rooms and tunnels. Most of the secret rooms and tunnels were boarded up though, because as Grandma got older she’d get lost in the house, and for the safety of everyone, they turned it into a fairly normal house.

On most holidays we visited Grandma. Mom said her house is both the biggest and the emptiest in the family, which I couldn’t argue with because it was the only other house in the family. Mom said by going on holidays we helped to fill it up and bring a smile to Grandma’s face. I thought Grandma’s face already had lots of smiles, depending on which way you looked at it.

“You should have more respect for your elders,” Mom said.

Grandma’s house definitely was the biggest in the family. It was three stories if you included the basement, which I don’t because there aren’t any lights down there and Henry and Jim say three generations of McGrew men and stillborn children are buried under the wine racks. Mom told me not to believe them, but just walking by the door to the basement I get chills all over my body and have trouble breathing. In my mind I see little baby hands reaching up from the ground, poking through the dirt in the darkness, and grabbing my toes. I don’t know how they do it, but ghosts reach right through my shoes and grabbed my toes and that’s why my toes are always cold. When I sleep at Grandma’s I use three pairs of socks.
The other two stories were huge. There were ten bedrooms in all, though only five of them had serviceable beds anymore, and of those only Grandma’s room had a bed that wasn’t covered with dust.

The hallways were narrow and made even narrower because Grandma liked to collect coffee tables, bedside tables, display cases, and china cabinets. She didn’t have any china really. And it took me a couple of years to find out that china plates aren’t necessarily made in China and that the same word can mean two completely different things. That’s why sometimes we capitalize words. But instead of china and lamps, grandma collects figurines from all over the world. Dad said he felt like Moses parting a Red Sea of people when he walked down the hallways, and you always had to shimmy Shimmy sideways and suck in your stomach and butt unless you want to knock over some of the figurines. Mom refused to walk down the hallway. She was pleasantly plump.

Grandma greeted us at the door as she usually did, wearing her nightgown. You could see through her nightgown from about fifty feet. It had been a wedding gift from a poor cousin who’d hand-made it with stolen cotton, and Grandma wore it every night for sixty-three years. The edges were taped to her ankles with pink band aids. Mom said Grandma’s modesty, and the unpredictable wind patterns at the edge of the county made this a necessity, but I think she liked the band-aids because they matched the rollers she kept at all times in her thin, gray hair.

“Hello there, family,” Grandma said. She had a pile of chocolate chip cookies on a silver serving platter, and as we came into the house she gave each of us a kiss on the
forehead and a cookie. When my turn came she gave me two cookies, because I’m the youngest.

“Grandmother,” Mom said, “why do you give Paul two cookies? He can’t fit into his shorts as it is.”

“Because Paul is going to be a big family man someday. He can’t be a man with that rabbit food you feed him. The boy needs cookies.”

I never liked it when Grandma insisted I was going to be a family man. I hadn’t even kissed a girl. I’d never even held a girl’s hand. Certainly getting punched in the face doesn’t count. I hadn’t even made significant eye contact with a girl, except for the girl with pomegranate cheeks, and she disappeared. Grandma is a cookie away from having me taping diapers. When she said that my head started to hurt and my eyes teared up a little because I’m not ready to be a family man, and Jim and Henry made fun of me for being sensitive and call me “Little Daddy Sausage.” Luckily, Dad stepped in.

“We brought lunch for you, Mom. I made sandwiches, and my beautiful wife made you a lattice top apple pie.”

“Hooray,” Grandma said. She danced a little jig and one of her curlers fell out and hit the hardwood floor and echoed throughout the house. “I love apple pie.”

She motioned for everyone to move towards the kitchen, and slipped me a third cookie while Jim and Henry and Mom and Dad set the table and rearranged the chairs.

“There’s no hope for those two,” she pointed at Jim and Henry. “I want to be a great-grandma. What good’s a grown man who can’t figure out whose dumping dog food on him?”
My mouth dropped and I stared at Grandma, but she’d already headed toward one of her china cabinets and pulled out the silver pie stand. Mom’s apple pie always got to be the centerpiece of the meal at Grandma’s house, and I don’t think Grandma’s liking the pie so much was the only reason Mom spent so much time in the kitchen preparing the apples, cinnamon, sugar, and lattice. Grandma stuck six small paper American flags in the top of the pie, as if it were a cluster of car dealerships in the desert, and demanded that each of us take a good whiff of the pie before the sandwiches, so by the time dessert came around our mouths would be good and watery.

We had a good meal, and I broke my record and drank twenty-three glasses of water.

“It doesn’t count,” Henry said. “You had lots of ice.”

“It counts,” Jim said. “Ice is water.”

By the time dessert came around, my legs were shaking I had to go to the bathroom so bad, and Mom said I couldn’t have any pie until I got it out of my system, because I was shaking the table and the silverware was rattling.

I excused myself and hightailed it upstairs. All the figurines on the stairwell were covered with tarps. And there were plastic signs taped every six feet on the wall that said, “Please excuse our dust.” Because she had the biggest house in town, and so many figurines, Grandma’s house was the closest thing we had to a museum in Lake Fancy. Every year my class went on a field trip there, and every year the exhibit was different. I was tempted to peek under the tarps, which I wasn’t supposed to do, but I figured that I would pee on the stairs if I stopped for even a second, and be discovered.
The bathroom at Grandma’s was always an adventure. She stored most of her eccentric seafaring figurines from her trips to various tropical islands in the bathroom. I guess she thought they’d feel comfortable near the water. I always felt like a pirate when I went in there, because you had to pull the toilet paper out of a treasure chest, and eight colorful plastic birds ranging from parrots to cockatiels to hummingbirds hung from the ceiling on fishing line and swerved back and forth with the caprice of the vents. If you didn’t pay attention, they’d peck you in the back of your head mid-spray. The toilet was covered with a bushy pink toilet seat cover, and above that, on a shelf, were some more figurines. The wall was covered with giant framed pictures of famous waterfalls from around the world. In a weird way, it felt powerful to pee while looking at Niagara Falls.

I made it back downstairs, and decided not to peek because I liked most surprises. I didn’t like the surprise I found when I got downstairs. Henry had dumped a bunch of salt and pepper on top of my piece of pie, and I couldn’t say anything because Mom’s real sensitive about her pie, and I had to eat the whole thing and smile and with every bite I had to watch Henry nearly choke himself with laughter, because I was smiling so hard and pretending it was the best ever.

Jim felt sorry for me after that, and on the ride home, he took the middle.
The Girl with Pomegranate Cheeks

The dog was barking at the tree again, which was odd because the tree hadn’t been there for years and the dog was blind. I was sitting on the porch, laughing at the dog and soaking up the rays of the sun, which poked intermittently through the leaves of the medlar tree that wasn’t there and the eaves of the house. My left arm, as a result of the intermittency, was three shades darker than my right. Climbing up the tree that wasn’t there was a little girl, about my age, with no arms. She was wearing a light blue polka dot dress with bright yellow tights and spit polished patent leather shoes. My father told me once that you shouldn’t spit on leather, but he never told her.

“Why you always climbing that tree that isn’t there?” I called across the lawn, raising my three shades lighter right arm to block the sun from my eyes as I leaned forward on the swing I’m not to talk to strangers,” said the girl. She stopped climbing when she got higher than the fence to watch the sunset.

“Everyone is a stranger when you’re born,” I called. “What happened to your arms?”

“Nothing happened to my arms. I never had any. Could you stop asking me questions? I’m not supposed to talk to strangers and the sun only sets once a day. I don’t want to miss it.”

“I’m Paul. I’m your next-door neighbor. I came to see you the day after you was born. We ain’t strangers no more. Why didn’t you ever have arms?”

“You were there the day after I was born. You should have asked my mother.”
And I couldn’t think of anything to say after that so I climbed up the tree that wasn’t there to watch the sun set with the girl who didn’t have arms. It was a tough tree to climb. It didn’t have any branches until seven feet, and I couldn’t for the life of me see how a girl with no arms could climb that tree that wasn’t there. I was having trouble myself, and I been climbing trees for as long as I can remember. By the time I got up there I had big bugs of sweat sliding around on my forehead and under my arms, and I had to wipe them off with my sleeve, which is rude and shouldn’t be done, but there weren’t any towels in the tree and my arms were too tired to grab the red handkerchief out of my back pocket. Besides I’d used it to blow my nose not twenty minutes earlier, when the dog started barking.

“You got a boyfriend?” I asked her when the sun was all the way down and only the streaks of pink, orange, and gray were left.

“There’s not a huge demand for a no-armed girl in the boyfriend pool.”

“I guess you can’t swim too good neither.”

“Not that kind of pool.”

“Can I give you a kiss then?”

“Not unless you brushed twice. I never kiss a boy unless he’s brushed at least twice.”

I rubbed my teeth with my tongue. Nope. I hadn’t brushed twice in the last week. Didn’t see the need when I knew I was going to be eating again in a few hours. It’s like cleaning your room or washing your car. I never could see the logic in cleaning things that get dirty all the time. It seemed a hell of a waste of time, and I’d much rather sit on
the porch and watch the dog and feel the sun anyway. The dog isn’t going to be around forever you know. I figure it’s only got so long. It’s like the sun that way.

“I brushed twice already,” I lied. With the streaks of pink and orange in the sky it gave the girl a real smooth color in her cheeks, like an apple or a pomegranate, and I wished I had brushed my teeth because I always wanted to kiss a girl with pomegranate cheeks.

“No you didn’t. I been watching you from the other side of the fence. You’ve been on the porch all day except when you went to the bathroom and when you brought the crackers and sardines out. But you didn’t brush your teeth. You haven’t since Thursday.”

“Why are you watching me so close?”

“Because I figure you have to do something interesting sometime.”

“Yeah, well you just keep on figuring.”

Her mother called from the house next door, where they never ate corn on the cob because none of them could bare to watch her eat like that. Her voice rose up and through the tree that wasn’t there like a trumpet blaring in the morning like in the army. I hated to hear it because I knew she had to go and that I’d have to sit on the porch again. There’s only so much rocking you can do in a day, and as the girl said, the sun only sets once.

“I’ve gotta go,” she said, and smiled her pomegranate cheek smile at me because I had the highest tree that wasn’t there in the neighborhood. The only good place to watch the sunset was from my tree because the rest of the houses in the neighborhood had those firs, spruces, and maples that are no good for anything but firewood and peeing on. She
weaved her polka dots and yellow tights down to the base of the tree, and even watching her close I couldn’t see how she did it.

“I’m going to brush twice tomorrow,” I called after her.

“I’m not going to be back tomorrow,” she called. And she never did come back. I was on the porch all day long the next day, but I guess I didn’t hear the new family move in, on account of they didn’t wear any shoes or have any pets or bikes that needed greasing. They have a girl too, she’s about my age and has arms, but I don’t want to kiss her because her cheeks are white and look like bread.
Johnny Appleseed

On the day we became friends, Johnny Appleseed walked down my street carrying his metal G.I. Joe lunchbox. The shiny one that glints in the sun and looks like silver. I didn’t know what he carried in his lunchbox, but I guessed it was candy, because he always ate those sour apple candies for lunch and recess. Every once in a while I saw him eat a sandwich or a piece of cold pizza, but most of the time it was candy. The lunch box banged against his knee as he walked down the street and I wondered why it didn’t bother him when it banged his knee. He only had two of them, and he had some long tree branch arms, and I was worried.

“Johnny Appleseed, why are you banging your lunch box against your knee? Don’t you know you’ve only got two?”

“Don’t holler at me from the porch. Mind your own business.”

As Johnny came closer I noticed his eye was big and purple as a plum. It looked like it hurt, but I didn’t feel too bad cause he never shared his candy with me, even when I didn’t have lunch or offered to trade him a peanut butter sandwich for two candies.

Johnny didn’t talk much to anyone at school. He sat in the back of Ms. Lancaster’s class and talked only when Ms. L called on him. I guess he was kind of like me that way.

He wore a long sleeve blue and white flannel shirt with holes worn in the elbows, and rolled up to just below his elbows. Every few steps he pushed the sleeves back up because the shirt used to be his dad’s and was still too big. On his left arm, right above his wrist, was a big purple bruise that had been there since fourth grade when Johnny
tripped on a fire truck and fell down the stairs at his house by the lake. His dirty blond hair was peeking out over his ears like an owl on the sides and matted together in patches and cowlicks on top so that it looked like a crown.

I rocked a few times on my swinging bench. The dog scratched his ears. It must be getting on towards fall, I thought, cause that’s when he always scratches his ears. I noticed Johnny Appleseed wasn’t banging his lunch box against his knee and had stopped on the other side of my fence. He was standing still as a scarecrow, and I was worried for a second that time had stopped and I had missed it.

"Is that your tire swing?" he asked me, which was a dumb question because it was on my property and neither of my brothers ever used it.

"Yeah."

"I don’t have a tire swing," he said, and I noticed he was looking down at his shoes all mournful like, and his cowlicks were pointing straight at me like arrows.

"I don’t have a shiny silver lunch box with G. I. Joe," I told him, which was true. I had to wrap my peanut butter sandwiches in foil and put them in my backpack. All my books smell like peanut butter, which makes it tough to study when I’m hungry, but we can’t afford lunch boxes. Even dad wraps his sandwiches in tin foil, and he wears a tie to work.

"Can I swing on your tire swing for a little bit?"

"Won’t your mother be mad when you aren’t home from school?"

"No. She won’t mind."

So I told Johnny Appleseed he could swing in my tire swing even though he never shared his candy with me, because I couldn’t stand to see him standing there all
mournful, and my mother always told me to do into others as you would have others do
into you, and I was hoping he might give me some of his candy. Johnny dropped his
lunch box in the grass by the fence, and the dog came over to sniff it a little before it went
back to scratching his ears.

Johnny was swinging for a while, and I never did see a boy enjoy a swing so
much. You would have thought he was on the Ferris Wheel with his hair flying all
around, going in and out of his ears, and the big broad cheese eatin’ smile on his face. It
did my heart good to see him so happy, even though I preferred the porch swing on
account of the warmth of the sun and the way the breeze whipped around the corner of
the house and brought the smell of roses and garlic from the garden. I figured now was a
good time to get him to share his candy.

“Say, Johnny, you got any of those sour apple candies you’re always carryin’
around?”

“I got a few in my lunch box.”

“Do you think I could have one or two of those candies, seeing as how I let you
swing in my tire swing, and I’ve never had a sour apple candy before?”

“Sure,” said Johnny who was twirling around tornado style and not really paying
attention to me, “have the rest.”

Before Johnny even said “the rest” I was out of my porch swing and bounding
down the steps. They creaked a little, and my mom told me to be careful from inside
where she was watching her show. But my mouth had been watering even since I saw
Johnny Appleseed, and I didn’t hear her because my ears don’t work too well when I’m
hungry.

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I picked up Johnny’s lunchbox, which was warm and hurt my hands because it had been sitting in the sun, and I admired it more than ever. It was a fine picture of G.I. Joe, and I could see that Johnny took great pains to keep it clean and shiny. He probably even polished it with that polish that makes your fingers black and when you swallow it you have to call the ambulance. It took me a second to figure out the plastic lock, but inside was five sour apple candies, round and white like eyes and powdered like donut holes. I shoved all five into my mouth at once and figured out why Johnny Appleseed never shared his candies with me. It wasn’t because he was selfish, like I thought, but because they were toxic and filled with some sort of nerve gas. My eyes watered up and my nose burned and even after I spit them into the bushes I couldn’t breathe right for a minute or two. I ran over to drink from the hose and while I was washing my mouth out the dog ate the candies. He coughed, ran around in a circle a few times, and hopped up on the fence and started peeing, but other than that he was all right.

“Johnny Appleseed, how come you didn’t tell me those things was toxic?”

“They’re not toxic, they’re just sour.”

“I coulda died. And my dog went crazy for a minute.”

“A minute ain’t so bad. My uncle went crazy for twenty years. That’s why we don’t talk to him no more. He used to think he was a rooster and would go around pecking at my mom and her sisters like they were grain.”

And I knew right then that Johnny was right, and that the dog had gotten off lucky.

“Did your uncle eat sour candies?”

“No, he was in the war.”
“Oh.”

And Johnny and I played on the tire swing and threw the stick for the dog to chase, even though he was blind and brought back corn cobs and carrots from the compost pile.

When it got dark, my mom told Johnny he’d better head home.
The Ballad of Blueberry Joe

I changed my route to school two months ago today. The quickest way there used to be through the cottonwoods where no one ever built 'cause the ground is too rough. The river never gets closer than 1,000 yards to the forest, which most people just call "those smelly trees," and Lake Fancy is a good couple miles upwind anyway. So it's only during the rainy season that the trees see any water, then the woods are muddy for a few days till the sun comes out and bakes the ground like clay and the whole forest gives you the feeling that you're walking on this enormous and elaborately decorated pot. The forest begins behind the abandoned seed warehouse on Franklin and cuts through the briar patches and huckleberry bushes and drops you right off, after you hop the rusty and wilting chain link fence, into a bright and open swath of playground behind Mrs. Anderson's class where they planted the sunflowers. It only took about five minutes that way and when it rained you could sprint from cottonwood to cottonwood and not get too wet. Going by the main roads and staying on the sidewalks and keeping your shoes clean takes fifteen minutes. I figured each time I trekked through the forest I gave myself another ten minutes of free time. That's a morning recess and a spoonful of peanut butter.

A family of wild parrots lives in the trees. They only speak Spanish. Instead of chirps and songs the forest is filled with holas and buenos suertes. My mom says that if you come to this country you should learn the language, but I like to hear them talking and imagine they are making plans to take over the town. If they took over the town we'd have flying lessons instead of math. And with the breeze that starts in the morning and tears through the trees and sounds like a thousand moaning turtles and tickles your nose I
think flying would be much more interesting than math. It's a nice little walk with the
breeze and the parrots and the cottonwoods. But now I don't go that way any more
because Blueberry Joe's mom got mad at him and planted him near the huckleberries.

Blueberry Joe always got in trouble for drawing machine guns on his spelling
tests. His parents are divorced and his mom works two jobs to pay for cable, which is
cheaper than a babysitter, and Joe used to watch the History Channel all day. As a gift
from his estranged dad, he also had the complete collection of Colby History of
Espionage and Warfare books showing decades of weapons and warfare on soft yellow
pages that feel like Grandma's hands. At recess he could rattle off the names of a hundred
different guns for fifty cents, and even though none of us knew if he was making it up or
not, it was well worth the money.

Joe drew mostly M-16s and M-60s on his spelling tests. He'd been reading a lot
about the Vietnam War and the History Channel had been having specials on General
Westersomething and the Tent Offensive. For some reason that stuck in Joe's head, but
when he told me about it I couldn't keep it all straight. Ms. Lancaster, our teacher, who
always wears a gray sweater and sweats a lot, told Joe he ought not to draw guns
anymore. Ms. L asked Joe to stay in at recess one day, and the school psychologist, a man
named Mr. Jenkins who slouched and wore an eye patch, came in and talked to Joe about
why he liked to draw guns on his spelling test so much.

"I finish early and get bored," said Joe. And it was true. Joe was the best speller in
the class. He had a gift.

Joe wasn't nearly as talented an artist as a speller, and the guns weren't nothing
much to look at. Johnny Appleseed and Trevor Lindman could draw guns a lot better than
Joe, but Joe was the only one who did it on his tests, so he’s the one who got in trouble. When, on the next test, Joe drew a brown bear with googly Martian eyes humping an M-60 through the jungles of Pleiku, Mr. Jenkins called in his mom. She had to take time off of her job at the Laundromat to come in and sit down with Mr. Jenkins, Ms. Lancaster, and the principal, Mr. Ritzo. Mr. Ritzo smelled of olives and always said, “Ha ha ha, settle down, children.”

Ms. Lancaster laid out all of Joe’s spelling tests in a row on Mr. Ritzo’s desk. All of them were one hundred percent correct and covered with M-16s, M-60s, and gun totin’ animals, aliens, and pirates. They had been sitting in a file in Mr. Ritzo’s office and smelled of olives, too. Joe’s mom swore up and down that he never drew guns at home.

“With all the recent tragedies at school,” Mr. Ritzo said, “you can see why we’re worried.” Joe, who told me the story later, said Ms. Lancaster just kept to herself off in the corner and every once in a while said, “Oh my” and sweated. Mr. Jenkins held her hand and winced at the tests with pirates.

Mrs. Anderson came over to watch our class while the meeting was going on and we played Head’s Up, Seven Up until lunch, and though I hated myself for thinking it, I wished that Joe would get in trouble every day because Mrs. Anderson is nicer than Ms. L.

When lunch was over Ms. Lancaster came back, but Joe didn’t. Ms. Lancaster’s hair was frizzy and gathered in clumps and you could see the sweat marks under her arms when she told us that Joe had been expelled from school and wasn’t coming back. No one got any checks by his or her name that afternoon and we left school quiet as dead mice.
Joe lives about ten blocks from the school, but most of us heard his mom screaming at him, because the wind always blows stronger after school. So strong no one can ever catch up with an empty bag of chips. No one played kickball or hide-and-seek that day. We all just gathered under the slide and quietly threw tanbark at one another and felt sorry for Joe. Johnny and Trevor threw all their gun pictures in the trashcan. They ripped them into a million pieces and swore they’d never draw guns again. Even the parrots were quiet.

At first it didn’t bother me that Blueberry Joe was planted by the huckleberries and under the cottonwoods. Johnny Appleseed lived on the other side of school and I didn’t have anyone to walk with because my brothers both went to the high school. It was good to see a familiar face on the way to school. For the first week or so I stopped by and brought him some water and some leftovers from my breakfast. He really liked sausage but we only have sausage on Fridays, so the rest of the time he had to eat toast and marmalade.

His mom had buried him well. She worked at a Laundromat and a diner, but you’d a thought she worked for the forest service the way Joe was buried. He was up to his armpits and the soil around him was packed pretty tight, so he couldn’t move much in any direction. Sometimes he waved his arms above his head like branches if the breeze was soft and right and rustling the cottonwoods and blowing parrot feathers. On days like this he smiled and looked like he enjoyed this little game of tree. Other times his arms were crossed before him on the ground, and he’d be leaned over as far as he could and asleep. I never liked to bother him when he was like that, even if I did want someone to
On other days we talked.

“How’s it, Joe?” I asked while taking a knee. I never do like to talk to people who only come up to my knees.

“Not so bad. Not so bad as it could be I suppose. My Spanish is getting better and at least I’ve got my arms.” The wind picked up as he talked and he threw his arms in the air and started swaying back and forth and saying “hace frio.” No one had cut Joe’s hair since his mom planted him in the forest, and it too whipped around like a frayed rope. There were a few patches matted together by mud and poop that didn’t move much, and in the light of the early morning they looked a bit like branches growing out of his head. I pictured for a moment what he’d look like with a parrot perched on his branches-- a fancy pirate tombstone or one of those strange decorations Grandma bought for her bathroom.

“Is your mom still angry at you?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. She brings me food and water every night. She’s just busy with work. Bills to pay.” When he said “pay” he drew out the “aayyy” and my spine got cold and I remembered a dream I’d had once about being trapped in an Arctic Wind Tunnel.

“Oh.” I said. I liked Joe but when my spine started shivering I decided to move on. “See you later.”

I thought Joe and I got along swell for the first week or so that he was buried out there. He was real polite and thanked me all the time for the toast and especially for the sausage on Fridays. But after a couple of weeks we had a long weekend. It was
President’s Day on Monday and I was sick on Friday (when Mom gets a cold, we all get a cold) so by the time I passed through the cottonwoods on Tuesday I hadn’t seen Joe in four days.

It was one of those breath days. You know, the days where it’s so cold you can see your breath when you exhale, and you pretend like you’re one of those old time movie stars with a cigarette in one hand and slicked back hair with a bright white jacket and a New York accent. Cold, but fun. I wore my stocking cap that Grandma knitted me two Christmases ago when she still thought I was a girl. The cap felt warm and comfortable, but it was bright pink and I always took it off and stuffed it at the bottom of my backpack before I got to school. On days like this I looked like an angry and disoriented cat. I was breathing out a lot and saying “Fuggedaboudit” and trying to create my own little breath cloud when I heard screaming. It was coming from the direction of Joe, but because I had been breathing out so much I couldn’t see clear through the fog and the cottonwoods. I dropped to a knee to get beneath the fog and saw Joe screaming. I took off my cap and shoved it in my pack and sprinted over.

When I got there his face was blue and his voice was hoarse and from the circles under his eyes it looked like he’d been screaming a while.

“Worms!” he called. I jumped back a little because I’ve always been afraid of things without legs. Whenever I go fishing with my dad and my brothers I have to use one of the artificial flies you buy at the store. They cost twice as much, but when I try to put a worm on the hook my ears throb and I pass out. I looked all over but I couldn’t see them.
“Where?” I yelled. Joe was only a couple of feet away from me, but since he was yelling I thought I should too.

“Worms!” he cried again and began to beat the surface of the soil with his hands. There was dirt under his fingernails and leaves sprouting out of his knuckles and it looked like he’d been scratching at the ground trying to dig himself out. There were a few marks on the ground, but like I said before, it was too hard to do anything with. The leaves surprised me and there was a pine cone growing out of his elbow and to the left I heard _como estas_ and a flap of wings. With all this going on I felt disoriented and hot like the time my brother Henry threw me in the dryer for thirty seconds and it took me a minute to figure out that the worms he was talking about were down under the earth, probably crawling around by his waist and maybe even down into his pants. My ears began to throb, and I could feel my hair pulsing as the cottonwoods began to swirl.

“I brought you some sausages!” I called, stomping furiously at the ground to scare the worms away. Mom had made sausages special today because everyone was sick on Friday, and they were still warm because I had wrapped them in foil. I dropped them on the ground and sprinted off for school because I didn’t want to pass out and be late. Ms. Lancaster got very upset when people were late.

I could still hear Joe screaming about the worms and the parrots squawking _estoy cansado_ as I hopped the rusty fence and landed in the sunflowers, and it wasn’t until I was standing next to my seat and saying the Pledge of Allegiance that my hands stopped shaking and my ears settled down. Ever since then I’ve been taking the long way to school.
Ms. Lancaster’s class seems different without Joe. He used to sit three seats up and to the right of me. He was the tallest boy in the class, and when he was around I never got a chance to write down spelling words 7-10 because his big blue head always blocked that corner of the board. Now that he’s gone my grade in spelling has gone from a C+ to a B+, which my mom says is good, and that she always knew I was smart. My brothers just call me Smelly McSpelly, but they never got higher than a C in spelling and Grandma says they’re jealous.

Other than that, everything is pretty much the same. The guys still play touch football at lunch unless the yard duty is on the other side of the playground. Then they play tackle. Every once in a while I come home with a bloody lip because they always throw the ball to me when we play tackle.

Ms. Lancaster still sweats a lot, and now she’s real jumpy too. The wind picks up and rattles the windows, and she’ll stop in the middle of a sentence and turn white like a ghost was blowing on her neck.

In class we’ve been learning about gardening, and I think Ms. Lancaster stole the idea from Mrs. Anderson because we went out to plant sunflowers on the other side of the school. I tried to tell Ms. Lancaster that sunflowers don’t grow too well in the shade, but she told me that whether or not the sunflowers grow is up to God and no one else. I mumbled under my breath that God didn’t call them shadeflowers and that the reason Mrs. Anderson’s class had such great sunflowers was because they planted them in the sun, but the breeze picked up and carried the parrots crying la sangre, la sangre, in from the forest and Ms. Lancaster told us all to hurry up and pat down our soil because we had
to get back inside before the rains came. There weren’t any clouds in the sky, and Johnny and I reckoned Ms. L would never make it as a farmer.

Every time an eraser gets too much lead on it we rub it real fast on the carpet. This gets it clean and makes it nice and warm around the edges. Bobby, who sits behind me and is hyperactive and needs medication twice a day, always rubs his eraser super hard so that it is hot, then pushes it into the back of my neck and burns me. He does this everyday at a different time, and always catches me by surprise. Whenever I tell Ms. Lancaster, she puts her arm around me and I can smell her sweat and she tells me that Bobby has a medical condition and takes medication two times a day and that I should be a little more understanding of people who are different than me. I tell her that I’d be a lot more understanding of Bobby’s differences if he was sitting in the front row where he couldn’t burn me with his eraser, but Ms. L glares at me and says, “But Paul, that wouldn’t be alphabetical order, now would it?” And I agree with her because I don’t want her arm around me anymore and my shoulder already smells like Ms. Lancaster sweat, but I know somehow that she’s wrong.

Last Saturday Johnny Appleseed and I were catching crawdads and playing Merlin the Sorcerer down at Lake Fancy. When it began to rain and the surface of the lake was hopping hopping like a thousand crickets on vacation and we couldn’t see the crawdads anymore and our newspaper Merlin hat wilted Johnny suggested we pay a visit to Joe and take him some sausages. I didn’t feel too much like seeing Joe after the worms, but it had been more than a month and I figured he was lonesome and I didn’t want Johnny to think I was chicken so we went.
The air was still when we passed the abandoned seed warehouse and the ground was wet in the forest and we left our footprints in the mud and joked quietly about the schluck schluck sounds our shoes made as we headed to the center of the woods to see Joe. But when we got there Joe was gone. In his place stood a seven-foot tall Christmassy looking pine tree with a bluish trunk and two crooked branches at the bottom. The branches waved even in the still air and were graceful and fluid like a gopher in the bathtub. On top of one of the branches sat three bright parrots who stared at us and bobbed back and forth and nibbled at the pinecone hanging from the crook on the lowest branch. And it didn’t look anything at all like Grandma’s bathroom.
At the Other End of the Lake

There's a gray house sleeping in the shadows of rotting cypress and pine trees near the far end of Lake Fancy. Mom says the house used to be white, but no one has painted it since at least a decade ago. Crooked yellow water stains have crept up the gentle slope of soft earth leading to the house. Halfway up the flaking wood panels that line the house on all sides, the lake stains meet the rusty water line creeping down from the eaves of the roof. Beneath the house and on the lake is a rotting launch made of cypress wood. It was made along with the house back in the early part of the century when the cypress and pines reached up only just below the roof. The trees provided a pleasant shade for the first members of the Appleseed family in the area. The launch had been crafted with stolen railroad spikes and pioneer style lashings: thick rope that creaked with newness and the ebb and roll of the lake. It leaned out ten feet into the water and four boys could sit comfortably and fish or dive or skip stones. No boys sat on the launch anymore.

Five years ago, the support beams at the end toppled over around midnight- two on the left and one on the right- and when the sun came up the next morning and sprayed strawberry juice from the east the launch was at a forty-two -degree angle and looked like a knife chopping carrots. The far left hand corner dipped into the water and when the ripples of the motorboats lapped against it there was a slap slap sound and the frayed moss-covered ends of eighty year old rope bobbed up and down.
Mom calls it the House of Horrors. Mom calls it that because for her everything has a place. The cereals are arranged by size in the pantry; then the jars are arranged alphabetically by soups, spreads, or vegetables; then the packages of spaghetti are stacked up—always the one-pound bag of whatever is on sale at Hopperton’s with the oldest bag on top and the freshest on the bottom. This ensures that we are always eating spaghetti that has been sitting on our shelf for at least eight months. Socks go in the sock drawer. They are rolled up like sausages and placed next to the underwear, which are folded three times and never shoved in. Mom likes order. The Appleseed house has no order, at least not Mom’s sort of order, and the way she talks you’d think they tilted their launch like a cutting knife just to spite her.

“I can’t stand that launch. It’s an eyesore on that beautiful lake. Wouldn’t you know they got here first and set their house up right at the edge of the lake where the sun goes down, and every time you trot out to the lake to watch the sunset, every time you make a peach cobbler and gather your boys up and spread out the quilt that Grandma Bunyan made with her own two hands even though she was blind as a bat, blinder than a bat, and sit on the shore of that lake to watch the sunset, you watch it set right over that launch. You’d think it was a ghost town we were living in instead of a civilized town with two gas stations and a bank,” Mom said. She was a Mom and said what she liked even though there were circles under her eyes and the peaches this season weren’t as sweet as last.

“It’s a good thing Grandma Bunyan was blind too. She’d have died a lot earlier if she had ever seen that horrible Appleseed house.”
Grandma Bunyan died seven years ago, back when I was only five, but Mom didn’t mention that. All I remember about Grandma Bunyan was her soft hands. They were wrinkled and looked like elbows, but they were soft and when I was a baby she’d dip them in applesauce and let me suck on her fingers.

I say all this about Johnny’s house because right after lunch the other day, after I’d eaten a peanut butter sandwich and one of those cheap little plastic cups of applesauce, Johnny asked me if I wanted to spend the night at his house on Saturday. I’d never spent the night at anyone’s house before, other than my own and Grandma McGrew’s. At my own I might well wake up taped to the bed or with dog food in my hair, and at Grandma McGrew’s I always have to sleep in Aunt Josie’s old room because Grandma is senile and thinks sometimes that I am a girl. Though Johnny’s house has a broken launch, and Mom calls it an eyesore, I figure it can’t be worse than anywhere else I sleep.

It took a considerable amount of convincing, and I had to resort to my baby whining voice that Mom hates but always gives into, for me to be allowed to spend the night at Johnny Appleseed’s house.

“You are not going into that house,” said Mom. “You haven’t had your shots yet. You’ll probably catch hepatitis.”

I don’t even know what hepatitis is, but the way Mom says it, the way her eyes squint in the corners and her nose flares out, the way her arms wobble in the back and her fingers quiver a little, I think she’s making it up.

“Judge not on others, lest ye yourself be judged,” I tried. Mom hated it when you used her words against her, and she had told me a thousand times not to judge people lest I be judged myself. Most of the time I didn’t even know who she was talking about when
she said that I was going to be judged and I pictured a room with an old man in a black robe sitting up behind a high counter and wearing one of those white wigs and some lipstick. I don’t know why he was wearing lipstick, that’s just the way I pictured it.

“You don’t judge hepatitis, you just get it, and then you get rashes and your teeth fall out.”

“You told me your teeth only fall out once and that the tooth fairy invested in some bad mutual funds and couldn’t afford more than a dime per tooth anymore.”

“That’s unless you get hepatitis. The tooth fairy doesn’t pay for hepatitis.”

“But Johnny’s my friend.”

“The tooth fairy doesn’t take into account friendships when it comes to hepatitis. Heck, she’d probably take a dime from you for wasting her time.”

But I knew that the tooth fairy didn’t spend a whole lot of time visiting our house, because last time I lost a tooth, it was Dad who slipped the dime under my pillow when he thought I was sleeping. So I just whined and whined and eventually she gave in after I promised to take out the garbage for a month and do all my homework for the weekend before I went over to Johnny’s. I always think it’s funny when Mom forgets that we don’t have any homework during the weekends. I just write a story about a flying cow who switches up all the babies at the county hospital and tell Mom that we’re reading about the practical uses of agriculture, and she sees the word cow and puts it down because she’s always had this inexplicable fear of cows.

Moo.
Mom helped me pack for spending the night at Johnny’s house. I thought it was strange that she demanded I take three bars of soap and two towels in addition to four pairs of underwear.

“I’m only gonna be there for one night,” I told her.

“You can never be too prepared,” she replied. She was holding my underwear in her hand and writing my name on the outside of the band, and not just my name, but “This Underwear is the Property of Paul McGrew” in big black permanent letters that stretched from one hip to the other. As though Johnny and I were going to be swapping underwear, or we’d just leave them lying around in a giant pile and get them mixed up. Like we couldn’t tell our own underwear by the smell and discolorations. By the time I was ready to go, the backpack, Dad’s old camping pack, overflowed with two extra undershirts, two pairs of long underwear, a jug of water, three T-shirts, a jacket, a sweater, earmuffs, Dad’s old sunglasses, a first aid kit, a list of emergency numbers, and a laminated rabbit’s foot for good luck.

“Somewhere there’s a three-legged rabbit who doesn’t believe in luck,” said Jim, who had come in from the back yard where he was chopping firewood. He had woodchips and sap all over his socks and a trail of dirtiness followed him down the hallway to the back door.

“Jim,” Mom said, “You grab the broom this instant and sweep up after yourself in the hall.” And Jim got to it, because Mom had that Mom in her voice, by that I mean the authoritative certainty that none of us dared to go against because of the wooden spoon that hung against the wall by the refrigerator and under the picture of Grandma Bunyan’s smiling face. It was the third wooden spoon to hang by the refrigerator. Jim and Henry
had gone through one each, the splinters of which Mom kept in the drawer by the ice cream scoop. She hollered at me to make sure I could walk with the backpack, and then followed Jim out to the kitchen to make sure he didn’t grab some lemonade or ice water first, because she didn’t believe in dawdling.

As soon as she left I put the backpack on and fastened it around my waist with the buckle. It was heavy, and I felt the cold metal frame bang against the back of my knees, and the weight of it caused me to lean forward. As long as I could walk bent over at a thirty-degree angle through the brambleweeds and knee high mud leading out towards Johnny’s house I’d be okay.

“Hey turtle,” said Henry. He’d been in the backyard helping Jim with the firewood. He was wearing a muscle shirt and there was a line on each of his arms above the elbow and below the shoulder separating the brown part of his arms from the white.

“Why you callin’ me a turtle?” Henry’s hair was tied back in a yellow bandana and there was a gleam in his eyes I didn’t like.

“No reason,” said Henry. “Give your big brother a hug.”

Henry smelled like a thousand dead grasshoppers and was dripping with sweat. I backed up a little, but with my huge backpack I bumped into the bed and scratched my leg on the metal frame.

“No way,” but he already had his arms wrapped around me and he put his foot behind mine in one of those judo moves he learned down at the county fair and off of the video he bought from Mr. Hopperton’s son, Mike, and before I knew it I was on my back with my feet dangling over the ground. Henry grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me out into the hallway and I was kicking at him, but I hit the coffee table and knocked
over one of mom’s favorite candleholders instead. There was a thick thud then the shimmering sound of glass spraying over the floor. It would have been beautiful if it didn’t mean the wooden spoon, or that I couldn’t go to Johnny’s, and by the time Mom and Jim ran in from the kitchen Henry had gone upstairs and I kicked my legs uselessly and cried.

“He looks like a turtle,” Jim said. Then he pushed me with the broom towards the back door.

“So Henry got in trouble?” asked Johnny. He had one of the straps on his shoulders, and the two of us were walking through the cottonwoods to cut by the school. Already three high school kids had called us Siamese Dorks, and we figured there’d be less people who’d see us if we cut through the woods. It was early evening and the winds were blowing cool and gentle and the sky to the east was already dark and to the west it looked like streaks of raspberry syrup drizzled among the clouds.

“Yeah, he got a whooping with the wooden spoon and he has to go to bed without dinner.”

“That ain’t so bad,” said Johnny.

“I know. Jim’s just gonna take a double helping at dinner and eat real slow so that Mom’s show will come on and she’ll leave the table to watch and Dad will go with her, and fifteen minutes in they’ll be sitting there in the dark with lights flickering off their faces, and Jim’ll sneak food up to Henry and they won’t even know he’s walked past them.”

“You speak a lot in run on sentences.”
"I know."

"We don’t have a TV. Dad accidentally broke it."

The floor of the forest was dry and in the lull of conversation we could hear the ground crackle and crunch against the dry dirt of the forest ground. With the wind blowing, the leaves were rattling against each other and scraping the branches, and I kept listening for the parrots amid the sounds of the forest. At dusk I always got the feeling that things were more alive, like the shadows cast by the setting sun gave the rocks, and grasses, and tree trunks, and the crags in Johnny’s face, and even the bent curve of my hand a vitality it didn’t have during the blanket bright hours of the afternoon. It’s like for fifteen minutes everything, and I mean everything, comes to life and beats and beats with a pulse that isn’t a heart or a snare drum or anything. It just beats and you can hear it and feel it, and there’s a clarity to things that doesn’t exist in the absolute light of noon or the absolute dark of midnight. The shadows of dusk move across the rocks keeping rapid pace with the setting sun, and for a minute or two the rocks themselves are moving, like they’re following you along the trail, like they are getting up to stretch their rock legs for a minute before drifting off into a dark sleep. Where the grass sways and dances in the shadows of each other, and the tree trunks smile and the crags on Johnny’s face look like they’d be good spelunking for an army of miniature cavers with flashlights strapped to their hands and metal spikes clamped onto their boots and tanks of oxygen and canned meat. Everything is alive, and not in the sinister swallow you up into the land, or Wizard of Oz trees throwing apples at you, or pot falling off the stove onto your hair when you are four sort of way. Like life itself is giving you a big hug before it gets dark and danger comes out to play.
“What are you thinking about?” asked Johnny.

“Hamburgers.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

We came to the clearing in the woods where Joe had been planted, and it was darker there than in other places because Joe’s branches were thick with pine needles and pine cones and blocked out the sun more than the cottonwoods. Already Joe was among the tallest tree in the forest, and both Johnny and I were sweating from carrying my pack and we leaned the pack against Joe. Johnny pulled out a couple of sour apple candies from his pocket. He offered me one, but I declined because I didn’t want to die in the forest at night. The parrots would steal my soul away and turn me into a tree. We dumped half the water from my thermos around his roots. It hadn’t rained in a couple of days and we figured Joe was thirsty. Plus losing the water relieved some of the weight of the pack. We watched the water until it soaked into the ground, and after a few minutes we said good-bye to Joe.

The wind picked up a little as we dropped in by the school, and it was funny to walk by the school on a Saturday when it was quiet and there were no cars in the lot or kids on the playground.

“It feels like it’s abandoned,” Johnny said.

“Like a ghost town, or maybe a chimpanzee escaped and gave the entire town a weird virus or something and we’re the only ones left alive because we were in the woods.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “A chimpanzee.”

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We passed Mrs. Anderson’s classroom and saw that the sunflowers were almost five feet tall. There were twenty-five sunflowers, one for each kid in the class, and they all reached nearly halfway up the window, and even in the early dimness of night you could see the bright yellow petals. These huge flowers only made ours seem all the more dismal. By Ms. L’s class our sunflowers were still only a few inches or so out of the ground and most of the petals were gray like her sweater. I wanted to pull mine out and go plant it over with Mrs. Anderson’s class, but I thought Ms. L would give me an F, so I just patted the soil around it a few times and dumped some water.

“Ours aren’t growing very much,” said Johnny.

We stopped by the southeast edge of Lake Fancy, the part closest to the school, and sat among the cat tails and marshgrass at the edge of the lake for a bit. The moon was out over the lake, and the lake was still. I thought about my brother Jim, and the quiet way he got in the mornings when we’d go fishing. Just the two of us, when Henry wasn’t around to stir things up, and how Jim’d be still as the lake. How he’d quietly bait my hook for me and point to a spot on the bank near the cat tails and walk away to another spot beyond the boulders. How I knew it was his favorite spot to fish from because I could see the spent wrappers of pink bubble gum he was always chewing spotted with dirt and in among the weeds. How I always concentrated really hard and tried to catch the biggest trout, and all I could hear for an hour or so was the metallic spin of his reel echoing off the lake, and only the ripples from the bobbers and the occasional bubble coming up from a trout who was farting would disturb the stillness of the lake. And how
most of the time we’d both go home empty handed anyway. We didn’t even bring a basket anymore.

There were a few bubbles off to the edge of the lake near the trout farm, but the lights were off at the farm, and the loud air conditioning unit was off. It was a full moon and over the still water it looked like there were two moons out, one above and one below. Johnny just sat there quietly and tossed rocks out onto the lake, and it was getting colder, and I thought maybe we should be getting over to his house before it got too late so his parents wouldn’t be mad. I knew how my mom got when I was out after dark. But Johnny just sat there throwing rocks. I thought about offering to show him how to hold the flat ones so you could make them skip, just like Jim taught me last summer, but Johnny was just staring at the moon in the lake and seemed content with the plop sploosh of rocks sinking to the bottom, and I thought about that old fable with the raven and the glass of water.

“You keep throwing those rocks in there, Johnny, and we’re gonna have to move to higher ground.”

But Johnny didn’t say anything, and he just tossed a few more rocks. I stared up at the sky and tried to trace the bear and the warrior among the stars.

The smell of barbecue drifted across the lake, and I could see Johnny’s nose start to tickle and he snapped out of his reverie. Ms. L taught us what reverie meant only last week, and I didn’t for sure know what it meant until I saw Johnny staring blankly out at the lake and tossing rocks and the moon shaking in the water with each splash.
“Johnny,” I said, “You were in some kind of reverie.”

Johnny didn’t say much for a minute, and then slung the pack over his shoulder and pointed off towards the end of the lake where we could see the porch light on at his house and some smoke rising up through the chimney.

“Looks like Mom is barbecuing some hamburgers,” he said.

“Exceptional,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about hamburgers all day.”

Johnny never talked much about his Mom, and I suppose I didn’t either. Mom was just this weird, ambiguous word that didn’t have any definite meaning beyond a blank figure who filled up your lunch sack, or in my case, lunch foil, with food. Mom was the person who washed your clothes, wrote embarrassing things on your underwear, and either didn’t understand or had completely forgotten all of the fun things kids do. She was the enforcer, the iron-faced matron of the wooden spoon you heard in your head when you were about to do something you could get in trouble for, your excuse for not throwing rocks at Old Man Hopperton’s window, the cooing lullaby voice that reads to you about magical talking animals before you fall asleep, and the shrill wood shattering voice that hollers at you when you break the good china because you were playing flying saucers when you were supposed to be washing the dishes. In my mind all Moms were the same. I mean, they looked and sounded different, but there was a basic Mom template that existed. In my mind my Mom was just like everyone else’s mom and when they complained about or praised their moms, they might as well have been talking about my Mom. But when I met Johnny’s mom for the first time, I realized that the word mom was a noun rather than an all encompassing adjective.
The porch at Johnny’s house creaked a little when we stepped on it, and the slats of wood were splintered and had holes and were in need of some serious water seal. Ort Ort. Some of the holes were big enough to step through, and these were stuffed with moldy newspaper, or old towels, or had a chalk circle around them. The entire porch was what my dad would call a project, and I thought it would be great if he and Johnny’s dad would be friends so I could come over more. I didn’t see a truck in the driveway, Johnny’s dad had a rumbling ‘57 Chevy that you could hear from all corners of the town, so I figured he was still working. There was a soft fiddle music coming from the kitchen, where the hamburger smell came from.

“Boys?” Johnny’s mom called after she heard the porch, “Is that you?”

“Yeah, mom,” said Johnny. “We’ll be right in.” He pointed to a rusty iron bench next to the door on the porch, “Let’s drop the pack here until after dinner. It’ll be alright.” Then he dropped his voice to a whisper, “Be sure to use your best manners, she’s in a good mood tonight. I told her we were having company.”

Whereas the outside of the house was in complete disarray, from the broken boat launch, to the ramshackle porch, to the hanging window shutters, and rusty wheelbarrows grown over with weeds, the inside of the house was very nearly orderly. Apart from a few scattered editions of the morning paper, and mismatch cushions on the couch, and pictures on the wall tilted at twenty-three -degree angles, there wasn’t a whole lot of clutter. At least not the kind of clutter you’d expect based on the outside look of the house, and not the kind of mess that Mom had nightmares about, the kind that made her spit out the window of the car when she saw weeds peeking through cracks in the neighbor’s sidewalk.
Johnny’s mom peeped her head in from the kitchen.

“Come on in, boys; make sure you wash your hands before you eat.”

Johnny’s mom smiled as she talked and I got a real warm feeling about her, and with the smell of those hamburgers wafting in from the kitchen I was glad Mom let me stay. We were supposed to be eating liver and onions tonight. And though I don’t dislike liver and onions as much as most people, I still would rather have a hamburger. We washed up and walked into the kitchen, and Johnny’s mom had two plates on the table piled high with beef, lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, and cheese.

I don’t like mayonnaise much. I saw my brother Henry picking at his face when he first got into high school. It was all spotted red like the chicken pox, but lots of the red had these little white things in the middle. He’d squeeze at ’em and little shots of white would pop out and he’d start bleeding small red drops, and he’d hold the white stuff on his finger and ask me if I wanted any mayonnaise. I told him no, and I don’t think it was real mayonnaise, but every time I taste it, I picture my brother’s greasy face. I didn’t want to tell that to Mrs. Appleseed though, because my mom always says that you never question what is put in front of you on the dinner table, you just eat it. Not that there are a whole lot of questions a hamburger could answer anyway, but I figured that I should just focus on the cheese and beef and ignore the mayonnaise.

Mind over mayonnaise.

Mrs. Appleseed herself was rail thin. She smelled nice, like a combination of hamburger and lavender, and her nails were painted bright red, and I could tell that she wore a lot of make-up because when she stood directly under the light of the table it looked like she had flour on her face. She was real nice to me the whole dinner and even
let me have a second hamburger and a whole bowl of ice cream. At the end of dinner she led Johnny and I out onto the porch and asked us to sing a song. Johnny suggested “The Star Spangled Banner” because that’s the one we sing at the beginning of school each day, and the only song we know other than the dirty ones kids at school make up about us, and Mrs. Appleseed rushed back into the house and grabbed one of her husband’s old oil-stained Boy Scout uniforms so we’d have a flag to sing to.

We stood there on the porch, with the cool evening breeze blowing in off the lake, and the flickering light of the porch casting vaporous shadows across our faces, with our right hands over our hearts, and Johnny straddling one of the holes in the porch so that we could stand shoulder to shoulder with our backs straight up and proud like Ms. L taught us, singing the “Star Spangled Banner” for all the lake to hear. When we finished, we heard the low hum of crickets playing the violin on the other side of the lake, and Mrs. Appleseed gave us each a hug. From the other side of the house came the low stretching sound of growing rubber. Mr. Appleseed was not yet home.

Johnny’s room had only a twin bed, and Johnny laid it out on the floor sideways next to the box spring.

“It won’t be as comfortable for our feet,” Johnny said, “but this way we’ll both be half comfortable.” We went down and fetched my pack from the iron stool, and, because we were so close to the water, the lake the dew soaked through everything early. My extra undershirts, two pairs of long underwear, the lid of the jug of water, the three T-shirts, the jacket, the sweater, earmuffs, Dad’s old sunglasses, the first aid kit, the list of
emergency numbers, everything was wet except for the laminated rabbit’s foot for good luck. And I realized why some people laminate their rabbit’s feet.

“Aw shoots,” I said. “If it mildews, I’m in trouble.”

There was a rustling in the bushes. I know rustling is an overused word to describe what goes on in bushes, especially at night and when the storyteller is about to recount some hideous beast or small harmless cat, but that’s what I’ve grown up hearing so that’s what I’m using. Besides, no one would know what I was talking about if I said: there was a quiet sternutation in the bushes. Anyway, by the time all this ran through my head, and I looked over at the bushes to see what it was, there was nothing there. Johnny got all goosebumpy, but don’t worry because this isn’t a horror story.
The rumble of a ’57 Chevy engine woke me from my sleep. My back hurt a little, and I saw the flash of headlights cut through the shades of Johnny’s room. The shades sagged a bit at the top, and the light bounced off the ceiling and looked like one of those searchlights they show on TV when they are chasing someone in Los Angeles. The rumbling shook the floor and the bed a little, and knocked up some of the dust. I’ve always thought the way dust swirls in a light beam is beautiful, like rain on the highway, and even though it makes me sneeze I wish I had a camera so I could take a picture. Johnny woke up and asked if his dad was home and I said yes and then we both fell back asleep.

Creak.

“Johnny!” A raspy voice came from the door. I couldn’t see a face because the room was dark and the way we’d set up the beds meant you could only open the door three inches. Johnny suggested we do it in case the creature from the lake came out and tried to eat us.

“I’ve never heard of any creature from the lake,” I told him.

“That’s because no one lives to tell the tale.”

“What?”

“He eats their memory too!”

So when the raspy voice came through the door calling Johnny’s name and I couldn’t see a face, I thought it was the lake monster and screamed and wet the bed.
“Johnny!” The voice came again and I sat there wet and embarrassed and shaking and tried to poke Johnny to wake him up, but my whole body froze and my legs felt really weak, and I wondered what it felt like to be eaten.

Johnny stirred a bit.

“Hmmpf,” Johnny mumbled into his pillow.

“Johnny, come on boy, get up.” This time a smell came in with the voice. A potent smell, like rubbing alcohol. Probably swamp breath from all the gases at the bottom of the lake. That’s what the lake monster uses to wash down the people he eats. That’s what makes their memory go away. Just lying there frozen with fear I felt myself forgetting about Johnny already.

“Get up, boy, we need to pick now. While it’s still dark out. You know how it gets when the sun comes up.” The door creaked against the foot of the bed, and I reached into the pack for dad’s sunglasses. I figured if I had the sunglasses on, the lake creature wouldn’t be able to see me, either that or he’d confuse me with a mannequin. I hated to see Johnny go, and I knew that pretending to be a mannequin was cowardly, but deep in my heart I’d rather be a wet coward, than a dead lake monster snack. I pictured my family waking up in the morning, completely forgetting about me and wondering whose stuff cluttered up my room. They might even think they’d been reverse burgled like that time Grandma McGrew came home from her trip to Florida and found that her house had been stocked with a new TV, VCR, loveseat, and a golden tasseled purple ottoman.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Sheriff Driply.
But Grandma just complained that if they were going to reverse burgle her, they could have at least brought in one of those Heavenly Mattresses that folds up into the wall at night and regulates blood flow electronically.

"Johnny," the voice said again. This time he stirred. I saw him wrinkle his nose and looked around for a cat or small mouse to blame the pee on.

"Dad?" said Johnny. "Is that you?"

"Johnny, my boy, get out of bed. The day’s half over and the way you move we’ll lose half of our crops."

"Paul’s spending the night, Dad, can’t we put it off till tomorrow. You know how Mom never lets anyone spend the night."

When I heard that it was Johnny’s dad creeping around and smelling like rubbing alcohol I threw my dad’s sunglasses back into the pack and pulled out a spare pair of long johns and changed into them. Mom always starched my long johns and it took two or three wearings before they lost their cardboard feeling. These ones were freshly starched because Mom thought it would be embarrassing if I wore the ones with wrinkles and barbecue stains on them. They scratched my legs as I put them on. Then I crammed my soiled ones into my plastic Hopperton’s dirty laundry bag and shoved it to the bottom of the pack next to my pink hat.

Now that Johnny’s dad’s car sat parked outside, the room was pitch black. Clouds hung in the sky and the branches of the overgrown pine tree blocked out the little moonshine that got past the clouds. My eyes had been open for five minutes now, but there are some blacknesses your eyes will never adjust too. I figured if I couldn’t see, then Johnny couldn’t either and it wasn’t until I stepped on the rabbit’s foot and slipped
and stubbed my toe on the wooden end of the box spring that Johnny asked me what I was up to.

“Nothing,” I whispered, and I finished up changing. Johnny’s dad panted like a dog in the hallway and I heard the meaty thud of his shoulder as he threw it repeatedly into the door trying to open it.

“Gawd dum it, Johnny,” he said. A thud came from the floor, and I imagined that he was wearing heavy boots because of the way they echoed down the hall. “Cut the bull shit, Johnny, we’ve got to work.”

Outside it was cold and quiet. Mr. Appleseed was steaming drunk and stumbled down the stairs and I could see the steam rising off of his thick beard and shoulders and into the mist. When Johnny introduced me at the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Appleseed wrapped his arms around me and gave me a big hug.

“Glad you’re aboard,” he said and for a minute I thought we were going to be pirates, but he only led us out beyond the banyan tree to the tool shed.

The tool shed, like everything else at the Appleseed house, looked like it ought to have existed only those black and white photographs you find in the bottom of the nickel postcard barrel down at Hopperton’s. The roof was corrugated tin and patched over with slabs of rubber, and in the quiet of the night, the kind of quiet you don’t find by a river or highway, the kind that only comes by lakes and boulders, the kind of quiet that makes disc jockeys and taxi drivers mad with nostalgia, I could hear the slight echo as pine needles and banyan leaves fell and settled on the roof. Mr. Appleseed unhitched the latch on the door, which hung only on its top hinge, but the gesture was a superfluous one.
wood panels that made up the side of the shed were gray and splintered. There were holes of various size, color, and shape in the walls, and in some places you could see clear through to where his '57 Chevy rested drooped down in the front because Mr. Appleseed had parked in a drainage ditch. The passenger door was open and I could see a pile of cigarette boxes and aluminum cans spilling out from the floor and seat and into a puddle in the ditch. Mr. Appleseed put his arms around Johnny and me, tilted his head back, and laughed.

"It's a great night to be a caribou."

"What?" I said. But Mr. Appleseed entered the shed and started fiddling around with the tools.

Johnny shrugged when Mr. Appleseed let us go, and I put my hands up to my temples like antlers and pawed at the ground. Mr. Appleseed rummaged around the tool shed and pulled out a giant pair of shears, a hoe, and a wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow didn't have a wheel, and I thought that would make it only a barrow, or maybe even a handle barrow, and Johnny's dad, who had rewrapped his arm around my shoulder, kept bursting out in fits of raucous laughter. He grabbed the hoe and jumped up into the wheelbarrow where his steel-toed boots made a deep hollow clanging that bounced back and forth in the deeper parts of the barrow.

"You know how to work one of these things, Paul?"

"I've never seen one without a wheel before," I replied.

"You don't need to worry about that once we get out there." He handed the hoe to me and the shears to Johnny. Johnny kept yawning and dragged the shears in the dirt as we walked around the leeward side of the house. The blade left a sinuous trail in the
moonlight and created small moonshadows against the level dust. It was fine dirt, and seemed to have a life to it like water on the lake. Ripples seemed to move slowly outward in sine waves from Johnny’s shears. Both Johnny and his dad stumbled as we walked, and they dragged their feet like Mom always says you shouldn’t, and I imagined how mad she’d be at them if they were wearing their Sunday shoes. But Johnny’s dad wore a tattered pair of leather work boots with steel rungs and frayed laces and a hole at the seam by the arch of his foot. Johnny wore no shoes at all. His dad wrapped his feet in duct tape. Shuffle shuffle stumble.

_The grand old Duke of York. He had ten thousand men. One was carryin’ a rusty hoe and two were stum-ble-in’._

I kept my distance behind the both of them carrying the hoe on my shoulder like a British soldier, pickin’ my knees up straight to a ninety-degree angle and laying my feet down soft. So I didn’t make any noise. Bit by bit we headed towards the growing fields where Johnny’s dad made his fortune and his fate. Three shadows casting a ripple into the waters of the night.

“You gotta be careful,” said Mr. Appleseed. Johnny and I were wrapped up under his two arms and he kept swingin’ his head back and forth between us and breathin’ in our faces. His breath wasn’t so bad in the night breeze, and mostly the smell of fertilizer and rotting fish from the trout farm filled the air.

“These fences is electrified.”

We stood at the edge of a clearing in the trees that marked the end of both the town and the Appleseed property. Beyond the trees a sloppily constructed tangle of barbed wire leaned against an assortment of scrap metal, railroad spikes, rusty wire
hangers, and two bicycle frames. One of the bikes looked like the yellow Springmaster
Special my brother Henry had stolen from him back when I was in the fourth grade.
Henry drew fifty pictures of his bike and put up signs all over town offering a $3 reward
(he didn’t even have three dollars but he figured the person who returned it would be the
thief, anyway, and we spent half the summer digging a ditch at the edge of our property
and filling with wooden stakes so that we could throw the perpetrator in there), but he
never got it back.

I wondered what kind of crop was so important that it needed to be protected by
electrified barbed wire, because corn and strawberries and carrots were plentiful on the
farms at the outskirts of town, and humans didn’t pose much of a threat. Fruit flies and
locusts and corn moths do most of the damage, and an electrified fence wouldn’t do
anything to stop them.

“‘There’s a weak spot in between the two bike frames. Bikes ain’t good conductors
of electricity.’”

Mr. Appleseed tossed his jacket over the barbed wire and leaned the wheelbarrow
against the fence so that Johnny and I could hop over. We tossed our tools over the fence
for Mr. Appleseed, who wheezed heavily and whose face sweated with the effort from
dragging the barrow. He pulled a metal flask out from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“You guys need a sip of hooch to get you going?” He waved the bottle under our
noses and laughed before upending the bottle. He closed his eyes and his elbow pointed
out at a thirty -degree angle and in the moonlight he looked like a wax statue. When he
finished, he let out a whistle, hopped on one foot, screwed up his face like he’d sucked
down a quart of motor oil, and passed out face down at the edge of a row of crops.
“Let’s just leave him there and get to picking,” said Johnny.

“We should cover him up or get him a blanket,” I said.

“Nah. If he wakes up and sees we’re not working, he’ll be mad.”

Something about the way Johnny said he’ll be mad worried me, and in my head I pictured all the things that could have happened if Mr. Appleseed awoke and found that we weren’t pickin’ his crops. I knew that if he tried to hit me I could tell my parents and we could sue him. I’d never sued anyone before, but they do it all the time on the television and in the news, and I figured I could make a million dollars at least. But in school we’ve been studying about ancient and foreign civilizations, like the ones in the way back days when no one had tires or fire or buy one get one free. In those cultures the entire village was responsible for disciplining and raising the children, and I wondered if maybe the Appleseeds believed in the old ways and if they might feed me to the lake monster for being lazy.

Johnny stepped over the jacket and down into the tire fields.

“Don’t worry about the electricity. He was just kidding,” Johnny said. “My mom says he gets imaginative after he’s had a few.”

Imaginative or not I still didn’t touch the wire. I just picked up my hoe and hurried after Johnny who had moved off down the row in which his father had passed out.

“Make sure they’re ripe,” Johnny said. “Once they are perfectly round and the rubber is a little soft to the touch, that’s when you know they’re ready. And when you cut it from the stem, make sure you don’t cut it too close, otherwise you’ll puncture the tire and we’ll have to sell it half price. Usually if you cut above the leaves you’ll be okay.”
I'd never seen a tire field before, but the field still struck me as being a bit off. At home, in the back yard, Dad keeps a garden. Mom says he’s got a green thumb. It’s not true unless it glows green in the dark and only when kids aren’t around. (Once, during dinner, his thumb flashed green for a second. I only saw it once and out of the corner of my eye, but I swear it is true. Henry says the broccoli we had that night passed by and I didn’t notice because I got too excited by the green and stared at Dad’s thumb for three minutes, and Mom had to smack me on the shoulder with a spatula to bring me out of my reverie. Henry never has been long on faith though.)

Regardless of what color Dad’s thumb is, his garden is the pride of the house. It’s surrounded by a white picket fence that Henry, Jim, and I paint white the first Saturday after the snow dries every year. The garden is arranged, as Dad says, “in a physically and metrically geometric manner.” Each plant, herb, vegetable, and fruit is planted in a little planter box that is one meter square. There are ten boxes in all, representing the full range of the color spectrum. Strawberries, raspberries, goldenrod, carnations, lettuce, oregano, artichokes, blueberries, indigroses, and eggplant. The indigroses are these deep indigo roses that Dad found when cutting through the woods on the other side of the lake. He and Mom used to meet for moonlight fruit picnics in a grove two clicks away from the trout farm. The roses are a symbol of love, he tells me, but I’ve never heard of a love with thorns even half as big as the ones on the indigroses. I reckon I lost half a pint of blood in preschool when I tried to pick one for my teacher cause I didn’t have anything to give her for Christmas. The whole garden is arranged in a 4,3,2,1 pattern and surrounded by a triangular fence. Apart from me, Henry, and Jim, Dad says he’s proudest of the garden.
The dog sleeps chained up by the fence to keep out the seasonal botanists who try and sneak in when the indigrose is in full spring bloom. And I guess you can tell a botanist by smell because the dog can’t see and people steal our strawberries and lettuce all the time.

Where my Dad’s garden is arranged by color, shape, and size, Mr. Appleseed’s tire field wasn’t arranged at all. Bicycle tires grew next to tractor tires. The tractor tires wrapped their black vines around the steel belted radials. The steel belted radials ensnared the all weather traction control wheels, and the spare tires sprouted up in weedlike patches throughout the field. The field measured maybe an acre or two, and was surrounded on all sides by pine trees. There weren’t rows in the traditional European garden sense, but more the haphazard zigzag rows of the famous Anarchist gardens that Mom tells me about. The ones where nothing gets picked on time because there is no order, and all the people of the kingdom turn pale with hunger, and throw themselves upon the burning pyres of self-sacrifice. That’s the story she always reads before spring cleaning. Henry says she makes it up. I couldn’t imagine Mr. Appleseed, prone and stout as a sea lion, face down and exhaling small dust storms, throwing himself onto anything, so I wasn’t sure the myth still applied today.

“It shouldn’t take us too long,” Johnny said. “Usually, once I fill up the barrow, I’m done. With two of us working it shouldn’t take more than forty minutes.”

Johnny handed me the shears and pointed towards a bicycle tire.

“These ones are easier to cut, but it takes four of them to take up the space of a steel belted radial. The spare tires are pretty easy too, but there’s not much of a market for them. We can get seven bucks a piece for a spare, but the all weathers and the steel belted bring in up to thirty. Dad’s the only one who can cut the tractor tires. They’re
worth the most, but even the two of us couldn’t move ’em. That’s why a lot of the tractor
tires go bad.”

Johnny poked at a tractor tire near the end of a row. It whistled at the thrust of the
shears and spat at Johnny. He jumped back and put his hands up to shield his eyes, but a
spattering of black juice that looked like oil and smelled like licorice and burned hot dogs
covered his right leg from the knee down.

“Gross,” I said.

“Don’t eat any. If you eat any of the crops we’ll both get in trouble.”

I stared at Johnny for a minute, because I couldn’t be sure whether he was serious
or not. Certainly the human digestive system couldn’t process tires, plus neither the taste
nor the smell of dusty rubber would cause my mouth to water. But Johnny just walked
over towards one of the bike tires with his shears, stretched the vine taut, and in a second
he had a ripe tire thrown around his neck.

“I do it this way so I don’t waste time walking back and forth between the
barrow.”

It took me a little longer to get the hang of it, and by the time I chopped and
hacked my way through the vine on my first bike tire, Johnny had already dropped his
first load of tires off in the barrow.

I watched Johnny while he worked. He operated much faster than I did. Vine,
clip, tire. With the steel belted it was vine, clip, clip, clip, clip, tire. The vines on the steel
belted were thick, and I couldn’t get through them even with ten clips with the shears. For
the first few tires I felt myself getting angry at Johnny. Not angry because he acted mean
or ignored me or anything, but jealous anger. If Henry and Jim and I had a tire field, we
could have an entire fleet of racing box cars, bikes, and tire swings hangin’ from every branch. We could swing from tree to tree like Tarzan of the tire people. We would use the inner tubes and float around the lake and pretend to be frogs and *ribbit* and *ribbit* and leap into the water and eat gummy flies.

"Hey Johnny," I called to him across a row. "How come you never build racers or float around the lake with these tires?"

"Not allowed to." He paused for a moment and picked up a steel belted with his right arm. "Come on, Paul, I think we’ve got enough. Let’s get back to sleep before the sun comes up. I never can sleep when the sun is out."

To the east there were streaks of peach on the horizon, and Johnny and I loaded up the barrow with fifteen tires. I’d cut four of them, and of those, two were a little lopsided and not quite ripe.

"It’s okay," Johnny said. "We’ll put those at the bottom so Dad can’t see."

Mr. Appleseed wriggled around by the wheelbarrow and started to cough.

"Man alive and hocus pocus, whose been filling my mouth with dust?"

Johnny ignored him and clipped a wheelbarrow wheel from a hedge by the barbed wire and fitted it onto the barrow.

"We’re finished, Dad," Johnny said as he picked up the handles and started to wheel the tires over towards the house. I rushed over to grab one of the handles and Johnny waved me off and whispered that he was used to it.

"I hope you didn’t go lazy because your friend is here," called Mr. Appleseed. His eyes were closed and he rolled around on his back like a cockroach trying to right itself.

He upended his flask and when nothing came out he hurled it into the fields.
“Cut the bull...” he said, but by the time he finished, Johnny and I were out of earshot.
Spring

Mary Garcia danced with her broom last night. I saw her because I climbed up in the tree that wasn’t there after I was supposed to be in bed. I couldn’t sleep ’cause my bed felt like rocks and the wind was blowing through the tree in the way that makes it whistle and sway in the breeze. I never could sleep when it was whistling like that. Even with the window closed and Kleenex stuffed in my ears. Sometimes I liked to whistle along. Mom told me not to whistle in the house, so I had to go climb the tree. The neighborhood was dark except for the orange streetlights that buzz like bees, and the glow of the moon, which doesn’t make any noise at all. I could see the moon’s eyes and mouth and with the branches it looked like it had a moustache too.

I sat in the tree for a while and whistled the theme song to the Andy Griffith Show and pictured myself going fishing with my dad when a light came on across the street. It was Mary, who was in high school with Jim and known throughout the neighborhood for her amaretto legs. She was wearing a big gray shirt and sweat pants that covered her amaretto legs, but I didn’t mind ’cause I always liked her smile, which was pure as the spring sky, anyway. She danced around the kitchen with a broom like she was practicing to be Cinderella. Every once in a while she’d stop and bow to the broom. I thought it was silly to bow to a broom, and I laughed a little, but I watched her until she was through because her hair bounced up and down like a rabbit. All night long I dreamt of rabbits, and Henry socked me twice cause I was hopping around on the bed.
That weekend, when I was sitting on the porch with my older brothers, Mary Garcia walked by and smiled at us. Our dog was lying in the grass the whole time and didn’t bark like he normally does when people walk by. You always knew it was Mary Garcia if you heard footsteps and the dog didn’t bark. She was wearing one of her short skirts, and her legs looked smooth and sweet as cinnamon sticks, this according to Henry, who didn’t like amaretto.

“It’s not her legs, I’m looking at,” said Jim, my oldest brother and the one who was in Mary’s class at the high school. And I was thought he was talking about her smile, and wondering how it could be spring so early in the year, but I noticed in between hops that his eyes weren’t looking at her smile.

“You know what I’d do with those melons?” he said to Henry. (The two of them hardly ever asked me questions, except around Christmas, and then only so that they could get me a gift I didn’t want like a bag of pistachios or black licorice, when I told them every year I wanted a set of watercolor paints.) And I didn’t know why they called ’em melons, because melons are hard and green. Her melons were soft and white like clouds.

“Probably the same thing you do with all the other melons in this town,” said Henry, “which pretty much amounts to nothin’.” And Jim got that angry look in his eye and he and Henry went around the side of the house to see what was what, and I could hear some yellin’ and thumpin’ for a few minutes before they disappeared in the house to grab a football and some iced tea.

I went in and got a tall glass of lemonade with lots of ice, on account of the sun getting beyond the shade of the tree, and took it out to the porch with me and was calling
out races between the drops of condensation on the side of the glass like on the radio, when I noticed the dog wasn’t barking anymore. I hated to look up ’cause I knew Mary was going to be standing there at the fence, but I did anyway and there she was.

“You’re a funny boy,” she called over the fence. And I felt this weird rush of sensation over me, like in the shower when someone flushes the toilet, and my face went bright as a stoplight.

“You’ve got amaretto legs,” I told her ’cause I couldn’t think of anything else and I didn’t want her to leave. I took a big swig of my lemonade until there was nothing left but the lemon and the ice, and rocked a few times on the swinging bench.

“How come you’re always out here on this porch?” she asked. And I wanted to tell her about the intermittency of the sun, and the sway of the tree, and the bark of the dog, but I was feeling uncomfortable and just said, “I don’t know.”

“You got a girlfriend?”

“Mother says I can’t go out until I get to high school.”

“Well then, you’ve got a ways to go,” she said, and she pulled out tissue out of her purse and wiped her eyebrows and no make-up came off because she never wore anything but lipstick.

“Let me get you some lemonade,” I called, and before she could say no I was coming down the steps with my mom’s sorority mug, which I wasn’t supposed to touch, but it was the best looking glass we had. I even put in two slices of lemon.

“You’re so sweet,” she said and wrapped her arms around me and gave me a hug, and I could see why my brothers were so keen on her melons, even though I still thought they were soft as clouds, and I turned red again.
We sat down on the rocks for a while why she drank her lemonade, and the dog came over and sniffed at Mary’s knees for a while before flopping down in the grass. But I didn’t need to sniff her knees to tell that she smelled like lilacs and apples. She was talking for a while about her ex-boyfriend who had a motorcycle and lived in the next town, and how he used to take her for rides in the countryside, and her hair would slap at her cheeks and shoulders when they turned, and how great everything was when they were on the motorcycle.

“It stinks, you know,” she said, “that you can’t live your whole life on a motorcycle.”

I got jealous for a bit and wondered how old you had to be to get a motorcycle, but for the most part I just sat there and listened to her talk. She wanted to be an actress a dancer, and I told her with her pretty smile and amaretto legs I thought she’d be great at both.

“If you was in a movie I’d save up my lawn mowing money to see you,” I told her, even though Mom never paid me for mowing the lawns. Mary nodded and patted my head and said she’d like that very much. She talked for a while longer and I got the feeling that she was sad. She smiled while she talked, but her eyes looked puffy and gray, like she’d been crying and I wondered what a girl like Mary had to cry about. After a while, when the shadows had changed and the wind had picked up, she finished her lemonade and handed me the mug.

“It’s been real nice talking with you,” said Mary, which was an odd thing to say because she had done all the talking. Then she leaned over and gave me a kiss on the
cheek, which to this day is the sweetest kiss I’ve ever gotten, and I wished she would do
it again because her lips were soft and made my ears tingle.

“Mary,” I called, when she was a few steps down the sidewalk, “I seen you
dancing with that broom the other night. I know I’m not supposed to, but I did and I
never told anyone.” And I wished I hadn’t told her because I was sure she’d hate me now,
but I felt I had to tell her after she kissed me.

“That’s okay,” she said not turning around, “I saw you up in that tree.”

Mary walked across the street and twirled once, slow and deliberate, on her porch
before she disappeared inside.

I heard two clacks like shoes on the porch behind me. I figured it was Mom and I
hid her sorority glass under my shirt and turned around.

“Mark my words,” she said, “that girl is in for a lifetime of sorrow.”

“She’s nice,” I said.

“That’s what I mean.” Mom turned around and stepped halfway in the house.

“And don’t forget to bring in my sorority mug.”

I scrambled to my feet and pulled the mug out from under my shirt. But before I
went inside I took another look at Mary’s place. A parrot feather floated by with the
breeze from the lake, and I ran up and put it on Mary’s porch. As I walked home, the
smell of fresh lilacs tickled my nose, and the air with thick with dandelion pollen.

Every once in a while, when no one else is around, I’ll climb up in the tree that
isn’t there, or sit on the rocks by the fence, and stare off at Mary’s place, and wonder
about the spring and the funny things it does.
Field Trip Preparations

On the day we went to Grandma McGrew’s house for our class field trip, Ms. Lancaster tied her brown hair back in a pony tail and wore a bright pink dress with sunflowers.

“What’s she know about sunflowers?” I thought to myself.

She stood in front of the class holding a pile of permission slips in one hand and writing our homework on the board with the other. If she was wearing a crown she would have looked like the Statue of Liberty, except shorter and more flexible. Her dress hung to her ankles, and was slit on both sides up to the knee. When she stood on her tip toes to write the date at the top of the board, the slit parted and the whole class could see her bare leg. It wasn’t very exciting as far as legs go. It didn’t have the smooth amaretto color of Mary’s legs, or even the variegated clumps of fur the dog had that all whirred together at a sprint. I caught Mr. Lindman, Trevor’s dad and one of the chaperones for our field trip, looking at it and smiling. The other four chaperones: my Dad, Mr. Jenkins, Mrs. Davenport, and Ms. Lewis, were gathered at the side of the room and holding their color coded wrist bands.

“You already know whose group you are in,” Ms. Lancaster said. “Your field trip assignment sheets will have either a black, red, green, blue, purple, or yellow stripe at the top. Black is Mr. Lindman. Red, Mr. Jenkins. Green, Mr. McGrew. Purple, Mrs. Davenport. Red, Ms. Lewis. And yellow is with me.”

“Aw, man.”

Alex Tonitirria raised his hand.
“Ms. Lancaster,” he called. “I didn’t get one.”

“That’s because young men who write nonsense words on their spelling tests are not mature enough to visit The McGrew Museum of Figurines.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s not fair that you make light of the prefix ‘pre’ by writing predogurinal. You have your worksheet for the day. You’ll be sitting in the fishbowl outside of Mr. Ritzo’s office.”

The fishbowl was a glass room with three desks between the nurse’s office and the school secretary. It got its name when Junky Lindman, Trevor’s older brother, used to be sent there three times a week by Ms. L. There weren’t any curtains, just three sets of clear plastic windows and a door. Whenever students would come to the office to drop off attendance sheets or pick up their lunch, Junky would suck his cheeks in and walk slowly back and forth across the room with his hand flicking around behind him like a tail, shaking his butt and gulping at imaginary bits of fish food.

Ms. Lancaster pulled a bright orange office pass from her folder with all the permission slips and emergency cards and handed it to Alex.

“Mr. Ritzo is expecting you in three minutes.”

Alex left the room with his chin pressed against his chest and his backpack dragging on the floor behind him. Alex was one of the bigger kids in class. He was an only child whose favorite trick at lunch was to shout, “What’s that?” and snatch pepperonis and brownies from other people’s lunch trays. His head was down, but rumor
had it that his impression of a goldfish was ten times better than Junky’s ever was.

Johnny said he’d seen him rub green beans on his face and pretend to have ick.

“For the rest of you,” Ms. Lancaster said. “Take a moment to look over your sheets. There are five questions you need to answer. Each one is worth two points, for a total of ten. Remember, your final grade is out of two hundred and fifty points, so this is five percent of your total grade.”

“For four percent,” my Dad whispered. He held up four fingers.

“We’re leaving in five minutes, so please check in with your chaperone and get your bracelet. No switching to be with your friends. No, you can’t trade. Don’t forget to grab your lunch sack on the way out the door. There is no cafeteria or souvenirs at the museum. I don’t think it is necessary to remind you that I expect you to be using your very best manners today. Remember, once we get there, use your indoor voices.”

When Ms. L finished talking, I got up and walked over to my dad. He was wearing a bright green long sleeve shirt and his favorite tie: a pelican eating a salmon.

Grandma McGrew got Dad a regular fish tie, a wide-eyed trout with silver and purple scales, for Christmas two years ago, and Dad put it on immediately over his Santa pajamas.

“My God,” Mom had said. “It’s positively atrocious.”

“I think it’s real trout,” Dad replied. “And I’m a ferocious grizzly bear.”

He stuffed it in his mouth and Mom went to the kitchen to check on the scones. He wore it every once in a while to work, not so much because he liked it or because it matched his garlic mashed potato pants, but mostly because Mom refused to look directly at it, as though she might be hypnotized and brainwashed by the shiny silver scales. She
squirmed uncomfortably in her chair and bit nearly through her tongue every time he wore it.

On the following Father’s Day, Henry bought him the pelican. Partly because he thought Mom might think it was funny, but mostly because it was fifty percent off at Hopperton’s. At home I liked the tie. I fantasized about wrapping it around my hand and sneaking into Mom and Dad’s room at night, and dangling it in front of her, and softly calling her name until she woke up with a fake salmon spawning its way around her toes. But here, in class, about to go to my Grandma’s house on a field trip, I didn’t like it nearly so much.

Johnny, Hollerin’ Holly, and Bad Brad, the deaf-mute kid who sits on the other side of the class, wears Hawaiian shirts, and carries around a note pad, were in my Dad’s group. Dad wrapped each of our right wrists with a green band.

“Hello, I’m Mr. McGrew,” he said. “And you can call me Mr. McGrew. Or, if you are slightly more daring, you can call me…”

From behind his back, Dad whipped out a bright white hat with laurel leaves and a shiny black brim.

“The Admiral.”

“Oh no,” I whispered.

“Okay, Admiral,” Holly said.

Bad Brad scribbled me a note.

Your Dad is weird.

I nodded. He handed me another note.

And you have a gray hair.
“Johnny,” I called. “Do I have a gray hair?”

Johnny motioned for me to bend my head over and took a long, careful look. Too long for my liking, but I noticed his brown tennis shoes had a small hole over the big toe, and that his big toe wiggled around the whole time he was looking.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Let’s go,” Dad said. “Everyone in the Admiral’s green navy, a-ten-hut. Private Holly, you lead the troops out to the U.S.S. Dodge McGrew. It’s a rusty old bucket, but it’ll hold.”

“Dad. Please.”

“It’ll hold because it’s got to hold. Private McGrew, any more dissention from you, and you’ll find yourself pulling KP duty. Comprende?”

Holly threw her shoulders back and led us out of Ms. L’s class. Left. Left. Left right left. She was followed by Brad, Johnny, and then me. Johnny picked up a crooked stick and dragged it along the base of the red brick exterior of the school, leaving a resinous white line that surged and plunged like a seismograph.

“Private Johnny, return your rapier to its scabbard until you see the whites of your enemy’s eyes. Keep dragging it along the brickwork like that and you’ll find yourself face down in a muddy ditch, your face melted from mustard gas.”

“Dad.”

I looked over at Johnny, but he was at attention against the Dodge, and the stick was thrust under his belt buckle. Flanking him were Holly and Bad Brad, both of whom were standing with their right forefinger bisecting the distance between their eyebrows and hairlines.
Bad Brad handed my Dad a slip of paper. He looked at it and folded it in half.

“That’s what I like to hear, Private Brad. You’ve been promoted to E-2. You’ll make a fine soldier some day.”

Dad handed me the slip of paper, saluted Holly, Brad, and Johnny, and unlocked the door to the Dodge.

*Admiral’s Green Navy—torpedoes are loaded and unit is ready for action, sir.*

“Holly, throw the briefcase on the floor. Paul, you get in front. And for the rest of you, I don’t want you thinking this is an act of nepotism or communism. I love this country. Paul’s riding in front because he’s got the biggest butt, and there’s more room up there.”

“Yes, sir,” Holly said. “Paul’s big butt is affirmative.”

“Not that a-firm,” Johnny said. He withdrew his stick and poked at my rear.

“Private Johnny,” Dad said, “we do not make fun of our fellow soldiers on this ship. However, your quick mind will take you far in this Navy. You’re an E-2.”

When I climbed into the car I scooted in butt first and quick as I could. I didn’t want anyone to see it, because I knew it looked even bigger in the tight purple shorts that Grandma had given me for Christmas. I wore them over the weekend so I wouldn’t have to wear them on the field trip, but Mom said I had to wear them on the field trip. Otherwise Grandma would think I was ungrateful.

“I am ungrateful,” I replied. “I hate these shorts. Everyone makes fun of me and calls me Sausage Butt.”
But Mom wouldn't hear otherwise and I wore them. I even tried wrapping my sweatshirt around my waist, but Mom said it was too hot for a sweatshirt, and she didn't want me to leave it behind, so she put it back in the closet.

“Private Paul,” Dad said. He turned the key in the engine, and the thick layer of warm dust coating the dashboard flitted about in the sun before settling. The Dodge started on the first try. “As you are in the front of the U.S.S. Dodge McGrew, you have specific duties. Commensurate with your duties is a rank promotion. Are you prepared to handle your duties?”

“Dad.”

“Private Paul, are you, or are you not prepared to handle your duties as co-captain?”

I turned around and looked in the back seat. Johnny was behind me, Bad Brad was in the middle, and Hollerin’ Holly was behind Dad with her scraped elbow hanging out the window. Each of them had the school prepared paper bag lunch, consisting of a turkey sandwich on white bread, a red apple, a cinnamon granola bar, and a box of apple juice, sitting on their laps. Holly nodded at me.

“Aye aye, captain,” I said.

“That’s the spirit, Private McGrew. You’ve been promoted to E-3. Now make sure your shipmates are wearing their life preservers, and we’ll get this old junkwagon out onto the sea.”
Because the district had cut expenses over the summer, all five of the county’s school buses now sat in the empty lot behind Hopperton’s General Store. Mosses and grasses grew over the gray and cracking tires. Most of the windows had been broken and shattered by kids throwing rocks or practicing with their BB guns. There was even some graffiti, the first in Lake Fancy’s history, a bright orange peace symbol, along the side of Valley School Bus #3. This, Mom said, signaled the end of the world as we knew it.

“The dirt of the 21st Century has finally been kicked on the shins of our town.”

Since all the buses were in hibernation, all field trips were possible only through what the district called, “the generous donation of time, gas, a minimum level of comprehensive automobile insurance, and the triplicate signing of waivers of liability against the district in case of any accidents.” The U.S.S. Dodge McGrew brought up the rear of our field trip caravan, behind Ms. L’s yellow Le Car hatchback with the aluminum foil gas cap, two minivans, a sport utility vehicle, and Mr. Lindman’s chromium blue Ford F-150. Dad and I stared at the custom painted image of a fire-spouting dragon attacking a mist-shrouded castle the entire ride to the McGrew Museum of Miniature Figurines.

Holly and Johnny, on the other hand, sang

*Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate’s life for me...*

and

*My body lies over the ocean
My body lies over the sea
My body lies over the ocean
So bring back my body to me*

and

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for most of the ride over to the museum, but I just rolled down the window and stared out at fields lining the side of the road. Once we got past Hopperton’s and the buses, there were a few untended fields. They had been wheat fields owned by Mr. Hopperton’s family years ago, but he’d sold the land to a couple of men who claimed to be developers about three years ago. They’d worn crisp, navy blue suits and dark reflective sunglasses. I remembered because they’d come into our fourth grade classroom and taken some pictures and handed out candy bars after we filled out some sort of survey, but no one had heard from them since.

Dad told me once that they were probably just some speculation investors, hoping that when the urban sprawl reached our neck of the woods, they could throw up a strip mall and a parking lot. Henry’s ears perked up when he heard that.

“I thought you said they’d never put a strip mall in this town with Reverend Musselwhite in the pulpit.”

“Strip joint,” Dad said. “And you need to stop sneaking down the hall when your mother and I are watching her show.”

From the looks of the fields now, the only thing those men developed in three years was a breeding ground for rats and a makeshift dump for people who didn’t want to pay ten dollars or drive the twenty minutes to the county dump behind the hills. The wind swirled to and fro amongst the dry, brown wheat, blowing it first towards the road, then gently away and back again, like a large invisible hand with thick calluses was reaching down and ruffling the hair of the earth. The road was bumpy, and the shocks on the Dodge had been nothing more than rusty decorations for the past three years, and the
way the car rocked up and down with the rutted crooks of the road, and the way the fresh 
country air, dashed with the gritty, salty powder of warm dust, brushed against my nose, 
the whole thing reminded me of the ocean.

Holly’s hand dipped up and down like a seal outside of the window. She began to 
sing “Sailing, sailing…”

Johnny had his eyes closed and his head out the window. His blond hair whipped 
him in the forehead and around the eyes, but he joined Holly in between gulps. Bad Brad 
had his arms stuffed inside his shirt, and he rubbed his arms like he was cold, even 
though it must have been eighty degrees outside and the wind was a warm one. He 
bobbed his head back and forth while watching Holly’s hand. I looked over at my Dad 
who was in the midst of singing the bass round of “…over the open sea.”

He took off his admiral’s cap, and put it over my eyes.
When we got to Grandma’s house for the field trip, Ms. Lancaster was standing at the base of the stairs, and lining the groups up by color and according to height.

“We’re not going anywhere until you guys get in alphabetical height order.” She crossed her eyes and looked out at the parents and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, ‘Kids today.’

“And if you can’t do it and quiet down in the next ten seconds, we’re going to hop back in the cars, go back to school, and practice our silent reading response journals.”

Most of the kids groaned, and I figured the parent chaperones would be mighty ticked off if they had to pile a bunch of angry kids into their cars and head back to the school, and if they had taken a day off of work for nothing, but Ms. Lancaster didn’t let on that she was using a ploy. We got into order as best we could, and a few of us were still grumbling.

“No grumbling in the Admiral’s Green Navy. We’re the elite unit on this field trip and I expect you four to be the best behaved group out here. I have complete confidence that your manners will prevail over the evil forces of adolescence. Now a-ten-hut.”

Brad, Holly, and Johnny saluted, and then snapped to attention. Bad Brad was standing so upright I thought he was going to fall over backwards. I gave a quick salute and puffed up my chest. We were the quietest line by far.

“Three, two...” Ms. Lancaster was still doing the countdown because a couple of kids were still talking to each other, and Trevor was poking his buddy Oakley in the back and kept shoving him into the other kids in the group and there was a whole bunch of
dust being kicked up and, because of the way the wind blew through the cornfields in the morning, blown right into our faces.

“One. Alright, it appears you aren’t too keen on this field trip,” Ms. Lancaster said. “I’ll give you five more seconds, but after that, we’re heading back to school.”

“I’d rather be at school than look at a bunch of dumb figurines,” muttered Trevor under his breath. Oakley and the rest of the boys in Mr. Lindman’s group laughed.

Grandma, who had been standing on the porch dressed in her Sunday afternoon comfort pants and a boxy red curator hat with McGrew embroidered along the side in gold stitching, spoke up.

“I’ve got a plate full of warm cookies here,” she said, “and it’d be a three eyed trout shame to have to eat them all myself. I’d probably lose my girlish figure. So, if we can be quiet and line up straight, I’ll make sure everyone gets a cookie. Chaperones too.”

Trevor stopped running his yap then, and even Mr. Lindman stood with his shoulders straight and his hands by his side, because Grandma’s cookies were famous throughout the county. And within a few seconds all of the kids were lined up in alphabetical height order and there was quiet. Even the breeze stopped blowing and the trees stopped rustling and all twenty-three of Grandma’s cats were lined up too, from shortest tail to longest.

“All right,” she said. “Is this satisfactory, Ms. Lancaster?”

“It is indeed.”

“Mr. Lindman’s group, what a terrific bunch of nicely behaved young ladies and gentlemen, why don’t you come on up and grab a cookie and wait in the foyer for the rest of the class.”
Trevor smiled and pranced proud as a peacock up the steps. Even though there were three other kids in his group before him, they saved the biggest and warmest looking cookie for him, because they knew he’d take it anyway. From personal experience, I knew that Grandma always threw a little extra salt on top of the biggest cookie, to teach people against being greedy, but Trevor didn’t know, and I saw his eyes light up because the biggest cookie is usually at least double the size of the rest.

Grandma called us in one group at a time, and Ms. L’s group went second, followed by Ms. Lewis, Mrs. Davenport, Mr. Jenkins, and then finally us.

“Aw, Grandma,” I said, “Why’d you pick us to go last? Trevor’s group was shoving each other and making all sorts of noise.”

“Private McGrew, never question the authority of the Admiral’s mother,” Dad said. “You’ll be docked two bites of a cookie for that.”

Dad reached down and grabbed my cookie.

“So I have any volunteers to consume two bites of Paul’s cookie, to teach him a lesson about the chain of command. Holly and Brad raised their hands, but Johnny didn’t because he knew how much I liked Grandma’s cookies.

“Excellent, then we avoid a squabble.” Dad handed the cookie to Holly, who turned her back to me, and opened her jaws so wide I thought her head was going to tilt over backwards and fall off. Holy Cow! She’s eaten the whole thing. Then she scooched over to Brad and handed him the cookie. He looked at what was left, nodded at Holly, and then he turned his back to me, and opened his jaws wide as a snake, so wide I thought he was going to dislocate his jaw and have it fall to the ground and clatter around on the wood porch. Then he chewed, and wrapped what could only have been the
smallest remnants of a single oat in a napkin. Then the pulled out a post it note, jotted something on it, and put that in the napkin as well. Brad smirked and handed the bundle to my Dad, who turned his back as well to inspect the work they’d done. The whole time I was thinking this was cruel and unusual punishment, and that if I wanted to, I could probably find a lawyer who’d take on my case, and then I could sue my own Dad. It wasn’t the brightest idea in the world, because if I won he’d probably kick me out of the house, or tell me I wasn’t his son anymore, but I was mad anyway. All I’d done was speak up for myself, and my repayment was getting my cookie eaten!

“Excellent work, Private Holly and Private Brad. You’ve been promoted to E-4. You’ll be officers by nightfall if you keep this up, and then I’ll be answering to you. Proud to do it to. A couple of standup sailors like yourselves.”

Dad handed the napkin to me, and the four other members of the Admiral’s Green Navy marched in step into the foyer, Johnny swishing his rapier back and forth like a tail.

Inside the napkin was a full cookie, not even the slightest bite out of it. And on top of the cookie, with a translucent spot growing in the middle, was Brad’s note.

_Fooled Ya!

Grandma patted me on the back as I put the whole cookie in my mouth in one bite.

“You see, good things come to those who complain. The squeaky patience is a virtue grease, and all that nonsense. Where’d you get those ridiculous shorts?”
"You gave them to me." Bits of cookie flew out of my mouth in a spray, and the twenty-three cats broke ranks, jumped off the rails and licked up the scraps.

"Well, I certainly didn't mean for you to wear them."

Inside the foyer everyone was oohing and awwing and climbing on the giant porcelain lions Grandma brought back after her trip to Delaware. Ms. L was running around telling everyone to get back in line and not to touch anything, even though every time she made a loop she came over and touched Mr. Lindman’s elbow and whispered something in his ear that either made him nod or laugh or say "Whooee!" and stamp his foot on the ground. Dad leaned down.

"What's that all about?" he asked, and he pointed his thumb at Mr. Lindman and Ms. L.

"I don't know," I said, "but I know Trevor's and his dad just got the internet because his last two reports have had fancy pictures on the cover."

Trevor, Oakley, and Trevor's other buddy, Morty Jenkins (who had been placed with his uncle's group) were using the lions as turnbuckles, and were jumping off of the head and slamming each other in the shoulder with two hands like the professional wrestlers. Everyone was talking after the cookies, and Mom says that sugar runs straight through the body of a twelve year old and goes directly to fuel the mouth of girls and the hyper glands of boys.

"Where's the hyper gland?" I asked her.
“Right here,” Dad says, and reaches under my armpits and tickles me until I can’t stand and I’m just flopping around on the ground like a jellyfish. I never can get a straight answer out of my Dad.

Grandma had done the place up real nice. She’d painted a banner on a piece of old yellowing canvas and strung it from the ceiling just like a real museum.

“The Wonders of Delaware.”

There were little aluminum rivets in the corners that the rope went through, and I knew Grandma had worked hard setting up this exhibit because she knew it was my class coming. She’d never made a sign before, but this one was the glossy red paint from Hopperton’s that he usually kept locked behind a glass display case and didn’t sell because the bucket itself was so fancy. Dad had been coming over after work every day for a week. It looked real nice too. She had figurines all lined up with little handwritten information cards along both of the walls, up the stairs, and along the banister, and off in the family room, I could hear the low murmur of a television. She told me after she came back from Delaware that she’d picked up an amazing little video on the history of figurines. She didn’t know if it would work with her new VCR though, on account of her being reverse burgled, and the technology was all so complicated.

Grandma flipped off the lights, and the whole room went dark and quiet, except for the banner. It glowed in the dark and looked kind of eerie with two foot green letters just hovering in the air above us like an alphabet ghost. And as my eyes adjusted, I saw that all of the figurines, and all of the information cards were glowing too.
“Because Ms. Lancaster’s class is so special, we decided that you were going to be the first ever class to see the glow in the dark spectacular.”

The whole class clapped and everyone was chattering.

“I hope you won’t be too scared,” Grandma flicked on a flashlight under her chin, and she was floating under the sign. “By the darkness. A Hoo Hoo Haa Haa.” Grandma’s voice got real deep and a few of the students and Ms. L gasped when they saw Grandma hovering around with her feet dangling just a foot or so above everyone’s heads. Johnny reached over and grabbed my shoulder, and Brad and Holly looked at me too, and they kept looking back and forth between me and my Grandma, trying to figure out why I never told them she could fly before, but I figured I knew something that they didn’t, because I’d seen a whole reel of rope and a harness in the back of Dad’s car and thought that had something to do with it.

“All right,” said Grandma. “Ms. Lancaster, Ms. Lewis, and Mrs. Davenport, please follow me on the tour. Mr. McGrew, Mr. Jenkins, and Mr. Lindman, please lead your groups into the family room, where you can watch the forty-five minute video about how figurines were made...”

Trevor, Oakley, and Morty groaned when they heard what the video was about.

“... and the bloody feud between two rival families of figurine makers that left a town haunted and abandoned after a four alarm fire.”

“Cool,” Trevor said, and he slapped a high five with Oakley, then missed Morty and slapped him in the ear. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness by then (Mom always said the McGrews had the eyes of nocturnal animals, because Jim, Henry, Dad, and I
could always see pretty clear in the dark a full minute or two before anyone else), and I swear I saw Trevor grin right before he smacked him.

“Hey!”

“It’s dark, I couldn’t see.”

The video was okay. The fifteen of us piled onto three couches that were set up in a semi-circle around the TV, and the first part was pretty boring. There was this old guy with glasses who was a professor at such and such a place, and they kept putting his name up on the screen every time they showed him: Douglas Peabody, PhD. It was kind of cool when they showed how they actually poured the wax or the metal into a mold, but most of the time it was just Douglas Peabody who started every sentence by giggling and saying, “It’s ironic really...”

Trevor pulled his milk straw out of his sack lunch, and chewed up little piece of paper and spit them at Johnny and me. I don’t know if Dad was caught up in the video, or just asleep in the corner, because he didn’t tell him to stop. But once the part about the feud between the wax figurine makers and the aluminum figurine makers started, and they showed some pictures of guns, arrows, and fire, Trevor stopped spitting at us. Apparently the feud came to a fiery end when the daughter of the wax figurine guy secretly married the son of the metal figurine guy, and the grandpa of one of them, said the whole thing was an abomination and a sin in the eyes of the Lord. Then he tied up everyone in the general store and set the whole town on fire. Now no one goes there at night anymore. Not anyone who wants to come back alive. Douglas Peabody was doing
the narration for this part too, and now I understood why someone would want to get a PhD in figurines.

Right at the end of the film, Ms. L and the rest of the class came in and said that it was our turn for the figurine tour. All the girls in the class except for Holly had been put in the groups with the female chaperones, and they were chattering back and forth and telling us how cool all of the little figurines were, and how all of the ballerinas were so pretty, and that the Wolfman figurines and all of the bloody toothed beasts and vampires up on the second floor banister should be skipped entirely because they were disgusting. And when we got out there, Grandma led us to the ballerina figurines first because she could tell that we couldn’t give a rat’s eye about the ballerinas, and that all we wanted to see was the monsters and the animals. Even Holly seemed bored by the dancing figurines, even the one that spun around and spit out sparks, because the girls sounded so disgusted by the second floor banister, that we knew it must be cool.

“If I have to look at one more ballerina, I’m going to break something,” Trevor whispered to Morty, and Morty laughed and said him too, though Morty probably couldn’t have put his pants on in the morning unless Trevor called him up and told him that’s what he was going to do.

I don’t know how Grandma was moving around with that rope, because even with my eyes adjusted and the flashlight shining in her face I couldn’t see it or hear a pulley set up on the roof creaking as she moved around, and I figured Dad must have used plenty of grease or installed an automated system outside, either that or Grandma had hired one of the loggers that hung out occasionally down by the buses at Hopperton’s spitting on the rocks and rubbing the backs of their necks to guide the rope around from
outside. But she floated up to the second floor, and we hardly even looked at the Delaware Minor League Baseball Legends collection along the stairs.

Brad handed a note to my Dad when we were halfway up the stairs.

*Are you scared?*

"An Admiral is never scared, not even of the Scylla or the Loch Ness Monster," Dad declared, but then he scribbled a note back and put his hand on Brad’s shoulder.

The monsters went well beyond our expectations. They weren’t just wax and metal eight inch figurines of monsters, but an entire assortment of all the most wonderful creatures ever imagined by all of the most ghoulish of the Walking Wax Figure Dead.

"As you can see," Grandma said in a vibretto, "Technology has changed quite a bit in the figurine industry over the past hundred years. For those of you who are feint of heart, you might want to hold someone’s hand."

All along the foot of the banister, crowded together haphazardly like a nightmare horde, were the monsters and beats. At the outer edges, guarding the perimeter in a half-circle were the wild boars, teeth baring wolves, and snarling grizzly bears. The grizzly bear in the center had a trout in its maw, and thick red blood dripping down the sides of its coat. The next layer in was the more mundane of the movie creatures. A twelve inch blob swallowing a Volkswagen, a man wearing armor with a lizard head whose arms moved back and forth slashing a four-inch knife and snarling, and a Frankenstein that kept shaking it’s hips back and forth to the tune of Monster Mash. In the center, right at the base of the railing, were Dracula and the Wolfman. The Wolfman was almost three full feet in height, and had a mechanical moon that orbited around his head. When the light side of the moon faced the Wolfman, his ears grew long and hair sprouted out every
which way, and his fangs grew in his mouth. Then he’d roll his head back and release a howl that made your spine get the wiggles. I even saw Mr. Lindman shake a little like the wind crept into him and sighed. Dracula was just as tall, and had blood dripping from his teeth, and his eyes darted around like they were looking at us. He said, “One of you will be a vampire!” Then quick as a cat he sprung into the air with his arms reached out at Trevor, and Trevor screamed and jumped back and tripped over Morty and fell on his butt.

“Boo!” Dracula said. “A Ha Ha Ha.” And then he shimmied back down the electronic coil he’d spring off of and started looking at all of us again. I couldn’t blame Trevor for being scared and screaming, because I jumped back a little too when the vampire sprung, but I laughed anyway along with most of the other kids. Trevor kicked at Oakley and his cheeks were all red, and he brushed his dad’s hand away when he tried to help him up, and I could tell he was feeling pretty sore about the whole thing so I stopped laughing and poked Johnny in the ribs and he stopped laughing too.

When we got back downstairs, the rest of the class was waiting in the foyer, huddled up like a sea of ants, and everyone was buzzing and chatting, and all of Grandma’s cats went around licking people’s legs and sniffing at the lunch sacks and meowing.

“We have one more stop before we join the rest of the class and make some figurines of our own on the back porch,” Grandma said. “This little piece is my very favorite one.”
Grandma shined the flashlight down on a little porcelain figurine that I had seen and heard the story of about one hundred times. It was an orange cat with a peaceful smile on its face, resting on a pillow by the fire.

“My Grandma bought this for me at the county fair when I was only five years old,” she said. “I know it’s probably hard to look at me now and think that I was ever five years old, but I was. And no, Mr. McGrew, they didn’t have brontosaurus pups in the petting zoo at the county fair when I was five.”

Dad laughed a little. Every time Grandma talked about when she was a girl, Dad always said, “When dinosaurs roamed the Earth.” It made me look pretty foolish in kindergarten when the teacher asked if anyone knew anything about dinosaurs, and I said my Grandma used to ride them to school.

“It wasn’t so long ago as you might think. This was the first of my collection. A collection that now numbers over 1,000, only about a third of which is on display at any one time. It’s not worth a whole heck of a lot. My Grandma won it for throwing a sack of rice into a milk jar. Probably not even worth fifty cents, but it’s my favorite one, and the only one that is always on display. Now, let’s join the rest of the class and head out to the back porch and make our own.”

We only got a few steps when there was a smash, and everyone turned around and lying at the foot of the stairs, in about fifty different pieces, was Grandma’s cat. The lights came on and now everyone could see the rope that held Grandma up, and the harness that crushed her pants up by her stomach.

“I’m sorry,” said Trevor. “It was dark, I couldn’t see.”
Mr. Lindman immediately offered to pay for it, but Grandma just shook her head, lowered herself to the ground, and unharnessed herself.

"It's my own fault," she said. "I never should have turned off the lights."
The class went out to make plastic figurines on Grandma’s back porch, but she wasn’t smiling or passing out cookies, or patting anyone on the shoulder. Everyone kept their heads low in a collective bow of shame, because even if the rest of the class didn’t know how important the cat was to Grandma, they certainly picked up on their parents’ mood, and how the breeze had tiptoed off to the cornfields and was blowing apologetically and slow, and how the cats were huddled together under Grandma’s porch bench, which wasn’t a swinging bench because it was built into the side of the house. And even though twenty three cats were piled on top of one another, trying to cover themselves in the deepest part of the shadows, there wasn’t any screeching or hissing.

Johnny wouldn’t even talk to me or look at me when I tried to show him the miniature vampire with four fangs I’d made. Brad and Holly didn’t look up either, and I figured that we’d have the most intricate bunch of figurines a field trip class had ever made because everyone was so focused on their work. The only person happy was Ms. L, who liked it best when there was uncomfortable and guilty silence, who thrived on creating and celebrating the depths of the dark pools of misery she could find in a town as generally happy as Lake Fancy. She was like a thick gray rain cloud that tried to find the holes in your roof. She kept walking by Mr. Lindman, and leaning over his shoulder, and letting her pink dress with sunflowers run against his arm, even though he was down because he’d seen the cat when he was in seventh grade too.
Johnny had a lot of trouble with his figurine. He pulled the wax figure out of the mold too early four times in a row, because he kept smashing it and the wax squeezed through his fingers and hardened on his knuckles like tree sap in the winter. His face got red and I could see his shoulders shaking more and more, and I wondered if he was part tea kettle and if he was going to start whistling, because he looked that hot.

“Johnny,” I whispered, and Ms. L shot a look over at me, even though she hadn’t said to be quiet during the project. Johnny didn’t look up.

“Johnny!”

Johnny’s face turned even redder, and he reached down and pushed his stick rapier around, and pulled it halfway out, and then pushed it back into his belt.

“Johnny, are you alright!”

“He did it on purpose.” Johnny would have spat if his teeth hadn’t been clenched so tight.

“What?”

“Trevor. I was behind him. I saw.”

“Let’s tell Ms. L.”

“She’s sweet on his dad, she won’t do anything.”

“Let’s tell Principal Ritzo.”

“He won’t do anything either. Nobody will do anything. People who do wrong never get punished in this town. Only the ones who do right.”

I didn’t know what Johnny was talking about, but he seemed pretty steamed up, so I let him alone and didn’t push it any further. Ms. L walked over to see how we were doing, and even though she didn’t have her gray sweater on, she still smelled like gray,
and when she leaned down close to make a face at my vampire, I wished I had flunked a grade.

“That’s interesting, Paul,” she said. “But vampires are only supposed to have two fangs.”

She walked over to Johnny, and I could see his shoulders tense up, and he shifted as far to the end of his bench as he could.

“Looks like someone wasn’t listening to the directions,” she said. “We’ll have to take some points off of your assignment. Because everyone else is almost done with theirs, and you’ve just got four piles of smooshed wax.”

Ms. L walked away, and Dad put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder and said not to worry about it, that some people didn’t recognize genius when they saw it, and that there was a reason why Ms. Lancaster would never be the curator at the museum of modern art. Ms. L held up two fingers in the air, which meant we had two minutes to clean up our stations, and Grandma came by and offered everyone a cookie from a store bought package.

“What happened to your cookies, Mom?” Dad asked.

“I forgot about them, and they burned.”

Ms. L asked for two volunteers to go around and pick up all the scraps so that we could leave Grandma’s house just as clean, if not cleaner, than when we arrived. When no one raised their hand, Ms. L picked me and Trevor and handed us each a white plastic garbage bag.

I’m not sure what happened after that, because my back was turned and I was on the other side of the porch, picking up the scraps that Bobby threw on the ground so he
could poke me in the butt with his wax figurine of a two headed spatula, but all of a sudden I heard Johnny yell, and then Trevor scream, and by the time I turned around Dad was wrestling the rapier stick away from Johnny, and Trevor was on the ground bleeding behind the ear.

“He did it on purpose!” Johnny yelled, but I guess he didn’t yell it loud enough, because when we got back to school, Mr. Ritzo suspended Johnny for three days because he refused to apologize to Trevor. I guess Johnny’s mom and dad were pretty upset too and suspended him even more, because Johnny didn’t come back to school for a week and a half, and when he came back his arms were all black and he had deep bags under his eyes and didn’t say nothing to anybody unless Ms. L called on him.

When I tried to talk to him at recess, all he said was:

“The tire fields.”
Bloody Friday

Johnny wasn’t at school on Friday afternoon and I walked home with a bloody nose.

At lunch, Trevor Lindman and three of his friends saw me playing Merlin the Sorcerer by the water fountain.

I wiggled my fingers slowly over the fountain, like the monsters and magicians do in the Sunday afternoon thriller. I figured my incantation, a mixture of mumbles and parts of magical words I’d seen in my magician set dictionary, wasn’t going to be powerful enough because I hadn’t yet had a secret master magician who lived in a cave in the woods take me under his wing.

“Abradahoopla and Mysticarburetor, by the power of Merlin and his trusty falcon Dinosaurus Sherbat, I command the water to be cold and clear.”

The fountain was white except for where the tile had worn away, and there it was rust colored and sometimes green because Ms. L always made us wash the paint cups out in the water fountain. Every once in a while one of the third graders would come back from lunch with green teeth and a tongue and they’d have to go to the school nurse and wash his mouth out with 7-Up and brown paper towels.

Usually Johnny and I worked on our magic every Friday, and usually we practiced on the water fountain because the water oozed out of the faucet like clay. When I told my dad, he said the school had been built almost a hundred years ago and the pipes carrying the water had probably rusted over. I told him the water came out white, rather than red, and he reckoned there was a dead animal or that the glue factory at the edge of
town was dumping illegally. I always thought the glue company wouldn’t make a lot of money if they dumped their product into the town water system, but dad says capitalism is only an illusion.

“Like Houdini?”

“Kind of,” says Dad. Then he reads the paper.

Johnny and I figured that if we fixed the water in the fountain we’d save the school nurse a lot of trouble, especially on hot days when the line had fifteen people all through recess and everyone would take turns yelling, “Save some for the fishes,” until Yankee Collins, the fattest kid in our grade got up to the fountain. Then people snorted and flopped around on the ground like pig fish. I never saw a pig fish, but they sound like terrible little creatures. Never bait your hook with filth.

On hot days ten kids could wind up in the nurses office with a stomach ache.

If we fixed the water using the magical powers of Merlin the Sorcerer, the whole school, except for the kindergarteners because they eat paste anyway, would be better off. In the midst of the no more glue mumbles and the clear water ear wiggles, I heard Trevor and his buddies laughing at me from behind the garbage can.

“Hey there, Merlin the Dorkerer, what are you up to today? Trying to make fish sticks come out of the water fountain?” called Trevor. Ever since Trevor stopped drawing guns he and his cronies went around at recess and made up names to call everyone. I was Merlin the Dorkerer, and Johnny, when he was at school, was Johnny Candyass.

“Just trying to make the water clearer.”
“What’s the matter? You don’t like glue flavored water?” said Ronald Hayes. Ronald’s dad worked at the glue factory. My dad said Mr. Hayes was the dirtiest horse thief in the county, but I had never seen a horse except in pictures and once, on the day I got the worst sunburn of my life, I saw a man in a golden chariot being led through the sky by flying horses. But I couldn’t tell you what a horse smelled like.

“No.” I said.

“How’d you like a knuckle sandwich?” Trevor said.

“Does it have beets? I don’t like beets unless they aren’t pickled.”

Trevor’s knuckle sandwich missed my mouth a couple inches to the north when I tried to duck out of the way, and for a minute I thought he had just popped a soy sauce packet on my face because I felt a thin liquid all over my mouth and it tasted salty.

I grabbed some paper towels from the bathroom and shoved them up my nostrils in little balls to stop the bleeding. Two paper balls in each nostril. They were rough and scraped the inside of my nose like sandpaper, but I’d rather have them in my nose than wiping green paint from my tongue. You know, there are worse things to have up your nose than sandpaper, but it’s tough to get your hands on iron meatballs or spiky lemon pop gun caps anymore. Just when I’d gotten the blood to stop dripping into my mouth, the lunch bell rang, and I ran to get in line. Ms. L doesn’t like it when people are late.

After lunch we have silent reading time. Ms. L never lets anyone talk during silent reading time and you aren’t allowed to go to the bathroom either. You also can’t lean back in your chair, tap your foot, crinkle your paper, turn the page too loudly, fart, eat chips, make faces at other people in class, pass notes, or look at Ms. Lancaster’s feet.
While we read she takes off her shoes and curls her toes against the gray carpet of the classroom, and there are brown stains on the carpet where she curls her feet that she can’t see because she hunches over her desk and types to her friends on the internet. I told my mom about how sometimes Ms. L will giggle to herself during silent reading. We get in trouble when we giggle during silent reading, even if it’s one of those funny books like *Grapes of Wrath*. But when Ms. L giggles she looks around the room real quick and she marks down anyone who is looking up at her in her little green book. Then she types real fast. My mom says Ms. L does this because she is lonely and during the summers she will travel great distances to meet the men she talks to on the internet. My mom thinks this is a scandal that will eventually cost Ms. L her life or her job, but dad says each to their own.

Today Ms. L giggled a lot and typed a lot and ran her fingers through her hair twice and checked her day planner and nodded. She pulled her hair back in a tight black bun with little flecks of gray mixed in. I think the carpet seeps in through her toes. I think it’s possible. We learned about molecules in science and I think it’s possible. And I think somehow the carpet gets up into her hair. So running her fingers through takes a lot of effort, like she’s running her hands through that thick woven carpet that always makes your hands look like honeycomb, and eventually she has to redo her entire bun. This can take up to five minutes and silent reading time went longer than usual. And by the time we wrote our paragraph on what we learned from our book school was over.

There were drops of blood on my paper, and I figured I’d get an F because Ms. L doesn’t allow you to turn in homework with blood on it, but I didn’t care today. Usually
when Johnny missed school, people picked on me, but my nose had never been bloodied before. I just wanted to go down to the lake and dig a hole and bury this day forever.

I grabbed my backpack and jacket and ran out the door before Trevor and his buddies could make fun of me for eating knuckle sandwiches with my nose.

When I got to the lake the whistles from the trout farm lowed and the water on the surface of the lake pitched and hopped with the sound vibration. My feet shook a little too and I remembered the county fair from last year when mom paid a quarter for me to get my feet rubbed by the electric machine. I told everyone that I was a sizzling sausage. Mom and Dad laughed, but Henry told me I was a sizzling idiot. I told Henry if that was the case, then he could bite me. Then he told me that he wasn’t in the habit of biting idiots, and I told him I had it on good authority and had seen pictures on the internet that proved otherwise.

“Stop acting like a couple of polar bear cubs,” said Dad. And we stopped, but I thought I got the better of Henry that day because he looked out the window the whole drive home and didn’t say anything or pinch me.

The bell at the factory stopped and I looked down at the ground. The sand crabs scuttled back beneath the surface of the banks of the lake and I wondered where they bought their morning coffee and if there was enough room for a human or two down there. Johnny and I could live amongst the sand crabs, probably even be the rulers amongst them if we decided to use our force. Then we could establish a democracy where Johnny and I would take turns being president and sand crab votes would only count 1/100th because they were so small and not familiar with the democratic way of
governing. Eventually, when the sand crabs learned to stop being savages, we would relinquish the government to them.

The lake weeds poked up intermittently in the circumference of the lake until about ten feet back where they grew as thick as waffle everglades and small children weren’t allowed to roam because it always took three hours to find them. In the thick part of the lake weeds the mud tasted sweet. Here lost children contented themselves, away from the sand crabs, until their parents found them bloated, smiling, and with thick, dark rings around their mouths like mouth raccoons. Smiling and lost but not knowing it. Crying when their parents condemned them to months in the crib. Swallowing furiously as their parents wipe the last vestiges of mud from their puckered cheeks. Longing with their bright brown doe eyes for the edge of the mud and the cool of the weed shade. Here I would bury this day forever.

I got down on my knees and began to dig a hole with my fingernails. Dad always says work, hard physical labor, will cure all that ails you. Seeing your progress, your creations, knowing that at the end of the day something tangible has been accomplished is the most satisfying feeling a man can have other than the one Dad won’t tell me about.

“That feeling. The other one. You’ll find it for yourself soon enough.”

Dad says that no man should wear a tie to work and carry a briefcase and that office buildings are the worst thing to happen to man since sliced bread.

“It makes us all lazy. Soft. It’s turning us into a nation of porcupines.”

“Porcupines aren’t soft,” I tell him.

“Porcupines are other things.”
This ran through my head as I dug a hole at the edge of the weeds. My nails were clogged with mud, but I didn’t need much of a hole to bury a day like this one. Just enough for a couple of bloody paper towel bits and a rock to make sure they didn’t come up if the lake flooded. I stopped a couple of times to snack on the mud, toss bottle caps out into the lake, and sip at the water because the sun loomed high in the sky and the mud turned to dirt even as I dug. Sweat ran down my back in canals and a boy with his mule traveled fifteen miles down and landed in evaporating puddles by my feet. The thick mud trickled down my throat and I began to feel light headed after a while. I figured the heat made me feel this way, so I sat down in the shade of the weeds. Out of my backpack I pulled a roll of tape. There were a couple of rocks around me, white and dry in the sun, and I chose a round one with two divots in the back for the bloody paper towels. With four quick wraps of the tape, the bloody towels were in place. Dry blood flakes fell from my nose and into the hole as well. The hole was about two feet deep, but it filled up faster than I had emptied it, and by the time I kicked all the dirt back into the hole and hopped up and down three times to make it even, the sun hung low on the horizon and the sky reflected off the lake.

For three minutes and an eternity there were two skies and I wondered which one to dive into to wash me completely clean of this day. I wished Johnny would come out because I still had fear of the lake monster, but his house down at the end of the lake sat covered in shadows and none of the lights, not even the porch light or the torch out by the tire fields, were on.
I learned in school that you aren't supposed to end a sentence with a preposition like I just did, but the word preposition itself ends with one, so I figure it's just something a teacher made up to fill the end of an end of the year class with.

I stripped down to my shorts and left my jeans and shirt in a pile by my backpack and ran and jumped into the lake with a yell that echoed off the trees and rocks and scared the trout over at the farm. I know because I could hear the splashing across the lake before I submerged and my mouth filled with water and I got goosebumps.

I splashed around for a while, and got used to the cool of the water, and as long as I kept my head below the ripples of the wind I didn't shiver. Darkness crept in from down by the Appleseed house at the edge of the lake, and pretty soon there were streaks of salmon in one part of the sky, and gray in the other. In the winter, salmon and gray decorated the sky most nights, and in my mind armor decorated the other knights. Nights. Knights. They aren't so different as you might imagine.

When it got so dark that I could no longer see the edge of the lake, I started to swim towards the sounds of the grasshoppers. In my haste to bury and wash away the day I'd forgotten two things. First, mom told me before school that tonight was going to be spaghetti and sausage night. Usually we sat down right after dark to eat, but Mom wouldn't let me sit down at the table with lake moss in my hair and smelling like trout, so by the time I got home and took a shower it'd be cold spaghetti and sausage night. No one could use the microwave if he was late. The second thing I forgot about was the lake monster. I hadn't seen it since the rustle in the bushes at Johnny's house, but I figured that a kid swimming alone in the dark was just the sort of snack the lake monster drooled
over. Plus some of the blood from my nose had dripped into the lake during my swim, and if the lake monster was anything like a shark, it was probably swimming towards me right now.

*Duh duh. Duh duh. Duh duh duh duh.* Then the trombones and a fin.

Right behind me, in the darkness, I heard a splash. It sounded like someone throwing a pebble into the water, or maybe even one of the trout escaping from the farm, but in my already frightened state of mine, it caused my legs to go limp like a jellyfish. For a second I froze solid, like I do in all my dreams where I am in danger, like someone cast a plaster of Paris or some marble about my feet. I'd like to say everything started moving in slow motion, but it was too dark to tell. My ears were throbbing like a rock and roll song.


Time moves like an Indian burn in the darkness. You know when someone grabs your forearm tight and twists in opposite directions and laughs? Below the water time moved slowly. My legs flopped about like a couple of strands of rope dangling from a dock. Above the water, time galloped along. Tick tock tick tock tick tock. Bam. I could only move my fingers and tongue, and I swam for the edge of the lake as quickly as I could. My fingers splattering water in little baby tear drops, and my tongue lapping like a dog. I wasn’t sure I was getting anywhere until my feet hit the slippery moss rocks along the shore and I stubbed my toe.

“Rarrgh,” I cried as I threw myself into the bushes at the edge of the lake. I shook the bushes and banged rocks together, figuring that if the lake monster was anything like a bear, it’d be scared off for long enough for me to grab my clothes and head home to the
safety of cold food. I groped around on the ground for my clothes and made big lion sounding roars.

"ROAR," I yelled.

"Are you alright there?" a voice from the darkness said.

"ROAR," I yelled again. I wondered how the lake monster learned English, and if they had homework at Lake Monster School.

"Son, what in the Earl heck are you doin'?"

I felt a hand on my shoulder. A thick hand. Strong. Crooked fingers. Hair that came up from the knuckles and brushed against the bottom of my chin. Hair that felt like the bristles of a toothbrush. I bit down hard on the fingers.

"MOM!!!" I screamed. "The lake monster has got me. Don’t forget about me. Don’t forget about Paul." But it was a windy night and I couldn’t even hear myself. For a minute I thought the wind might carry my voice to the Appleseed house, or maybe even over to the night watchman at the trout farm, but it blew them right back into my mouth and I could feel the nouns get lodged in my esophagus. I coughed.

"Boy, settle down a little. You’ve been swimming in the lake too long and now your imagination has got hold of you. Imagination is a dangerous thing in the dark, my boy. But don’t worry, it’s no lake monster that’s got ahold of you. It’s just Bill Spencer. The trout were a little jumpy about something in the lake, so I took a stroll to see if there were any lynx or bobcats or anything prowling around."

He pulled a flashlight from his belt and shined it on his face.

"See, it’s just me. Snaggle Toothed Bill."
Among the kids of the town, Bill had a certain celebrity because he always gave out the king sized candy bars on Halloween, and up until a couple of years ago, when his wife died, Bill had set up a Haunted House in his backyard complete with bowls of eyeballs, and guts, and a werewolf (which wasn’t really a wolf, but just his dog Scratchy who howled all the time anyway.) I’d only seen Bill in his Halloween costumes, which ranged from an astronaut, to a vampire, to a used car salesman, to a giant celery stalk during International Vegetable Year. He also volunteered to be Santa Claus for the kids at the orphanage in the next town, and spent the week before Christmas ringing jingle bells and collecting money for the orphans outside of Hopperton’s. But tonight, Bill wore a security uniform. His pants and shirt were khaki, and there were patches on his arms that said Hopperton Trout Farm Security. He had a gray beard on half of his face, and the other side was clean shaven. And I wondered if he’d forgotten to shave the rest or if he read those European fashion magazines that Mom said were ruining the world.

Bill’s teeth, which are nearly as famous as his Halloween feats, were jumbled together and overlapped each other and it looked as if he’d spent a large portion of his life trying to eat marbles and rocks. Gray hair covered his head, except for a few dark streaks shaped like rectangles above his ears. A thick black belt circled his waist, and a thick ring of keys hung from one side, and a set of handcuffs from the other.

“Am I going to be arrested?” I asked. He could see me peeking at the handcuffs.

“Nothin’ in here to arrest you with, son,” Snaggletoothed Bill said. He flipped up the cover for the handcuffs and inside sat three chocolate bars.

“I like chocolate,” I said, hoping he’d offer me one of the chocolates, but he just peered at me and the light from the flashlight bounced about on his eyes.
“Wouldn’t want to ruin your dinner.”

“How’d you know I haven’t eaten dinner yet?”

“Your backpack. It’s full of schoolbooks.”

“Oh,” I said.

Snaggle Toothed Bill picked up my backpack and slung it over his shoulder. My math book and language arts were in there, even though I didn’t need math because we didn’t have any homework, and Bill stooped a little under the weight of the pack.

“Let me walk you home, I’m sure your Mom doesn’t want you trolling around the lake after dark. You never know what you might run into out here.”

“Are you talking about the lake monster?” I asked him.

“There’s worse things to be afraid of than a lake monster,” Bill said, and stepped off towards the path that led around the woods and to my street. He grunted with every other step and I offered to carry my bag, but he just kept on walking.

“Hey, Bill,” I called.

“Yep.”

“Do you know of any caves or anything out beyond the trout farm and past the lake?”

“Why? You lookin’ to run away?”

“No, I’m just wondering if there’s anybody out there who can teach me magic chants so I can stop the water at school from oozing out of the faucet. You can’t hardly drink it, and on hot days it makes everyone sick.”
“I think a new filter might do the trick a little faster than magic chants. I’ll see if I can get one free of charge from Mr. Hopperton and put it in before school starts on Monday.”

“Can I help?” I asked. “Dad lets me help when we do projects around the house.”

“Sure, I’ll stop by and ask your folks on Sunday after church.”

“What about the caves?” I asked. “You never know when you might need some magic.”

“No caves. No magicians either,” Bill said. We were turning onto my street and I could see the tree that wasn’t there in the glow of the streetlamp, and the tire swing swung back and forth with the breeze coming in off the lake. “But I do have an idea for you.”

“What?”

“I heard you like to write.”

“Who told you that?”

“Mrs. Anderson.”

“She’s not my teacher.”

“Yeah, but she’s seen some of the stories you write. She mentioned, in particular, one about a flying cow.”

“Oh.”

“She says you have quite an imagination, and that you could be a writer if you wanted to, you know, when you grow up.”

“Mom says writers are a bunch of hippies and misogynists,” I replied. I don’t know what a misogynist is, but Mom scrunches up her mouth when she says it, and the
crease at the corners of her mouth lead all the way to her ears. It's only when Mom gets really mad that the line goes all the way to her ears, so the thought of being a writer scared me. I don't know what Mrs. Anderson is thinking, but if I become a writer, I'm going to get a beating with the wooden spoon or the rolling pin. "Besides, I want to be a magician."

"You can be a magician and a writer," Bill said. "Besides, I don't want to see talent go to waste."

We came to a stop out in front of our fence and the dog ran up and started sniffing at my shoes through the fence and whimpering. I could smell Mom's homemade sausage from the kitchen, and through the blinds on the porch I could see the shadowy outlines of my family just sitting down to dinner. Good, I wouldn't have to eat cold sausage.

"So if you want to help me with the faucet, I'm going to give you an assignment."

"All right. I'll have to tell my Mom it's for school, and I'm not gonna sell it on the internet or anything."

"No. I certainly hope you don't sell it on the internet."

"What should I write about? More flying cows?"

"Do you want to be a good writer?"

"I guess so. I'd rather be a good magician that could make myself disappear like Houdini, but being a good writer sounds like fun."

"All right. The key to being a good writer is to write about something you know well..."
“Popsicles. I love popsicles. Can I write a story about a popsicle that comes to life and grants wishes? Hopefully it’d be a grape popsicle, cause I don’t like those as much. I like orange cream the best.”

“Sure. It can be about popsicles, but there is a second part. You pick something you know well, and then you lie about it.”

“I’m not supposed to lie.”

“It’s not really a lie.”

“You just said to lie.” I looked at Bill suspiciously. Mom had always told me not to lie to anyone, and said that anyone who tried to get you to lie was up to no good. I tried to imagine what Bill was up to, with his chocolate bars, and his dog that howled at the moon, but it couldn’t have been anything too bad because my dog just sat there with his nose resting on my shoe and slobbering on my laces. If something bad were afoot he’d be barking. He can smell bad things.

“It’s not really a lie if you don’t tell it to another person. If you write it, it’s called fiction rather than lying.”

“Paul,” my mother’s voice came from the back porch and the dog’s ears perked up and I could tell that Mom was a little worried because when Jim or Henry showed up late for dinner, she just put their plate in the refrigerator so that they’d have cold food and learn to show up on time. I guess you get special treatment when you’re the youngest.

“All right, Bill,” I said. “Thanks for carrying my backpack and getting me home in time for dinner.”

Bill handed me the pack and nodded at me and shook my hand. His hands were scratchy and hairy, but when he shook my hand I felt like an adult. I promised him I’d
have the greatest lie story about popsicles ever on Sunday, and told him to watch out for
the lake monster because it ate people's memory too. I sprinted up the stairs, taking them
two at a time, and I had a mouthful of spaghetti before the steam even disappeared.
I awoke without the blaring of my alarm clock when I dreamt that a pumpkin-headed scarecrow scratched my window with his crooked and branchlike finger. In the dream, snow gathered in clumps at the base of the trees and filled the bottom of the tire swing and stared coldly at everyone who walked by. Slush lined the walkways and you could see the brown spots where Dad walked with his boots to shovel the driveway and cover the car with blankets because the car never can sleep when it gets too cold outside. The pumpkin man crept in from the forest under cover of darkness. He was a Halloween jack o’ lantern and walked with a slight limp because his right leg was a broom stick and his left leg was a mop. His eyes glowed as he approached under cover of darkness. Down the hall I could hear Dad snoring, and the car rocked gently back and forth in the driveway, and the sapphire quilt, the one Grandma McGrew knitted for Grandpa during the war that Grandpa never came home from, and danced like a lumpy jellyfish in the capricious winter breezes. I tried to scream, but you never can scream in dreams unless there are vampires, and the pumpkin head crept closer and closer and inched his way towards the house. He waved his arms over his head and the tire swing expanded and kept expanding up and towards my window. There was a soft rubbery bump as the tire hit the side of the house, and I heard the dog whimpering down the hall and under the rug and Dad snoring and even the cotton of Henry’s pajamas as they scraped against his bed post. The jack o’ lantern kept smiling at me as he hopped on top of the tire and rose towards my window. Jack o’ lanterns always smile because that’s how people carved
them, but I hadn’t carved this one, and I didn’t remember it from Trick or Treating, and in the dream I knew that it was a murderous Jack O’ Lantern from another dimension.

The pumpkin had rotted slightly, orange ooze spilled out of its eyes and nose, but the ooze didn’t drip or run because the snow froze everything in place, including me. I was so cold I couldn’t even shiver, and the pumpkin got closer and closer and reached for the window and his branch finger scratched at the window and I woke up and hollered and wet the bed.

“Keep it down,” said Johnny. His voice was muffled through the side of the house, and I saw him standing on his tip toes and peering through the bottom of the window. “It’s just me.”

Johnny waved the stick and for a minute I wondered if Johnny had the power to control dreams, but then I waved him around to the front of the house so I could change into a fresh pair of shorts.

“Did you wet your pants again?”

Johnny sipped at the hot cocoa I brought him as we sat there drifting in and out of consciousness on the swingin’ bench.

“No,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“I know you wet the bed when my dad showed up and wanted us to pick his tires. It’s okay. I didn’t tell anybody.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why are you wearing shorts in the winter?”
"Why are you running around in the middle of the night knocking on people’s windows with sticks and pretending to be a jack o’ lantern?"

It got quiet for a minute and Johnny and I took turns lookin’ at each other suspiciously and out of the corner of our eyes. It was times like this I thought Johnny was a stealthy fox of a kid, and when he looked off wistfully at the tire swing I checked his shoulder for rabbit fur.

“How much money you got?” asked Johnny.

“Why?”

“How much?"

“Well, if I do all my chores without complaining and on time I get fifty cents a week. I’ve been saving up for a set of watercolor paints, but usually I spend about half of my allowance on gum or candy down at Hooperton’s. So I reckon somewhere between five and ten dollars in dimes and quarters.”

Johnny scrunched up his face like he does in math class and held out his fingers and folded them and shook his head a few times before he came to some sort of arrangement with himself and shook his head.

“I reckon that’s enough.”

“Enough for what.”

“I got something I need to do, and I want you to come with me. You’ve got a pocketknife don’t you?”

“Yeah, Henry gave me his old one when he got that leatherman for Christmas this year.”
"Is that the rusty one with the bent blade that got stuck in the tree bark when he was trying to carve a horse for Maria?"

"Yeah. The blade doesn't close all the way, so I have to wrap it in a sock, but it works okay if you need to cut some fishing line or somethin'." 

"It'll have to work."

"It does work."

"It'll have to."
Johnny insisted I pack light and leave plenty of room in my backpack. He wouldn’t tell me where we were going or what we were supposed to bring back, but he told me three times not to fill it more than half.

He also said to bring all my money and the knife. Johnny had never asked me about money before, not in the way most of the kids in the class did, and he never charged me a quarter to be my friend for ten minutes like Trevor Lindman, or tied me to the flagpole upside down after drawing a fake moustache on me, so I figured that something important was up, but I don’t need to tell you that because you probably figured it out before I did.

I wrapped all my money, nine dollars and forty-five cents in silver and copper coins, in a plastic sandwich bag. I stapled the bag thirty times across the top and cut my pinky twice with the crooked staple edges. After I washed my hands with antibacterial soap so I didn’t have to get a tetanus shot or lockjaw, I wrapped twelve rubber bands around the bag, dumped the whole thing in a couple of Jim’s old football socks, and had Johnny duct tape the sock to my back.

“You look like a hunchback,” Johnny said.

“You shouldn’t make fun, what if a hunchback comes by?”

Johnny looked out from my porch and up and down the empty street. The bushes sat there quietly, losing their green in the shadows of night, and the trees all pressed together high over the center of the street, forming a dark gazebo for those of us wooing trouble. The lamp over Mary’s house flickered and I thought if I could time my blinking...
just right I wouldn’t even know it was flickering. He rifled through my backpack and sighed.

“I’m not making fun.”

It was still dark out when we left, and the full moon cast a shadow down through the tree that wasn’t there, and sometimes the shadow wasn’t there either on account of the glimmering lamp. Every few steps across the lawn I jumped back because I thought the shadows of the leaves were a thousand cockroaches trying to steal my money.

“It’s just the shadows,” Johnny said. “The tree is moving in the wind.”

“I’m just cold is all.”

We spoke in whispers because if we got caught that meant my butt would graduate from the wooden spoon to the rolling pin, and even though my Mom hadn’t labored for fourteen hours to pop Johnny’s bowling ball sized head through a toaster slot sized opening, I thought that, considering the circumstances, he might get a whoopin’ too. The dog whimpered a little, and I looked up expecting to see my parent’s light come on. For a second, my whole back got cold like a nymph dipped me into the river. But their room stayed dark, the dog stopped whimpering, the lamp stopped flashing, and a few steps later we were beyond the fence and out into the street.

Johnny wore the orange backpack. It didn’t sit too comfortable on me with the money taped between my shoulders, and since Johnny only brought a pair of gardening gloves with holes in the index fingers and dark stains along the wrist, he offered to carry the load. The backpack rested nearly flat against his back. Apart from his garden gloves and the knife, the pack was filled with only a change of underwear, a flashlight, and two
bottles of root beer from the fridge in case we got thirsty. The bottles clanked against each other with every other step, and, walking two steps behind Johnny, I could see the contents of the backpack shifting as he stepped from the sidewalk, to the curb, to the street, and back again, meandering in the way that people who are lost do from time to time, as though they expect where they are going to reach up and tug on their shoelaces, and offer them a graham cracker sandwich.

We headed down towards the main stretch of town and other than the occasional chirping bird, or the low whistle of leaves, or the slight creaking of old screen doors, there wasn’t much to hear. Johnny wore a pair of tennis shoes, and the heel on his right shoe needed to be glued back on, and it kept slapping against the bottom of his foot and against the pavement in rapid quarter notes every other step. I’d put on a pair of Henry’s old work boots, and the heels were thick and heavy, and I felt sleepy. Too sleepy to lift my feet all the way off the ground. The two of us together conducted quite a symphony.


As we approached Hopperton’s, I could see Mr. Hopperton’s brand new half ton pickup with a towing package and a winch parked next to the dumpster at the back edge of the parking lot. A bright green Hopperton’s logo covered the tail gate, and even though it was five in the morning, right before the sun came up, and right before the moon disappeared, the not quite day or night part of the cycle, the white doors gleamed like they’d just been polished.

“See those tires?” Johnny smiled and pointed towards the wheels on Mr. Hopperton’s truck.
“Yeah.”

“Those are our tires.”

“The ones we picked?”

“Fresh off the vine.”

A single light shone through the back room at Hopperton’s, and I imagined that Mr. Hopperton himself was in the back filling the barrels with candy and making sure that all his goods were in the right places. My Mom never liked to go to Hopperton’s in the evening because there are a lot of indecisive and lazy people in our town. The kind of people who pick up a jar of mayonnaise, put it in their cart for three aisles, decide they don’t really want it, and leave it on the shelf next to the crackers. My Mom said going to the store after six was a crapshoot, which just sounds kind of gross to me, so I never go except on Saturday mornings.

We walked past Hopperton’s, and the first bits of sunlight yawned in from the east, stretching out in a bright crown above the cottonwoods and pines, and I noticed that Johnny had small rings of sweat forming at the edges of the backpack strap, and that there wasn’t much town beyond Mr. Hopperton’s except for the bus station, Grandma McGrew’s house, and the abandoned Exotic Pet Store that Jim and Henry barely remember.

“Where are we going?” I asked Johnny.

“I’m not sure yet, but we’ll find out in a minute.”

The bus station was a station only in name. If you’re like me, when you hear of a station, you probably think of one of those huge depots in London or New York or Egypt.
where the buses stretch around the block and getting on the bus you want to is more of an accident than an intention. I’ve seen pictures of those places, with the giant black bricked fronts, archways, thousands of people walking around trying to think of an excuse to buy peanuts or candy bars, and always with babies crying and two old ladies who are pushing strollers full of books. The bus station next to Mr. Hopperton’s is nothing at all like the giants in the big cities. There’s not even an aluminum covered awning for the bus to park under when it rolls into town. Just a small wooden ticket booth and the words “Bus Stop” painted in a fading red above the apex of the arched window. There are iron bars over the window except for the bottom where a small drawer reaches out to take your money, and the plastic window is foggy gray and you can barely make out the bus schedules, which are written in Mr. Hopperton’s rectangular script, and taped up on the inside part of the window. There’s no register or machine that issues official tickets, just a cash box and a roll of red raffle tickets that say either “Keep This Ticket” or “Admit One.” A clock hangs at a slant from the back wall, and the only other furniture or decoration is a three legged metallic stool with a flowered chair pillow with a hole cut in the middle. My Mom says it’s for Mr. Hopperton’s Roids.

“Steroids?” I asked when she told me.

“No.”

Johnny walked up to the splintery bench next to the station and dropped the backpack from one shoulder and leaned back.

“What time is it?” he asked.
I walked up to the ticket window, rapped on the counter with my pinky, and peered through the fogged glass at the clock.

"5:45," I said. "A.M."

"The bus comes through in fifteen minutes.”

Johnny leaned back and closed his eyes and I supposed he had been up all night making preparations and felt tired and needed one of those power naps my Mom had been taking since she heard about them on Oprah. I sat down next to Johnny on the bench and tried to lean back and close my eyes as well, but with the giant sock taped to my back I couldn’t find a comfortable position. The bench was too hard and splintery to lay down on, even sideways with my shirt pulled up over my ears, and I hopped up and paced back and forth and tried to make a mental list of all the songs I’d ever forgotten.

Johnny snored a little, and his chest moved in and out, and his upper lip trembled with his snoring, and for a minute I thought it would be funny to draw a moustache on Johnny and hang him upside down from the bench, but he had a peaceful look on him when he slept, and the edges of his mouth were almost turned up in a smile, and I could see the crooked row of his bottom teeth that looked like a yacht club after a hurricane, and just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I walked over to the station and peered in again through the window, trying to read the destination of the 6 AM bus, but the destinations were obscured behind the frosted glass, and there weren’t any colorful posters with palm trees or roller coasters, so I figured it couldn’t have been anyplace too exciting.

“You boys taking the bus today?”
I looked up and Mr. Hopperton was fiddling with the lock on the station door. Like Snaggle Tooth Bill, he had a thick and jangly ring of keys and I couldn’t imagine there being enough locks in the world for all the keys he had, and on the fourth key the lock sprung free with a click and Mr. Hopperton moved inside.

I couldn’t see how Mr. Hopperton fit his whole body in the little station, because Mr. Hopperton was a big man, quite possibly the biggest in the county, and maybe even the biggest in the state. My Dad said only half the candy that Mr. Hopperton ordered ever made it into his famous barrels, and the other half went straight into the barrel Mr. Hopperton kept hidden under his shirt. He said he had it on good authority from Dr. Laura Pearl, the local dentist and veterinarian, that there wasn’t a tooth in Mr. Hopperton’s mouth that hadn’t been filled at least twice with the silver stuff, and some as many as five times. I didn’t think you could get a cavity in the silver stuff, but apparently once it gets into your mouth it becomes a living organism, and, because it’s a registered citizen of the United States, can do whatever it wants under the first amendment. There was no light in the station, and I couldn’t see the glint of anything silver in his mouth, and I thought about asking him to open his mouth so I could see all the cavities, but I heard my mother’s voice coming from the sock and decided not to.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’m not sure where we’re going, but I think we’re taking the bus to get there. Let me get Johnny and find out.”

I ran over to Johnny, and because the wind was low and things echo more when there’s no one around, I whispered in his ear.
“Johnny, Mr. Hopperton’s got the station open and wants to know where we’re going, plus his stomach touches every wall in the office and spills out a little from the door.”

Johnny stretched his arms towards the sky and opened his eyes slowly as if he were under water and didn’t know whether or not the chlorine was going to make him cry.

“Tell him we want the six o’ clock bus.”

“Where are we going?”

“Ask him where the closest cow fields are. I figure no matter where the bus is going, it’s got to pass a cow field somewhere.”

Johnny closed his eyes again and leaned back against the bench. His head stood straight up like he had a pillow behind it, and I kept expecting his head to roll off backwards like those people in Alice in Wonderland. Off with their heads! But his head stayed still and he began to snore again, and I didn’t even ask him why we were looking for a cow field. I figured if we were going to ride the cows and practice for the rodeo we would’ve brought a saddle or a rope, but all we had was the knife and the gardening gloves with the holes. Then I thought maybe we were going to glue the gloves to our stomachs and pretend to be cows, and I got real excited because I’d never pretended to be a cow in a cow field before, only in the shower. But Johnny never would have thought of something like that.

“So where are you kids going?” Mr. Hopperton called from behind the glass.

“The bus’ll be here in a minute, and you need a ticket to get on.”

I walked back over to the window.
“We’re looking for the closest cow field, Mr. Hopperton. The closest one we can get to for less than ten dollars round trip.” I wanted to make sure we had enough money to get back because I didn’t want to be stuck in the dark with a cow.

Mr. Hopperton leaned back on his stool. That is, he rolled his head back a little, and the sides of the station groaned, and the portion of his belly that hung out the side quivered a bit and came to a rest. I thought about poking him in the belly like the Pillsbury Dough Boy, but I figured he could press charges or throw me in jail for assault, even though I reckoned he wouldn’t have felt it at all.

“There’s farm about ten miles out of town, right off the main highway. The bus doesn’t stop there. It’s a private residence. Mrs. Catalino owns it. Used to be a beef farm back about ten years ago, but no one eats beef anymore. Not like they used to at any rate. Now she just keeps a few of them around for milk and such. If you ask the bus driver real nice, he might slow the bus down so you can jump out.”

“I’m not supposed to jump out of moving vehicles. My brother Jim jumped off the Christmas Tree Wagon back in the fourth grade and he ain’t been right in the head since.”

After Mr. Hopperton assured me the bus would stop for us to get off, and then helped me unravel the duct tape, athletic socks, rubber bands, and staples, I had two red tickets in my hand. One “Admit One” and one “Keep This Ticket.” The fare was normally five dollars a piece, but Mr. Hopperton sold ’em to me for what I had, and threw in a half pound bag of Chocolate Reindeer to boot. I threw the rest of the duct tape
in the waste basket by the bench, woke up Johnny, and by the time he rubbed all the sand out of his eyes, the bus had arrived in the station and we were covered in dust.

“Drop these two off at the Catalino place,” Mr. Hopperton said to the bus driver. “They’re looking for a cow field.” He had his hand on our shoulders and helped us, one by one, up a rickety wooden stepstool with a daisy painted on the top step that Mr. Hopperton had produced from inside the ticket office, and placed next to the bus.

“Is there a bull there too?” Johnny asked. He paused on the top step of the stool and looked at Mr. Hopperton. “If they don’t, I’d rather get dropped off someplace with a bull.”

Mr. Hopperton shrugged his shoulders and looked at the bus driver who shrugged his shoulders back. The bus driver frowned and wore his blue bus driver cap almost accidentally on his head, tipped so far back from the front that I couldn’t see how it didn’t fall onto the seat behind him. A moustache swallowed roughly half of his face, and I guessed that he hadn’t had a cup of coffee or bowl of soup in the last three years that hadn’t been filtered by the baleen like pepper colored strands that obscured his entire mouth. He, too, was a big man, though not nearly as large as Mr. Hopperton.

The bus driver looked at his watch and pointed towards Johnny and me, then Mr. Hopperton, then the highway.

“Well, kids, I guess you’ll just have to see when you get there. If I remember right, they had a couple of calves running around last time I was there, so you should be alright.”

Mr. Hopperton picked up the stool and glanced over at his store where a few of the early birds had gathered outside the door. It was mostly farmers with their pick-up
trucks still idling and wrapped in their Wednesday morning flannel, and sipping at coffee from insulated plastic cups with the logos of various feed or equipment manufacturers.

"Have a good trip boys. Don't gorge yourself on the Chocolate Reindeer." He patted his stomach, waved to the bus driver, and walked off towards his store.

"Grab a seat, boys. We're two minutes behind schedule."

There was only one other person on the bus, which ran from Springfield on one side of the county to Milton on the other. And the other person had drooped a thick straw hat down over his or her head, and was laid out across the back seat, the one near the bathrooms, with his or her feet, covered in dusty old cowboy boots, hanging out into the aisle and bouncing with the ebb of the bus.

"Let's sit in the front," Johnny said. I agreed because that's where we sat when we went on field trips, usually right across from the teacher so no one could fire spit balls at us or flick our ears with pencils or cut our hair with safety scissors. Personally, I liked to sit over the seats with the wheel covers because they rumbled a little more and it felt like the foot massager down at the fair. For a minute I considered suggesting this to Johnny, but he had already grabbed the window seat in the front row, the one right over the stairs, and he looked out at the country beyond town with eyes as wide as someone who was both excited and drowning. I sat down next to him and tried to look out the front window, but it was covered with a thin layer of dust and everything looked like channel 83. The channel Jim and Henry switch to when Mom and Dad are out for the evening when they think I've gone to bed. The channel where everyone has a breathing problem.
“Put on your seatbelts,” the bus driver called over his shoulder. “The road gets a little rough up here.”

Johnny and I looked around and dug under the seats, and got our fingers covered with that brown axel grease and some gum and sunflower seeds, but we couldn’t find any seatbelts.

“There aren’t any seatbelts,” I said.

“Ha! Then you’ll have to hold on tight.”

The road wasn’t nearly as bumpy as the bus driver suggested it might be, except for one section where the state workers were working on the road and we had to drive off into a ditch on the side of the road to get past. My mouth chattered so much I was sure I was going to bite my eyeballs, but nothing happened except one of the cowboy boots slid off the other passenger’s foot and down the aisle and into the stairwell. The bus driver opened the door and the wind whistled in even though we weren’t going more than twenty miles per hour, and the rocks and dirt from the ditch were getting kicked up by the wheels. Johnny got pelted in the forehead with a rock, and when I opened my mouth to laugh at him I got a yapper full of mud and we both ducked down to avoid any more flying debris. The bus driver turned the wheel hard and to the right, and I crushed Johnny against the wall and the boot flew out of the open door and into the mud.

Johnny pushed me away when we straightened out.

“That’ll teach him to fall asleep on my bus.”
The bus driver snapped his fingers and pointed towards a wooden sign on the side of the road that read “Catalino Ranch- one mile.” As we got closer Johnny started smiling because there was a big, brown bull chewing on some alfalfa right by the side of the fence, no more than ten feet from the main road.

“This,” Johnny said as he elbowed me in the ribs and pulled the sock covered knife out of the backpack, “is the place.”
With a whirr and a rumble the silver thermos shaped bus pulled off down the highway. The sun had crept up into the sky during our ride and now hung low and powerful and there were bugs of sweat on my forehead, and when the bus got down the road and the angle was right and the sun shined off the hoary rear of the bus, I winced at the flash and turned away.

There was a canopy of oak trees lining both sides of the highway on the Catalino Ranch, and they ran for about a mile in each direction from the main gate, spaced out ten feet apart and inside the barbed wire fence that extended the length of the property and was covered with cobwebs, dead leaves, and rust. The bull was chewing some alfalfa under the shade of one of these oak trees, and looked at us for a second, snorted, pawed a couple of times at the rutted and cow hoofed dirt, and went back to chewing. The dust floated, like a jelly fish, slow and aqueous, about a yard or so behind him before it disappeared under the weight of the sun.

Near the bull, on the highway side of the fence sat a rusted out old tractor, and Johnny walked over and climbed up onto the shredded seat behind the steering wheel. He stood up, caught his toe on the edge of the seatbelt that had been chewed through by mice and birds, and nearly fell. I took a quick couple of steps over to catch him, or at least watch him fall with genuine concern, but he caught himself on the crest of the seat, and looked out over the cow pasture with his hands shading his eyes.
The main Catalino ranch was situated about half a mile away from the road and behind the cow pasture. It was a two story ranch looking home nearby a big, red barn complete with a sloped roof and a couple of trucks parked next to a stack of wood. The wood was piled under the porch on the east side of the house and was black at the edges because of the rains. Beyond the house were corn fields, an apple orchard, and a stable from which I could hear the occasional neigh of a horse. The pasture itself consisted of a couple acres of dry, furrowed, dirt that looked like a miniature brown sea speckled with hoof prints, weed patches, hay, and an empty fast food bag. The fast food bag had a rectangular grease spot near the bottom and blew from east to west across the field except for when the wind would give it a good kick, and then it flew straight up in the air three or four feet before drifting slowly back towards the frozen tides of dirt. There were twenty or so cows, varied in color and size, most of whom drank from the rusty aluminum bathtubs placed in the four corners of the pasture and in the shade. A single calf, white with a streak of brown shaped like Norway on his left haunch, followed the progress of the bag, and scampered back a few steps in fear every time the wind lifted it into the air. In the third grade a got a B+ on my Norway report, missing points only because I suggested that the main export of the Norwegians were mermaids because that’s what Jim told me.

There was only one bull. The other cows seemed to give him his space, and he continued to chew, and unaffected by the presence of Johnny and me.

Johnny’s eyes darted around the pasture from spot to spot, and I could see the smile on his face widening and I thought for a minute that the edge of his lips were going
to touch his ears, and that he was going to have to learn how to hear from his teeth, but he just nodded and hopped down from his perch.

“Jackpot,” he said. “Paul, we’ve hit the jackpot.”

I’d followed Johnny since he pretended to be the pumpkin man, since I’d wet my bed, since I’d taped my life savings to my back, and then spent it on a couple of bus tickets into the middle of nowhere, up onto the top of a tractor, and I still had no idea what he was talking about. I wondered what in the world the two of us were doing outside of Catalino ranch, staring at a cow field, with a broken pocket knife, and half melted Chocolate Reindeer. I wondered if Johnny wanted to kill one of the cows with my knife as a test of manhood or something. In Ms. L’s class we’d been reading about a few of the ceremonies different cultures have throughout the world- bar mitzvahs, quincenieras, vision quests, and walkabouts, and I wondered if Johnny had gone out into the woods on his own, been lifted up into a chair, and been told by his spirit bear that he needed to kill a cow before he could become a man.

“Johnny,” I said. “I don’t think we’re gonna be able to kill a cow with that knife. I can barely even cut celery when I want to make ants on a log. If we could somehow hide in that bag out there, we might be able to lure the little calf up close and then jump out and bludgeon him with stones, but then we’d probably go to hell. Unless he was a heathen or golden calf. Then we’d …”

“We’re not gonna kill any cows.”

“Then what’s the knife for?”

“We’ve got to cut it.”

“What?”
"The bullshit."

"You’re not supposed to say that. If my Mom was here she’d make us both eat soap, and probably make us clean up dog poop."

"Let’s eat some lunch first. It’s going to be a long day."

All we had for lunch was the Chocolate Reindeer, because Mom counted the slices of bread every morning when she made us our peanut butter and jelly, and if I was going to get in trouble for disappearing in the middle of the night I didn’t want to compound it by stealing four slices of bread. The Reindeer were mostly melted in their colorful foil wrappers, and Johnny and I didn’t have any napkins so most of the chocolate reindeer ended up in streaks and splotches across the sides of my shorts and at the edges of my mouth.

"It looks more like reindeer poop," Johnny said. He started to laugh, but considering that we were ten miles out of town about to use my pocketknife to dig through cow droppings, I considered the joke inappropriate and I lost my appetite.

"We should save some of the chocolate for later, in case it takes us a while to find what we’re looking for," I suggested. Johnny agreed and placed the plastic bag against the trunk of the tree and in the shade.

"That way they won’t melt," Johnny said.

There were two garden gloves in the backpack and Johnny handed me the right hand and he took the left. The fingers were worn through on both gloves, but they were adult sized gloves and only if I pulled the glove down as far as it would go could I wiggle my index finger through the hole on top.
“Hey, Johnny,” I called. “It’s a worm.”

He looked at my finger.

“That’s your index finger.”

Scattered along the base of the fence were sticks and small branches, and Johnny walked over to these and picked them up and pressed them into his hip as though testing their durability. I wiggled my finger once more and looked up. The bull had stopped chewing his alfalfa and come over to get a better look at us. He stood by the fence, three feet from Johnny, and snorted. His tongue hung from his mouth and drool gathered in legions at the base of his nose and the edge of his tongue and dropped to the ground on the highway side of the fence where it kicked up small dust clouds and I imagined the sound of bombs dropping and ants everywhere running for their concrete bunkers where they’d stored up enough food to last through the winter.

“This one looks pretty good,” Johnny said. He handed me a two foot stick with a couple of knots down at one end about a fist away from the end.

“What’s that for?”

“This is my idea, so I’ll be the one who cuts. You can just poke around with the stick and break it up into piles.”

“It’s already in piles.”

“I mean smaller piles so we can find out what’s inside.”

“I think what’s inside is the same as what’s on the outside, except it doesn’t smell as bad.”

“You can just sit by the fence if it grosses you out, or if you’re afraid, but don’t eat all the reindeer.”
"I'm not afraid."

Johnny and I tried to move down a few trees from where the bull was, because the bull had horns that stuck out from the top of his head like a modern day triceratops, or even a biceratops because there were only two, and we didn’t want to be gored because then we’d really be in trouble. But the bull followed us stride for stride on the opposite side of the fence. He kept staring at us all glassy eyed like we were one of those reality TV shows. Like he was trying to figure out which one of us he wanted to vote off the highway or something. We hid behind a tree and then sprinted back the other way when he couldn’t see us anymore, but he just turned around and trotted back to where we were and then he’d drool over the fence for us. Some of the other cows noticed us too, and the little Norway calf gave up following the bag and moseyed over to stand behind his dad.

"Great," Johnny said. "Now we’ll never get in there."

"I've got an idea."

"What?"

"I'll distract them, and you sneak over a couple of trees and jump through the fence."

"How are you going to distract a cow?"

Johnny waited until there was no traffic and then crossed to the other side of the highway and dropped down into the ditch. The bull and the calf looked after him for a minute or two, and their eyes got real wide when he disappeared down into the ditch, even though you could see the top of his back as he tried to crawl his way down the
highway. He had the knife still wrapped up in the sock and in his back pocket, and every couple of feet or so I could see tube of the white sock bobbing up and down in the sun. The bull and the cow watched him for a moment and then returned their gaze to me.

"Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, and cows, welcome to the greatest show on Earth." I put my stick up in the air like a parade conductor and began to march in a circle in front of the cows. I hummed Sousa’s Battle Hymn of the Republic and thrust my arm into the air with every step, keeping my chin high and picking up my knees almost to the middle of my chest, and after thirty seconds I was completely out of breath.

"Will you all please rise and remove your caps and horns for the singing of our National Anthem."

At this point the bull went back to chewing his alfalfa and the calf rambled back towards the paper bag. A cow with sharp rear haunches was chewing on the bag, and when the calf approached her, he mooed a pitiful moo in tune with my singing, and then he rubbed his nose against her side until she dropped the bag and went back to the water trough.

I was halfway through the National Anthem, at the bit about the bombs bursting in air, when I noticed Johnny down on his hands and knees sawing away at a bit of cow poop at the far end of the corral. The bull looked up and noticed him too, but didn’t seem too keen on leaving the shade or the alfalfa to go find out what Johnny was up to, and then I remembered that there was a reason people had guard dogs and not guard cows.

I picked up my stick, which I had dropped for the Anthem, and worked my way through the fence. It was tough getting through without getting poked by the barbs, and I was worried especially about the rusty ones because I hadn’t eaten my vitamins that
morning and didn’t want to catch a disease. Just when I thought I’d made it through clear and free I felt a poke in my back. I cursed myself because I figured I was going to get hepatitis just like Mom warned me about, and that I probably wouldn’t be able to play with Johnny anymore, and might even have to live in plastic bubble and eat only celery and corn nuts. I turned my shirt around when I got to the other side to check for blood, but there wasn’t any, so all my worrying was for nothing.

I heard a snort. The bull had ceased his alfalfa chewing and walked over to meet me. I put out my hand so he could smell it, figuring it would be nice to show a gesture of friendship. He stared at my hand for a minute, like he was trying to figure out which of my fingers would best wash down a pound of alfalfa, but then he stuck out his tongue and licked my palm. He seemed to like the parts where there was chocolate residue the best, and his tongue was thick and moist and felt sticky against my hand. After he finished the chocolate he sauntered back into the shade and watched a blue Ford F-150 pass by. I was glad the bull hadn’t greeted me like a dog, sniffing my butt and all, because I certainly didn’t want to sniff his butt in return, especially considering the nature of our mission, but I would have if it meant my life.

Across the corral Johnny waved his arms for me to come over. Quick. I shot a glance off to the farm to see if Old Man Catalino had come out to fire his rifle at us for cattle rustling, but as best I could see no one was home. When I got over to Johnny he had dirt caked on his knees and the backs of his ears were sweaty and there was a large oval of bull crap cut up into quarters.

“Look what I found,” Johnny said. He pointed at the cow poop for a minute, and all I saw was cow poop, and I almost said to him, What did you expect to find?, but his
voice had gone up an octave, and he was breathing faster, and when I looked closer I saw a slightly misshapen marble in the middle of the second quarter.

“A marble?”

“Yep.”

“Is that what we’re looking for?”

“I don’t know, but let’s throw it in the backpack and keep looking.”

“It’s shaped kind of weird.”

“Cows have four stomachs.”

“I’ve never seen anyone eat a marble before.”

“I think they get tired of hay.”

“I get tired of peanut butter and jelly, but I’d never eat a marble.”

Even though the marble didn’t look like much, and I knew we’d never play with it, the idea of finding toys in the middle of a cow field got me excited and I told Johnny that I’d head over to the opposite side and we could work our way towards the middle.

“We should split whatever we find fifty-fifty,” I told him. “Except the marble. You can have that because this was your idea.” I said that because I thought it was the generous thing to do, and that Johnny deserved the first treasure because it was his idea, and because I hadn’t played with marbles since I tried to see how many I could fit in my mouth at once on a dare from Henry, and nearly choked to death before he draped me over the couch and slapped me on the back with a hiking boot.

“All right,” Johnny replied. “But if we find what I need, then I get that.”

“What is it you need?”

“I don’t know.”
I thought Johnny was being a little mysterious about the whole thing, and part of me thought he was just trying to keep the door of opportunity open in case we found something real cool like a wagon or a plastic sword and wanted to claim it for himself, but I agreed because Johnny got all excited when he saw the marble, and I always do like to see people happy.

I didn’t find much on my side of the field. After half an hour of poking through cow plops with my stick, all I’d discovered was a petrified cricket, a few strands of purple hay (like in the song), and a penny. My enthusiasm for the project petered out as the sun got higher and the circle of sweat on my back began to drown my shoulders.

The stiff clay ground bounced the heat of the sun upwards and my chin caught the full brunt of the heat and for a minute I thought Trevor was hiding in the bushes somewhere and flashing his watch at me. I wiped my forehead with the sleeve of my shirt, but it didn’t do much good because I’d already sweated through to the point where I didn’t know if I was wiping on or wiping off.

The bull stood off in the shade of the oaks, and most of the other cows were either flicking their tails in the shade or drinking from the trough. Water dripped from the Norway calf’s mouth as he slowly ambled his way from shade to shade and he looked out towards his paper bag. The wind had died down and the bag sat motionless in the middle of the field about halfway in between Johnny and me. When the calf saw the bag taking a nap, he turned back towards the shade of the oaks and scratched his side on one of the crooked fence posts.
Johnny's back was covered with a dark pool of sweat, and, from the way he kept wiping at his eyebrow with the leg of his shorts, I figured he was just as hot as I was.

"Johnny," I called, "You want to stop for a few minutes? Maybe take a drink from the trough."

"I'm not a cow."

"You're not a camel either," I called, but Johnny didn't turn around or even look up from the pile he was working on. For a minute I wondered if he might at least be related to a camel, but he didn't even have one hump.

I walked over to the trough nearest the shade and dipped my head in the water. I thought this would be refreshing, but the water felt lukewarm, like the bathtub when you forget to drain it, complete with the little white foam lily pads swirling around in the corners. It tasted like cow slobber and leaves. I don't remember how I know what cow slobber tastes like.

I walked over towards Johnny because I figured I should give him a hand instead of standing in the shade like a cow. I felt tired because we had set out so early, and like I always do when I'm sleepy, I dragged my heels as I approached him, and then I turned around and walked backwards because I wanted to pretend like I was stealing the cattle and trying to mislead the detective who'd be sent out to track me down. I didn't know if the police department had detectives for cows. I don't even think our police department has a detective. When Grandma McGrew was reverse burgled, the sheriff's son came out and gave her a loaf of garlic bread. That's about as serious as it gets around here.

"Paul, look at this."
Johnny’s cheeks were red and his eyes were wide and red, and his nose and chin were pale white, and there was a brown streak of mud and poop running like an airplane wing from above his right eye to his left ear where he’d been wiping the sweat from his forehead. His arms looked as though he’d dipped them in chocolate fudge like they do with the ice cream down at Mr. Hopperton’s Ice Cream Queen, except for a few spots where sweat streaked from his elbow to his wrist. He held the knife out to me.

At first I thought it was a green cigarette or something, illegally imported from Cuba, because it was rolled in a tight circle and both ends were capped off by brown scraps and you couldn’t see through to the other side. But at one end I saw a few small numbers in black, a signature, and a bigger number in light green.

“Is that money?”

Johnny stood up and brushed what dirt he could from his knees onto his shins.

“Ten bucks.”

“How does a cow get ten bucks?”

“Maybe it works at the milk factory.”

“How can it work at the milk factory if it doesn’t have any pants?”

Johnny shook his head and folded the knife back as far he could and shoved it back into the sock and threw them, along with the ten dollar bill, into the backpack. The sun was a little past its peak and the wind picked up from the east and blew through the trees and across the cow field, and in the southwest corner, near the Catalino Ranch, a small whirlwind picked up and three cows took off in flight and ran towards the safety of the bull. The bull watched all this and continued to chew his alfalfa. The breeze felt good.
against my shirt and I got goose bumps on my arms and the back of my legs and Johnny did too.

“I’ve always wanted to be a whirlwind,” Johnny said, and before I had time to ask him what he was talking about Johnny dropped the backpack and ran through the cows. For a minute I thought Johnny was going to be trampled, but when the cows saw him coming they veered wide and mooed and the slowest one snorted at Johnny as if to warn him, but Johnny made it through okay. When he got to the whirlwind he closed his eyes and his mouth and put his arms in the air and started swirling around and around. The whirlwind itself moved off towards the Catalino ranch and beyond the fence, but Johnny whirled and twirled and kicked up dust until all around him was a brown smoke of fine earth. I saw only the tips of his fingers and the top of his hair peeking out like sharp hills in a mist. I thought about telling him that the twister was gone, but I don’t think he would have heard me through the haze. A minute later he collapsed.

His chest heaved and his hair and face and clothes were a couple of centimeters below the blanket of dust when I got over to him and offered him a hand to stand up.

“You’re dirty,” I said.

“I,” he replied in between heaves, “am.”

He sat there for a minute and I sat next to him and pulled out a few chocolate reindeer and we both just sat there and chewed until the reindeer were gone.

“Well, we’d better get home,” Johnny said. “We’re probably both going to be in a lot of trouble.”

“We could tell them we were kidnapped by truckers and escaped after we put a bunch of rocks in the sack they were keeping us in.”
“Sure,” Johnny said, but he was looking off towards the highway leading away from town. He didn’t seem to excited about it, so I just pretended to be looking for something in the backpack, and then I pulled out the knife and opened it and closed it and shook my head as though I’d just confirmed something I’d been thinking about.

It took Johnny a few minutes to wash up in the cow trough, and by the time we got out of the cow field and back to the other side of the highway the sun had faded in the east. The bus pulled up a few minutes later and Johnny and I sat in the front. This time I got the window, and Johnny fell asleep as soon as the door closed and the bus was moving.

Through the tinted windows of the bus the sunset took on a gray and almost nostalgic quality, and I looked out the back of the bus towards the cow field. The bull was still standing there, in the shade of the oak that now stretched across the pasture and faded into the darkness by the troughs where night had already reached and there weren’t any shadows at all. The last bits of sunlight hit the face of the bull, still chewing his cud in and out of the shadows. Norway calf resumed his chase of the paper bag. It caught on the barbed wire fence and flapped at the edge like a flag. The calf sniffed at it. Every time the bag hit his nose he jumped back and looked around suspiciously. When the sun disappeared completely everything felt like a black and white picture and I could physically feel the memory of the day imprinting itself on my brain.

The bus driver had to wake us up when we got back to town, and I wiped the drool that had accumulated against the seat with my sleeve so that no one would notice.
Uneasy Dreams

In the still, thick air of a windless night, I awoke breathless and shaking from uneasy dreams. The moonlight sliced the floor in bright strips through the blinds and the bed itself sweated bugs in the dense humid fog that had filled my room. My shirt was halfway over my head, and even my tongue dripped with salty drops of sweat. Looking at the foot of the bed, where the grey sheets covered with bears playing baseball were bunched in foothills against the wooden frame, I realized I must have kicked myself awake. My quilt, a bright yellow weave with a giant macramé clown face that scared the hell out of me in the dark (even more so in the still, thick dark sliced by menacing moonbeams), billowed like an underwater sail in slow, heaving swoops from where it was tucked in at the foot of the mattress, to where it had been kicked in the middle of the floor. Apart from the slow whiz and click of my fan, standing on its single plastic foot atop my desk, and the flapping of the quilt against itself, the house was quiet.

I sat up in bed and stared out the window at the rain. It fell in glimmering laser beams. My gut tightened with the certainty that I was not alone in the room. I felt certain that the dark, swaying cattail shadows of my dreams had spilled out into the world and lingered in the corners and waited for me to fall asleep again so that they could steal my soul away.

With my shirt still tangled about my shoulders, I kneeled and pulled the yellow wiffle ball bat from the umbrella stand under my desk, and swung it blindly at the darkness. As my stomach groaned, I felt as if the sinister weight of the pumpkin man, the lake monster, dream shadows, and Trevor Lindman were gathering at the base of a fiery
mountain somewhere, clad in dark armor and riding skeleton horses straight for me. I thought about going into Mom’s room, and sleeping at the foot of the bed like I did most of the times when I had nightmares, or maybe letting the dog in to sleep by the window, but other than my right arm swinging the wiffle ball bat through the slivers of moonlight, I couldn’t move. I looked out the window again at the empty and glistening street. The smell of fresh dust, driven up by the raindrops, mingled with rotting compost and filled the room. The clown flap flapped with the sway of the fan.

It began to rain shortly after Johnny and I returned home from our trip to Catalino Ranch. Puddles had formed at the base of the fence posts, and the wind stretched out like a dog yawning and shook the trees and some of the older tool sheds. I’d said goodbye to Johnny near the edge of the woods, and it wasn’t until I’d gotten about half a block away from home that I realized he still had my knife.

Henry was out front doing push ups in the rain when I got back, covered in mud up to his elbows. He stopped long enough to tell me that I was going to get a whoopin’, and that Mom had been worried sick and had made enough apple pies to feed half the town since I’d failed to show up for breakfast and they found my room empty.

“My God, he’s been stolen by gypsies,” Henry told me she’d said after she found my bed empty. And when he and Jim laughed, she smacked at them halfheartedly with the frill of her apron, and handed them each a knife and a peeler and told them to start dicing apples.
Mom called Dad at work, and then the sheriff from Dogtown, the town across the bridge, came over, filled out a police report, and ate two slices of hot apple pie. Mom suggested to the sheriff that gypsies might have stolen her baby.

"Ma’am, the gypsies haven’t been by here since they put in the trout farm,“ the sheriff replied. Henry heard from the kitchen.

"Dad’s mad too,“ Henry said, and returned to his pushups.

Mom wasn’t all that mad. She cried a little and then hugged me, pulling me into her lavender dress that smelled like apples and cinnamon and tears. She ran her fingers through my hair, searched my scalp for lice, squeezed my shoulders like I was an avocado, and whacked my knees with a wooden spoon to test my reflexes. When everything checked out okay, she pushed me away.

"Do you have any bruises?“ she asked.

"No."

She grabbed my by the shoulders and stared into my eyes. They were a little bloodshot from having been up so long and on the bus ride back to town I’d been rubbing my tired eyes with my unwashed forefingers and all the dirt and particles and cow residue from the ranch.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No!"

"Smoking?"

"No!"

"I’m too mad to talk to you right now. Go to your room. No dinner tonight. You can explain in the morning. Your father and I…“ she trailed off and peeked into the
kitchen, where Dad was making a salad and some macaroni and cheese for dinner. “Do you have anything to say to Paul?”

“Go to your room,” Dad hollered from the kitchen. “No dinner.”

I ran up to my room figuring I was pretty lucky to get out of it without being yelled at or grounded or smacked a couple times with the wooden spoon. And even though the wooden spoon sounds like the worst of those three, and there are parents who get arrested for it nowadays, it’s a whole lot better than getting’ yelled at. When Mom yells at me, I always feel real guilty because she talks about the ordeal of my birth, her twelve hours of labor, and how she didn’t eat anything but protein powder and graham crackers for seven months because that’s what Einstein’s mom did. That’s the worst. I usually have to convince Henry to let me wash the dishes when it’s his turn, and take out the garbage, and I do it so that Mom will see me and know that I’m grateful for all the graham crackers. I even try to mess up my hair like Einstein so she knows it all worked out, but Dad gives us all the army cut with electric shears over the bathroom sink, so there isn’t much to mess up. When Dad yells he slams his fist into his hand and mumbles statements like, “If you’d a known what you would’ve done before you did it, then we wouldn’t have had to have had this conversation now would we?” and, “If you had three stacks of pretzels for every time you transgressed the rules of this house, you’d be able to sail a fair way around the world without galoshes.” Mostly I just get confused for a few days when Dad yells at me, and slink around the house trying to avoid him so he doesn’t ask me any more questions. Grounding meant I couldn’t go outside and play with Johnny or even sit on the porch and watch the people pass on the street or feel the intermittent rays of the sun. The wooden spoon was quick and easy. On the only two occasions I’d
gotten the wooden spoon (when I cut up part of Mom’s wedding dress to make a Valentine’s card for the dog, and when Henry told me that the toilet wasn’t working and I pooped in a bucket for a week and spilled it in the garage), the sting was gone before I even got to my room. So I wasn’t sure what kind of punishment they had planned for me, but I figured it couldn’t be too bad, because they were going to sleep on it.

I ate a couple of Chocolate Reindeer that I had stuffed in a sock at the back of my closet for emergencies. I had to wipe a bunch of ants off the wrapper, and I opened my window and set them free on the outside ledge instead of smooshing them and flushing them down the toilet. I like Chocolate Reindeer too and I can’t blame them because there aren’t any ant stores where they can buy them. It’s rough to be an ant and walk around naked with everyone trying to smoosh you or spray you with poison.

After that I drew a picture of the bull standing under the oak tree, pinned it up on my wall next to the poster of the cat pirates at sea, and fell asleep.

I must have accidentally swallowed an ant, because I’ve never dreamed a dream like the one that scared me that night, and I’ve heard that ants have hallucinogenic properties.

In the dream I was walking through a meadow surrounded on all sides by tall pine trees. It was the middle of the day. The sun was bright and warm against my neck, and I was wearing a cowboy hat and riding the bull through the meadow towards a trough on the far side.

“Marvellous day,” the bull remarked.

“Yes,” I replied. “I hope we’ll have pomegranate pancakes for dinner tonight.”
“I’d prefer alfalfa.”

At the far end of the meadow stood a man wearing a plastic gorilla mask and holding a shepherd’s crook. A legion of rats scampered around his feet, darting back and forth, scurrying over his sandaled feet, and biting each other’s ears.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was muffled because of the mask.

“Hello.”

As I replied a black cloud floated in from the east and covered the sun. The tall meadow grasses disappeared, the trees fell over and the needles withered and turned gray, and as far as I could see nothing existed except for a plain of black sand that glowed red, as though volcanic, at the edges. I looked down and my bull had turned into a boulder.

“It’s strange the way things change so quickly here,” the man in the gorilla mask said. His rats evaporated in the darkness.

“It is.”

The black cloud swallowed the sun and all of the sky, and except for a shepherd’s crook shaped street lamp that appeared over the man in the mask, everything was dark.

“The worst thing about the day,” the man with the mask told me, “is that eventually it turns into night.”

“There’s nothing all that bad about the night. That’s when all the best shows come on.”

The man shook his head and pointed towards the west. On the horizon a dark shape appeared, and even though the world stretched out in blackness glowing red at the edges, there was a darker blackness approaching in an amorphous wind that had no
beginning or end, and either extinguished or covered all of the glowing red edges of the ground.

"You should leave," the man in the mask said. "It is too late for me."

I stood up on the boulder and looked back to the east, then the north, then the south. From all directions the blackness that was more than blackness closed in on me. Blackness blackened. A tidal wave, hurricane, whirlpool, earthquake of darkest gloom. The ground rumbled with the force of the oncoming rush, and I stood up on top of the boulder. Deep red eyes appeared amidst the swirling formlessness of the darkness. When it was nearly upon me, I jumped in the air and screamed, and the force of my scream carried me up, up, and up towards the sliver of a dim moon. When I looked down the darkness collided like waves against a cliff side and spouted upward, chasing me, so dense that I felt the pull of its gravity against my legs, pulling me back, the red eyes spouting geysers of sparks and flame. When I awoke the sheets were on the floor.

I tried for thirty minutes to go back to sleep, but time had slowed and my heart was beating fast, and my arm was getting tired from swinging the wiffle ball bat. I tried counting to ten, like Ms. L told us the Zen Buddhists do when they meditate, so I could block out all my other thoughts and fall back to sleep. But by the time I realized I couldn’t convince my mind to focus, I’d counted to 325 and only a minute had passed on the digital clock.

"I should get my knife back," I mumbled, hoping that any evil spirits, shadows, or lake monsters in the room would hear the word "knife" and figure that I was dipping deeper into my vast personal arsenal of weapons now that the wiffle ball bat, merely my
first level of defense, had failed. Really I was looking for an excuse to go to Johnny’s. I figured I could knock on his window and talk to him for a little bit, maybe we could play marbles or Merlin the Sorcerer, or make a list of ways to spend the money we’d found. Or maybe find out if Johnny had been dreaming about the shadows too, and if it meant that we were going to go to hell because we’d stolen money from the Catalino family, or the bull who kept his money in dried poop because he was morally opposed to a leather wallet, and if maybe we shouldn’t return it as soon as possible.

The idea of setting out through the woods and across the lake at night, in the rain, and after I was already in deep trouble, didn’t seem to me like the best idea. But it was only 3:20 in the morning, and even if I took a leisurely stroll and talked with Johnny for fifteen minutes, I could get back, with my knife, in an hour.

I crept through the house in my socks, stealthy and taut like a cat. I tied the laces of my boots together and wore them around my neck and tucked one of the boots into my sweater so they wouldn’t knock together and make a sound. I stopped in the kitchen to grab two leftover sausages for Blueberry Joe. Yellow pustules of solidified grease covered the sausages, and I wrapped both of them in aluminum foil and rubbed the grease off on my pants. I knew Blueberry Joe didn’t have a mouth anymore on account of he turned into a tree, but I figured if I buried the sausages by his roots, the rain would take the sausage flavor up through his branches and out to his leaves.

The rain fell hard from the sky and with the thickness of the air I felt like I was wading straight out into the lake. Puddles formed at the base of the stairs and all across the lawn like a marsh, and I could hear the metallic ring as rain hit the gutters and piping
along the side of the roof and down the side of the house. The drain was clogged with leaves, and the water had flown over into Mom’s rose beds, and the deep crimson bush leaned towards the house as the wind arrived. Smoochie Poochie came over and licked my hand and started to whine, and I worried that Mom might hear him above the patter of rain and Dad’s snoring, so I gave him a small end of sausage, and he scampered around the corner to enjoy it in his dog house. He didn’t like the rain either. I sat down on the swingin’ bench, put on my boots, pulled my swimming goggles out of the storage bench, buttoned up my slicker, and set out for Johnny’s house.

The floor of the woods was still pretty dry with the cover of the cottonwoods, except for in the spots where the leaves didn’t touch, and there the ground was soft and dark. I walked around these, and matted parrot feathers, and took my hood off as I dashed from tree to tree towards the center of the woods and Joe.

There’re a lot of people who talk about how the wind howls through trees like a coyote wooing the moon, or a dog with the loosies real bad, and sometimes it does. But when I walked through the cottonwoods and took my hood down and stood at the base of the tree and put my ear to the wind to listen for parrots or even Blueberry Joe, the wind didn’t howl at all. A howl is a long, dolorous call into nothingness, but the wind moved with purpose through the woods in short bursts of dithering flaps and slaps at the leaves and branches and matted parrot feathers. Rather than a slow howl, the wind moved with urgency, like that Greek guy with the winged shoes, delivering vital messages from the sky and the stars to the earth and trees, and then swirling back again to make sure nothing was missed.
When I got to Joe I noticed someone had carved the initials “TL + MG” in a knot about shoulder level up his trunk. Around the initials someone had fashioned a crude heart that looked more like a lung, and sap dripped from the bare white wood and over the thin dark bark. The sap was thin at the top and in thick little balls at the bottom, but it had been cold and the sap had not run too far from the wounds.

“I brought you some sausages,” I said to Joe. “And I know you can’t eat ’em or nothing, but I’m gonna bury them in the soil by your roots, and hopefully the flavor will seep down with the rainwater so you don’t have to eat just dirt and minerals. Even though you might like dirt and minerals now, because you are a tree.”

I used the toe of my boot to scrape a hole on both sides of the tree.

“Sorry about this one. I had to give a bite to the dog so that he didn’t bark. I’m heading over to Johnny’s to pick up my knife.”

I kicked what dirt I could back over the sausages, and when they were covered I took a step towards Joe and wrapped my arms around him. I figured it didn’t make me a hippie unless someone saw or took a picture, and there was no one out in the woods at this hour except for me and Joe.

“I hope it didn’t hurt too bad when they cut you,” I said. I took a step back and ran my fingers in the groove of the initials. “It doesn’t look so bad, actually, gives you a little character.”

“Hola.”

I heard a flap of wings and a parrot landed on one of Joe’s lower branches and crooked his head to one side.

“Sorry, parrot. I can’t talk now. I’ve got to get over to Johnny’s place.”
“Adios,” the parrot replied. He swooped down and grabbed one of the sausages and flew off to the far end of the woods where three more parrots were squawking eagerly.

“Dumb bird.”

I picked up two rocks. One I put over the other sausage, the other I slipped into my pocket in case the parrot came back and tried to steal everything from Joe.

“I’ll see you later Joe. Don’t let these cottonwoods get you down.”

Once I got beyond the woods, I crossed quickly across the school yard. The sunflowers we’d planted with Ms. L weren’t deep enough in the soil, and most of them had fallen over in the rain, and the yellow petals were covered in small brown splashes of mud. There weren’t any cars in the parking lot, but someone had left a light on in the cafeteria. I could tell because there was a single orange rectangle of light poking through the tinted windows above the cafeteria. I wondered if the janitor was sneaking some of the fudgy crunch bars they always ran out of by the time the fifth graders got to lunch on Fridays.

The rain began to fall harder and harder, and I could feel the wet drag of my socks against the inside of my boot, and the rubbery feel of the balls of my feet against the socks. The rain fell so thick and hard that I could barely see ten feet because the rain caused all the streetlights to blur, and the wind caused the lampposts to shake, and all the shadows shifted with the capricious moods of the wind, and looked like they were dancing with my senses. I pulled out my swim goggles and spit in each of the eyes and rubbed it around with my finger. The spit was brown and slimy from the Chocolate
Reindeer. Then I rinsed out the spit with rain, dried the plastic with my shirt, and put on the goggles.

It was easier to see with the goggles on, and I made my way towards Johnny’s. I tried to keep away from the lake because I didn’t want to run into the lake monster. I figured that a rainy evening would be just the sort of night he’d be out and about, looking for worms and beetles that couldn’t stay underground during the rain. And with the rain falling, and the overwhelming darkness once I got past the school and off the main road, I thought about turning back. Water rolled down my face and little tickly streams ran into my ears and at the corner of my mouth, and my jeans were heavy and sagged from my waist because I left my belt at home, and the backs were covered in mud up to my ankles. I thought to myself, this is what it must feel like to be born, all wet and dirty, and you just want to cry and turn around and go back home to Mom cause that’s the easy thing to do. Just when I had convinced myself that I wouldn’t be a sissy for turning around because no one would ever know I even went out, I saw the light on in Johnny’s second floor room. Shadows were flashing against the far wall.

“He must still be up. I wonder if he’s swinging a wiffle ball bat.”

I looked over my shoulder real quick to make sure the lake monster wasn’t creeping up on me. I saw only the cat tails straining like bows with the force of the wind. I turned back towards Johnny’s, hiked my sagging pants up to my waist, and broke into a jog.
Rain hit the Appleseed's gray deck in echoing thuds. The rusted, empty gutter braces hung from the edges of the roof like sick "L's," and old question marks, and the water cascaded in a curtain of beaded droplets over the steps leading to the deck. The porch light flickered. It didn't really flicker. It was off most of the time, and only after long, dark intervals, like a car passing on a lonely highway, would it flash for a second and cast its yellow glow over the crags and holes in the porch.

I figured I couldn't knock on Johnny's front door, even though his dad's truck was gone, because I didn't want to wake up his Mom and get the both of us in trouble. So I crept over to the edge of the porch and climbed up on the railing, and reached for Johnny's window. It was just a hair beyond my reach, and a little over my eyes, and I leaned just a bit farther and tried to steady myself against the slippery wood of the side of the house. The wind came in a gust and filled my slicker like a sail. I swayed and wobbled with the force of the burst, and nearly toppled over off of the porch and into a big wooden barrel filled to the brim and overflowing with some kind of briny looking liquid, but caught my hand on a hanging flower pot. The flower pot was empty.

I placed a little of my weight on the edge of the barrel, and though the plastic bottom of my boot slipped and squeaked against the rim, it was thick and sturdy enough to support me. There was a slight ledge below Johnny's window, and I reached up to grab it so that I could stand on the barrel. I pulled myself over, and after a few false attempts and another near fall, I stood perched atop the barrel. I leaned against the house and my chest heaved with the effort. The tips of my fingers were black with the wet dust of the
windowsill, and I wiped them on my pants. When I looked up again, my goggles were fogged with breath.

“Johnny!” I called.

Muffled sounds came from within. It sounded a little like crying, and I couldn’t tell if Johnny had heard me or not over the wind and the rain.

“Johnny!”

I stood up on my tippie toes and pulled up on the windowsill. I could just see into Johnny’s room. With my foggy goggles, it was tough to see clearly in his room, but I could see the vague outline of shapes. His bed was still on the floor and laid out in the same lake monster defense pattern we’d arranged it in when I’d spent the night. I could see Johnny leaned against the door with his feet digging into the mattress and his whole back leaning against the door. Tears streamed down his face, and his cheeks were red, redder because the rest of his face was so white, and I figured he’d been having the same dreams.

“Johnny,” I said. I reached up with my right hand and waved. “Come open the window. Let me in. I had the dream about the shadows too.”

Johnny didn’t hear me. His eyes were wide and as I looked closer I could see the door knob twisting and the door opening and little and then slamming back shut.

“No. No. No.” Johnny said. He held his right arm close against his chest and threw his whole weight against the door. But the door kept opening back and forth, and I could feel the vibration in the frame of the house as it opened and slammed shut.

“Oh my God,” I said. “The lake monster. It’s come to get Johnny.”
I looked back at the lake and then out by the shack and then down the road to see if the headlights from his dad's '57 Chevy were anywhere in sight. Nothing but darkness. I looked over at the other side of the lake, to see if the light was on at the trout farm, and maybe Bill was patrolling the lake. But the pounding rain and the creeping fog obscured the other side of the lake completely. I could barely see past the crooked and broken boat dock in front of the Appleseed house. There was a sharp splintering crack, and when I looked back into the room, I saw Johnny face down and sprawled out on his bed.

"You little son of a bitch! Don't you ever hold the door closed on me!"

"No. Please! Please!"

Johnny sat up and scooted backwards towards his bed frame in the corner of his room.

"Stand up!"

"Please. No. Please."

"I said, 'Stand up!' Now."

Johnny stood up. He held his arm tight against his chest and his legs were quivering, and it looked like he was going to fall down again.

"Mom... Please... Ple..."

Mrs. Appleseed slapped him full across the mouth and Johnny reeled and banged his head against his dresser. When he turned around his bottom lip was swollen and bleeding. He pulled his knees against his chest and grabbed his jacket from the bed post. He wrapped it around his shoulders.

"Disappearing for half the goddamned day!"
I turned around again and saw a flash of light on the highway. Johnny’s dad! The lights slowed a bit at the bend before Johnny’s driveway, then accelerated again once they got past driveway. I could hear the wet sloosh of accelerating tires against wet pavement.

“Help!” I screamed, but the wind swallowed my cry and I teetered atop the barrel.

“What’s this?”

Johnny drew the knife out of his jacket pocket and pointed it at his mom. She took a quick step towards him, but stopped when he swiped at her from his knees.

“You ungrateful little bastard.”

Johnny slowly stood up, resting most of his weight against the dresser and inching up. His legs were still shaking.

“Leave me alone.”

“You ungrateful little bastard. I’ve put food in your mouth for eleven years. You gutless baby. Pulling a knife on your own mother.”

“Leave me alone!”

Johnny’s legs stopped shaking and he stepped towards his mom, looking her right in the eye and holding the knife steady, aiming right at her stomach. She leaned backwards as he approached. Johnny’s eyes were wide and crazed, big and sharp at the edges, focused, like two white almonds streaked with red, and I stood there balancing on top of a creaky wooden barrel, watching my best friend threaten his own mother with a knife, and wondering if I’d never woken up at all, only fallen into a deeper, darker sleep and slipped into a new breed of nightmare. I wondered if I’d died in my sleep, and hell had reached up and grabbed my soul for lying to my mom, and getting C’s in spelling,
and stealing from the Catalino’s cows, and if this was hell. Raining and fear and wet pants and everything heavy and blurry. Always weighed down by the clammy, prune feeling of wet feet, and scared of the darkness, and having parrots steal your food away.

Johnny lunged toward his mom and thrust the knife, but his mom jumped out of the way and smacked him on the back of the head. His momentum knocked him over, and another thud as he hit the floor next to his mattress. Blood spilled out in a pool from underneath Johnny, and I couldn’t see the knife anywhere. His mom ran up and began to smack him on the back and kick him in the side, again and again. Johnny’s eyes were closed and his limp body gave a little with the kicks, but didn’t move. His head was crooked at an angle against the mattress, and the pool of blood grew larger, a spreading lagoon of pain.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed the stone I’d picked up by Blueberry Joe and threw it as hard as I could through the window. The glass shattered and the rock and several shards of glass landed in the edges of the blood and caused it to splinter out in web like tributaries.

“The cops are coming! The cops are coming!” I shouted at the top of my lungs and jumped off of the barrel. I landed face down in the mud, and the barrel tipped over and spilled a brackish sludge that covered me in a quick tidal wave before slipping off down towards the lake.

I was twenty yards and at a full sprint when I looked back and saw Mrs. Appleseed’s shadow at the window.

“My boy,” she cried above the wind and rain. “My sweet little boy.”
“Paul, come here for a minute.”

I was swingin’ back and forth on the swingin’ bench, looking up at the tree that wasn’t there and dragging my knuckles against the porch. My neck crooked a little to the left because I’d hit a growth spurt in the last year, and I couldn’t fit my whole body on the bench anymore. My feet were asleep dangling over the far end, and it felt like a million little ants were shoving icicles into my toes. When I looked up to see where Jim was, I moved too fast and bumped my head against the armrest.

“Where are you?”

I closed my eyes and rubbed at my forehead real fast, like I was trying to start a fire. It didn’t really take any of the pain away, it just made my head hurt in other places until I couldn’t feel any of the original pain and only the lump remained.

“I’m in the garden.”

Jim was kneeled over the indigroses with a couple of old newspapers duct taped around his knees to give him some support. Dad had bad knees from kneeling in the garden so many years, and permanent pebble shaped bumps in the skin on his knees. Mom says they make him less aerodynamic, but Dad says the air doesn’t have enough time to worry about some bumps in his knees; it’s too busy trying to modernize its facilities so that it doesn’t go the way of the Dodo bird.

The mud around the indigroses was still squishy from all the rain the previous night. Jim’s cheeks were bright red and his forehead was covered with sweat that dripped
down from his eyebrows and made splashes in the mud. He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm and left a thin brown streak.

"What do you want?"

"I don’t want anything. Just wondering what you’re reading in class right now?"

It struck me as odd that Jim was asking about school. He never asked me about school except for the one time he heard from Mom and Dad that I’d gotten a C- in Reading. And even then he didn’t ask me about school so much as he snuck into my room in the dead of night and whispered in my ear.

"Study.. oooo," and, "Read your homework... oooo."

I think he tried to be like those subliminal messages that they play at the movies, the ones that make you buy popcorn and soda, the ones that trick you into thinking five bucks is a fair price for a green hot dog in a pasty bun. It didn’t work because my door handle creaked when he tried to sneak in, and his big size 16 feet, even wrapped in two pairs of socks, hit the ground like logs falling from a highway truck onto a timpani drum, and I woke up. I just sat there with my eyes closed real tight, even though my Mom says she can tell I’m faking because when you are really asleep you don’t close your eyes tight at all. However, it was dark and Jim couldn’t see. I don’t know why he did the “oooo” at the end, but it spooked me out and I did all my homework for two weeks and brought my grade up to a C+.

"Why? Did my report card come today?"

"No. Just wondering is all."

Jim righted an indigrose that had tilted over in the wind. The petals were purplish until the tips. Then they looked like Mother Nature herself had snuck out of her cubicle
and dipped them in chocolate, but it was mud. I thought about eating mud for a second, and remembered the gritty feeling against my tongue and in between my teeth.

"Rrrgh." My back and arms quavered.

Only a few of the rose bushes hadn’t tipped over. Jim plucked a few petals and dropped them at the base of the garden fence where the mud stuck to the wood and folded the petals like taco shells.

“We’ve been reading some stories about a girl who falls down a rabbit hole and talks to cards.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s kind of confusing because everyone in the book talks like Dad.”

“Oh.”

“And Ms. L hands us a poem everyday because Valentine’s Day is coming up. We take turns reading them out loud.”

“Poems?”

“Yeah. A lot of them don’t even rhyme.”

“Love poems?”

“Mostly.” I tugged at the hem of my shorts, the purple ones that Grandma McGrew got me last Christmas. The ones that were too tight. I wore them a lot on weekends because Mom couldn’t force me to wear them to school if they were dirty. It was one of her peeved pets.

Jim reached up and put a gloved hand at the edge of the fence. There were holes in the tips of the glove, and his fingers were bleeding from the thorns. The blood mixed
with mud and there were red and brown spots all over the edge of the white fence, dripping down on the taco petals like salsa. My tongue watered.

“You still have any of those poems?”

“I put them all in my folder. Mom is supposed to sign them every night. If she signs ten in a row I get three points of extra credit.”

Jim wrapped a string around the stem of three of the indigroses that hadn’t fallen over in the rain and tied them to the fence. He checked the knot twice, tugged at it, then blew on the roses like an angry wolf. The roses didn’t move much. Satisfied, he pulled himself up and thick, brown water gushed from the newspaper and down his shins like a spider web mudslide. Most of it got in his boots. As he walked around to the outside of the fence I could hear the slosh slosh sound of his ankles dipping in and out of sludge.

“Can I see them?”

“Mom only signed five so far. I need her to sign all next week, then I get three extra credit points, and I can probably get a B.”

“I’m not going to keep ’em. I just want to look at ’em for a little.”

“You gotta girlfriend or something?”

“No.”

Jim walked over towards the garbage cans by the side of the house and unwrapped his knees, stopping every few seconds to wheeze real hard, and then rip the duct tape again. The backs of his knees were red and the hair was patchy, pulled off in clumps by the tape. Inside the house phone rang. I heard Mom wheeze as she got up from the couch and walked towards the phone. Jim wadded the newspaper together in a big, soggy ball and dumped it in the
“Oh, my God,” Mom said. Muffled by the house.

garbage can, slamming the lid down with a metallic ring that held for three
seconds.

“I just want to see ’em is all. I’ll give them back to you later tonight.”

“All right. They’re on my desk, in the…”

“Paul!”

Mom stood on the back porch, leaning out beyond the screen door, with the phone
cord stretched tight behind her. The bottom of her fuzzy blue bathrobe, the one with the
lining scratched apart by the cat we used to have, flopped open with her lean, and I could
see the blue strings on the side of her knees.

“Yeah!”

“It’s Johnny. He’s in the hospital over in Dogtown.”
Mom threw me the pink sweater with blue hearts Grandma McGrew made Henry on his twelfth Christmas. Henry never liked it much, and only wore it over to Grandma’s house when everyone else was out of town, and had three times tried to bury it under the house, and I liked it even less. She, Jim, and I were halfway to Dogtown by the time I finally figured out a way to tie it around my shoulders so that most of the pink was tucked into the back of my shirt and looked like a camel’s hump. Dogtown isn’t that far away, maybe fifteen minutes by car on a normal day, but Mom had her hair tied up in a bun on the back of her head with a cereal spoon, hadn’t changed out of her frayed bathrobe, and the remote control jangled in her pocket like a two by four in a pistol holster. This was not a normal day.

"Your father is going to meet us at the hospital," Mom said. "One of his co-workers is going to give him a ride."

"The Tooth Fairy?" I asked.

"Paul, now is not the time for jokes."

Jim turned around at me and frowned. He hadn’t had time to wash the mud from the garden off, and had wiped it in small rectangular patches across the sides of his cheeks.

"I’m not making jokes."

"And put that sweater on right. You look like Quasimodo."
The Dogtown Hospital isn’t the sort of place you’d see on one of those emergency room shows that Mom watches every Thursday night. The building itself is pretty big. Four doctors and seven nurses work on the sixteen-room, two-story, former mansion. Ivy runs up the red brick walls and along the four white Doric columns that separate the main house from the carriage port. The mansion was built back when the whole county was traversed only by horse and buggy carts, and rather than a staircase or a ramp, there is just a two and a half foot white marble platform that leads to the emergency room entrance. Fancy County has had the highest health rate in the state for the past five years which means that the four doctors and twelve nurses don’t do much except give flu shots and physicals, and once a year they hook Grandma up to a couple of fire hoses and clean out her bowels and her bloodstream. No one has broken an arm, sliced a major artery, caught their fingers in a blender, or fallen into a grain combine in over seven years (since I broke my leg falling out of the tree that wasn’t there), and the lore about the area suggests there is a magic layer that protects the inhabitants of Lake Fancy from major injury or illness. Even Grandpa McGrew, the newest resident of the Methodist Congregation of St. Francis of Assisi cemetery, died well beyond the bounds of the town, in the arms of a Tijuana fish merchant.

The leading cause of death in Lake Fancy, according to Henry, who heard Ms. L whispering to herself in the teacher’s break room, was boredom.

Because of this the only ambulance is a rusty old gray hearse with painted white squares on the doors, and hand painted crosses that look like two sticks of red licorice lying on top of one another. There’s a long gray scratch running alongside the passenger side from the front fender to the rear wheel well from the car’s days as a hearse. It is
rumored that Old Man Pappinsacker, the oldest person on record in a three hundred mile radius, had fallen asleep for three days, and everyone thought he was dead. The put him in the hearse and were driving him to the graveyard when he woke up and started banging on the pine coffin. It scared the driver so much he swerved to the right and hit an oak tree. The force of the impact killed Mr. Pappinsacker only a day after his 103rd birthday.

Usually the ambulance just sat in the shade of the Dogtown Hospital carriage port, gathering dust and being peed on by rodents and high school kids, but today the siren lights, though silent, were bright and swirling red, and the back door of the hearse was half open against the platform.

Mom pulled the car up next to the ambulance, and I jumped out before the car had come to a complete stop because every time I saw the hospital shows the best friend or husband or wife of the injured party always jumped out and started running in slow motion. I never ran in slow motion before, except for in the dreams where I was being chased by the lake monster or a giant eggplant riding in the French cavalry, and as I leapt from the car I wondered how I would run slow motion, and if everything around me would slow down too, and how dumb I might look if everything else stayed in regular speed. I didn’t have to worry too much about it though. My door hit the driver side of the ambulance and left a long gray scrape, the door rebounded from the impact and knocked me down, and I heard a crack down by my ankle.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Jim cried.

“I thought I was supposed to run.”

Jim jumped out of the car, picked me up, and slung me over his shoulder while Mom pulled the car up in front of the ambulance. She pulled the remote from her pocket
and dropped it on the front seat, took a step toward the hospital, then turned around and
moved the remote from the front seat to the glove compartment.

“Jim, don’t let me forget the remote.”

A long strand of gray lint stretched from Mom’s bathrobe to the car door, and tore
off as Jim pulled her up on the platform. It flopped about in the breeze for a second, and
then flew off and got stuck like a spider’s web on a hedge.

The hospital itself was in a state of pandemonium. In addition to the ambulance
and Dad’s car, there were two other sedans with government license plates and one cop
car lined up outside the hospital. I saw Johnny’s mom leaned against the back of the
cruiser while two men dressed in dark suits asked her questions and wrote things down
on a pad of paper. The cop, Hiram Peterson, a distant relative of Mr. Hopperton, and the
only bona fide lawman in this part of the county, wandered from the cruiser into the
hospital and back again while fingerling the butt of his service revolver.

Hiram, who, based on the broad girth of his mid-section was a closer relation to
Mr. Hopperton than mere blood lines could trace, took a full thirty-five seconds to scale
the platform, and another thirty to wipe his forehead and recover his breath. Dad said
that Hiram was “fat as a Christmas ass.”

Mom told Dad that the dinner table was not the place for barnyard discussions.

I thought about waving at Johnny’s mom, and asking her if Johnny was alright,
but she was crying and the men in the suits kept putting their arms around her and patting
her on the shoulder. I figured she had enough to worry about.
Inside the hospital, the receptionist was sitting behind his desk with a phone pinned to his ear and two red lights blinking on his switchboard. Malcom Jones, thin and sharp like he’d been ironed, was the son of one of Grandma McGrew’s bridge friends and had been the receptionist at Valley Hospital for two years. Mrs. Jones, his grandmother, insisted that he was the head surgeon. Mom insisted that Mrs. Jones had missed the better part of the last fifty years wandering about looking for scraps of aluminum foil deep in the recesses of her own little world.

Malcolm held up two fingers and pointed towards the reception area. Cuban trumpet music came through the ceiling speakers and bounced off the egg shaped white reception room chairs.

“No, Ms. Charch,” he said, “there won’t be any need for a Med-Evac. It’s really not as serious as it looks.”

Ms. Charch was the gossip and phenomenon reporter for the Springfield Daily.

“I’m sorry,” Malcom said. “Dr. Anderson is not available to comment at this time.”

He hung up the phone, pressed the blinking lights until they weren’t blinking anymore and looked up at us.

“I tell you, once the media hears that there were two ambulance calls in Lake Fancy in one night, everything turns into a goddamned circus. How can I help you?”

Mom spoke up.

“You can help us first of all by not blaspheming in front of my Paul. There are a million ways to put phrases together, Malcom, and cursing often indicates a low level of
intelligence and creativity. You are better than that. I understand from your grandmother that you’re nearly the head surgeon here.”

Malcolm’s nose and ears turned red and he began to rearrange the papers on his desk.

“Second, we are here to visit the Appleseed boy.”

“I apologize Mrs. McGrew. Things are a little stressful around here right now. Doc Anderson, is in the emergency room tending to Johnny. It might be a while before he can see any visitors. But feel free to have a seat and I’ll let the doctor know that Johnny has some visitors. Feel free to leaf through the magazines or play with the tinkerbox.”

Malcolm saluted us, stood up, and walked off towards the examination rooms. The tinkerbox was black and rusted, and looked as though a thousand bowls of snot had been dumped over the moving parts. The magazines were old issues of The Best Essays on Chiropractic Medicine, volumes 1-23. Detective Pearson dropped a nickel in the honor pot in the corner next to a fern. He took a sip of the coffee, spat it back into his Styrofoam cup, and pulled his nickel back out of the honor pot before catching his breath and walking back out to the cruiser. I saw all this from Jim’s shoulder.

Dad came around the corner. His hair was ruffled.

“Malcolm told me you were here. I arrived ten minutes ago. Johnny’s going to be mmph,” he said. I was still thrown over Jim’s shoulder, and I could barely hear over the trumpets, the swing of reception doors moving back and forth, and Detective Peterson’s wheezing.

“What’s that?” I called.
Jim took me from his shoulder and put me down in the seat next to Dad.

“What happened to your ankle?” Dad asked.

I looked down. My right ankle had swollen over the lip of my shoe and looked like someone had tried to fill my sock with pudding.

“He jumped out of the car before we stopped,” Mom said.

“Why?”

“I was worried about Johnny.”

“Well, he’s going to be okay. You don’t need to worry. He tripped over the mattress you boys threw on the floor when you spent the night and landed on that rusty knife of yours.”

“He tripped?”

“Well, he fell at any rate,” Dad said. “He didn’t hit anything vital though. He landed on his butt. There’s a big slice, and there was a lot of blood, but not enough to be worried about. Unfortunately, they are going to have to do some more tests to see if that rusty knife had any diseases. Hepatitis, dysentery, mad cow, the usual in situations like this. It doesn’t help that you guys were slicing up cow poop all day.”

“Is his Mom in trouble? The police are asking her questions outside.”

“Paul,” Dad said. “His mom’s the one who brought him here. She heard him crying late last night, and when she went to his room she saw that he’d tripped. She called 911 right afterwards. If it wasn’t for her, he might have bled to death.”

“And where is his father?” Mom asked.

“No one has seen or heard from him since a couple of days ago.”
“Are they going to have to amputate his butt?” I asked. I pictured how a person might look with a cheek amputated, and how the logistics of sitting on the toilet would be altered for a person with one butt cheek, and if you could get a specialty toilet with extra padding on one side so that you didn’t slip or fall in or have to rest your head on the sink.

“I don’t think so. The butt isn’t like a limb or anything you might normally amputate,” Dad said.

“Imagine farting without a butt,” Jim said. “It probably just fills and bloats you up until you explode.”

“Jim McGrew!” Mom said. “Don’t put thoughts into Paul’s head.”

“He’s not, Mom. I know that farts come from the hole, and that you can’t amputate a hole, you can only make it bigger or fill it in with concrete.”

“Well that’s enough from both of you about this farting business. Your father says he’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah,” Dad said. “Don’t make fun. It could’ve been you.”

Malcolm returned from the examination room, and we all stood up. Well, I tried to stand up, but the evil forces of my swollen ankle had claimed most of the leg below my knee and a sharp stab of pain went up my leg. Jim grabbed my shoulder and let me lean on him.

“Dr. Anderson says it is okay for you to go in there now. He’s a little woozy because of the blood transfusion and the painkillers, but as long as no one flickers the lights or unhooks his IV, he’ll be fine.”

“No one is going to flicker the lights,” Mom said. Jim threw me over his shoulder and the four of us took a few steps towards the emergency room.
“I’m sorry, Mrs. McGrew,” Malcolm said. He held up his hand and the sleeves, too short for his arms, tugged at his elbows. “The young one can’t go in. No one under sixteen is allowed in the emergency room.”

“What?”

“Hospital policy says that no one under sixteen is allowed in the emergency room.”

“But he’s Johnny’s best friend,” Jim said.

“Sorry.”

“But Johnny’s only twelve himself,” Dad said.

“Johnny is the injured party. The policy is in place for visitors only.”

“Look at Paul’s ankle,” Mom said. “It’s probably broken. He needs to see the doctor anyway.”

“It’s for his own protection, Mrs. McGrew. The state legislature came up with this law to ensure the safety of everyone involved.”

Mom, Dad, and Jim stared at Malcolm, who still had his arm up as though he was a crossing guard and we were a line of cars. From my spot on Jim’s shoulder I could see that Malcolm had some yellow ovals in the armpit of his white shirt, and I wondered what kind of food you had to eat to sweat yellow, or if maybe he had caught some sort of strange disease from one of the patients in the hospital. Something like yellow fever of yellow laryngitis. Some disease communicable only through air shafts and telephones.

“It’s okay, I’ll stay here with Paul,” Jim said.
“No it’s okay,” I said. “You guys should go in and cheer him up. I remember how lonesome I felt when I was in the hospital with my broken leg. You guys should sing him a song. Dad, you could pretend to be the Admiral.”

Dad smiled and threw back his shoulders.

“Or you could just say some nice things to him,” Mom said. “You don’t have to pretend to be the Admiral.”

“Pretending to be an Admiral,” Dad replied, “is an offense of the highest order. Impersonating a member of Her Majesty’s Navy is likely to land you some time in the brig. You,” he put his hand on Malcolm’s shoulder and straightened his collar. “You’re needed below deck.” Dad pointed over towards Malcolm’s desk where two pieces of paper had blown to the ground when Officer Peterson had opened the door.

Officer Peterson leaned against the door with his back, and two shadows approached from the outside. His eyes were squinty and he wheezed as he leaned against the door and fanned himself with his hat. There was a dark V of sweat starting at his neck and ending just above his belt buckle, and the top two buttons of his uniform were open revealing his chest, covered with gray and black hair. He seemed glad for a break.

“H.M.S. McGrew, all hands, except for Paul who is crippled and will be left behind to fend off the enemy single-handedly, on deck. Report immediately to the emergency room for Operation Cheer Up.”

Mom smacked Dad on the shoulder with her purse and stepped by him and around the corner, her bathrobe brushing against the gray wall of the lobby. Jim put me down in the chair, handed me two quarters from his pocket and pointed towards the gumball machine.
“I hear the enemy is deadly afraid of giant gumballs,” he said. Then he turned to Dad and saluted. “Aye aye, admiral.”

The two of them disappeared around the corner. I could hear the left-right-left of their step against the shiny tile hospital floor. Jim’s step had more of a sloosh crack to it, on account of the mud in his shoes from the garden was hardening. I watched their shadows fade on the floor of the lobby, till the last curl on Dad’s head vanished beyond the wall. The bell on the door jangled shut.

“Hello there,” Malcolm said. “Your husband is in ER number two. I’m afraid the little one won’t be able to go in there with you.”

I turned. Malcolm was leaning over to pick up two bright yellow and half filled out hospital admittance forms from under his desk. His voice was muffled.

“Hospital policy. For the protection of everyone involved.” He placed a paperclip box on top of the forms, and handed a visitor badge across the desk.

Standing with their backs to me were Officer Peterson, a thin lady with wild gray hair, a loose potato sack fabric body suit, and sandals, and a girl about my age, with no arms and pomegranate cheeks.
Her mom, dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans frayed at knees and brown behind the heels with dirt, leaned down and hugged the girl with pomegranate cheeks. She had arms enough for the both of them and the girl with pomegranate cheeks embraced her mom’s shoulder with the bottom of her chin, and the two of them just stood there for a minute, looking like they were frozen in time. The girl with pomegranate cheeks finally kissed her Mom on the forehead, a deep kiss that left two white lips behind strands of dangling brown bangs.

“Give my love to Dad.”

“I will.”

Then her Mom, whose cheeks were flushed with worry, took off down the corridor and off to ER 2 with the bottoms of her jean legs scratching on the cold hospital tile. The girl with pomegranate cheeks saw me across the lobby, nodded and walked over. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a white sweater with an embroidered rose and gold glitter around the edges.

“I know you,” she said, “You’re Paul. We used to live next door to each other.”

“I know you too,” I said. “Not your name, though. I forgot.”

“That’s because you never asked me.”

“Oh yeah.”

Even though there were seven open chairs in the waiting room, she came right over and sat down in the chair next to me, and part of me wished she hadn’t because I
didn’t know that I had enough to say to hold her interest. So I just sat there with my mouth open and pushed the little wooden spheres along the wires of the tinkerbox.

“I see you still haven’t brushed twice,” she said. “I can see it from here. It looks like you’ve had broccoli at least once in the past week. Possibly twice. You should floss too. If I can floss,” she looked down at where her arms would be, “it should be an absolute breeze for you.”

“Do you want a gumball?” I asked her. I had the two coins that Jim had given me, and I figured I could get one for each of us. If I got one of the mint ones, it might even freshen up my breath a little, and she might give me a kiss.

“Sure, Paul,” she said, “But if you wash your hands as much as you brush your teeth, do you think you could catch mine in a napkin or something? I just don’t know where your hands have been.”

“No problem,” I said. Then I got up and hobbled over towards the coffee machine, where there was a pile of napkins. The top few had dark coffee stains on them from Detective Peterson, so I grabbed the fifth one down, then got two gumballs, one green and one red. I hobbled back over.

“You pick,” I said. “I like both of them.” I said this, but the whole time I was hoping she’d pick red, because most of the time the red gumballs were cinnamon, and cinnamon made my mouth burn.

“Red,” she said. “But you’ll have to put it in my mouth. Because, you see, I don’t have any arms, and I sure as heck ain’t going to use my feet. Don’t touch it neither. You still haven’t washed your hands.”
So I held onto the green one tight and she put her tongue out a little and looked up
and our eyes met, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck crawl into my skull and the
trolls that control the heating ducts in my ears turned them up high. I imagined it must be
pretty hard to be the girl with pomegranate cheeks, having to rely on someone all the time
to put food in her mouth. What happened if she got home early and wanted a snack, or if
she wanted to turn on the TV, or if she wanted to turn a bike around a corner?

"Wait a minute," she said. "The way you’re looking at me right now, with your
aww shucks red ears and looking all around at the walls and the chairs and everywhere
but at me, makes me think you’re a little uncomfortable with putting a gumball in my
mouth."

"No... I..." I stammered.

"Put it on my knee."

"What?"

"Put the gumball on my knee. If I leave it up to you the gumball is going to grow
wings and fly away and poop little gumballs on everyone’s head."

So I reached down and put the gumball on her knee, and sat down heavy in my
seat. Man, my leg was killing me. The pain had crept up into my thighs.

"You watching?"

"Yes."

"No fair looking off at the posters and feeling all embarrassed. You were a lot
braver in that tree of yours."

"I’m watching."

"All right."
She balanced the gum ball on her knee and brought it up really slow and straight towards her mouth so that it wouldn’t roll off onto the floor. Just when she had the gumball nearly to her mouth, she winked at me.

“Now that way wouldn’t be any fun.” She stomped her leg on the floor, and the gumball bounced up in the air like a rocket, and she caught it in her mouth and winked at me again.

“Whoa!”

Malcolm, who had been watching from across the room, stood up at his desk and clapped three times. Detective Peterson, who had been leaning against the window and looking out at the parking lot and wiping his forehead with a coffee stained napkin, didn’t let on that he’d seen. I guess you see a lot of things when you’re a cop.

“Some people say it’s a disability not having any arms. I say it’s a disability when you just put the gum in your mouth and don’t get any fun out of it.”

I put the green gumball on my knee and started to lift it up, but I couldn’t even get it a few inches off the ground before the gumball rolled to either side, and I had to reach up and catch it.

“I can’t do it.” I said.

“I’ve got years of practice. Besides, you’ve got arms, you might as well use them, hindrances though they are. You still haven’t asked, you know.”

“Asked what?”

“My name.”

“Sometimes names can be hindrances too.”
“Yeah, but not as much as saying, ‘Hey, you,’ all the time. My name is Lia. Lia Catalino.”

“Like the ranch?”

“Like the ranch. My Dad owns the ranch. The ranch is the reason I am here today. One of the cows went crazy. Got chocolate fever. Started running around the fields and kicking all the fences and butting its head into the water troughs. Thing was bleeding from its forehead and probably would’ve mangled itself in the barbed wire if Dad hadn’t given it a shot.”

“So, it’s okay now?”

“Yeah, but Dad isn’t doing so well. Right before it passed out from the tranquilizer, it got one last kick and nailed Dad right in the jaw. Dad spit out three of his teeth and a few little bone shards. Mom called the ambulance, and then went out to the field to gather his teeth. That’s why we got here late. Doc Anderson said Dad might have to get an iron jaw.”

“With iron teeth?” I looked over at Lia and felt sorry for her. Johnny and I didn’t mean to cause her any trouble when we went out into the cow fields. If we’d a known it was her field we probably wouldn’t have even gone it there, we could’ve found another cow field somewhere on the outskirts of the county, or maybe even one of those underwater farms I’d read about in fairy tales where the water would slow down the kick of the cow and no one would have to worry about iron jaws or iron teeth. I wondered if she had seen us out in her cow fields with our knife, slicing through all the poop and trying to find whatever it was that Johnny was looking for, and if she did see us, did she blame us for her dad’s jaw? Maybe she was just trying to make me feel bad so that I
would confess and then they could sue me and Paul, even though we didn’t feed the cows any chocolate and didn’t have any money.

“Maybe. But what can you do. Sometimes fate throws you a curve ball.”

“Wow.” I said, and I figured if she was talking about fate then she wouldn’t have blamed us anyway, because it’s not like we were the ones who kicked her dad in the jaw, or made him go into the fields with a tranquilizer. Though, I thought Johnny and I should probably make her Dad a card or something, when he got better.

The whole time Lia told me the story, she didn’t stop chewing once, and I’d never seen someone who could talk so well with a giant gumball in her mouth, and with her cheek all puffed out on the right side where she held the gum, and I found myself wishing I didn’t have any arms either, so that I could chew gum and talk like that. I put my gumball in my mouth after a few more failed attempts to use my knee, and began to chew. It was one of those huge ones that takes up half your mouth and makes you wheeze if you’ve got a stuffy nose because it blocks all the air flow.

Lia kicked off one of her shoes and pushed the little wooden blocks around the tinkerbox with her socks. Her socks were mostly white with little cows on each of the toes and a CR embroidered by the ankle.

“So why are you here?” she asked.

“My fwend Jahwny,” I said through the gumball. I couldn’t close my mouth and make the right sounds because the gumball was still too hard and it felt like the gumball itself was trying to rip my jaws apart right at the joint. “He fehwawn a kife.”

“A knife? Who leaves a knife around to fall on? Sounds suspicious to me.”
“Yehw, me two. I had a dweam dat it wads his mod.” A little bit of green saliva escaped from the corner of my mouth and dripped down onto my shirt.

“Was it a vivid dream?”

“I tink so.” I brushed at the saliva and hoped she didn’t notice, but I only succeeded in making it bigger.

“Interesting. Maybe you had a premonition.”

“A wath?”

“A premonition, where you see something before it happens, like deja vu.”

I didn’t know what exactly she was talking about, because I couldn’t very well see with my eyes closed and laying in bed in the dark with the covers pulled way up over my head, but I supposed that sometimes what you see in your head without your eyes lays just as much as claim to being seen and being true as what your eyes tell you. More sometimes. Like what Mom said about Malcolm’s grandma. Like the way the rocks came alive and danced in the sunset, even though you knew it was just the shadows. So I supposed she was right.

“I dod know.”

Outside the sun was peeking a little through the clouds, and I could see that the cops were done talking with Johnny’s mom because she got back in her car and drove away. I watched the license plate on the back of her car hanging from a single bolt and swaying back and forth as she turned out onto the highway. One of the two questioning cops came in and saluted Detective Peterson.

“She’s going to get him a change of clothes and a sandwich. Says she doesn’t want him eating the hospital food. Says it’s enough to make a boy sick.”
Peterson laughed and wiped at his forehead.

“So I tell her, ‘Well, he’s sure in the right place if he does get sick.’”

“Is that what you told her?” Peterson asked.

“Word for word.”

Then Peterson laughed too, and clamped his arm around the shoulder of the other cop, and the two of them went down to the squad car, and drove off to file a report.

The phone rang in the lobby and Malcolm picked it up.

“No, Mrs. Charch, Doc Anderson is still in the ER... No nothing new to report...

That’s right, a lacerated buttock, and a broken jaw... No, kicked by a cow... A cow...

That’s right. Chocolate fever... I don’t know what chocolate fever is, you’ll have to ask a vet. Though my grandma gets chocolate fever every year around Christmas... Yes, that was a joke, Mrs. Charch... I realize that it’s not very funny considering the circumstances... Thank you... Good bye.”

Malcolm hung up the phone, and it was one of those old heavy cream colored phones that exist in all schools and hospitals, and the clatter echoed off the walls and filled the silence created by the end of the Cuban trumpet CD.

“Some people,” he said to Lia and I, “have no sense of humor.”

“Some people,” she said, “have no arms.”

Malcolm turned bright red and looked like he was getting ready to apologize, but Lia laughed and kneed me in the thigh, and I laughed too.

“What’s so funny?” asked Mrs. Catalino. She appeared from around the corner. She looked a lot more relaxed now, and she smiled.

“Your daughter doesn’t have any arms,” said Malcolm.
“And you find this funny?”

“No... what I meant was...”

“What you meant was,” Mrs. Catalino had a real angry look on her face, and I could tell she was about to lay into Malcolm, who, at this point in the day, was probably pretty sick of being layed into because he’d already gotten it from my Mom, Mrs. Charch, and Detective Peterson about the coffee. “What I meant was, you could probably use a vacation after a busy day like this. Don’t be so uptight. Not everyone is Mrs. Charch.”

Then Malcolm laughed, and Lia laughed, and all four of us were laughing and I couldn’t even feel the pain in my ankle anymore. I’d heard once that laughter is the best medicine, but Dad said the person who said that had never been caught by the side of his face in a bear trap. Dad hadn’t ever been caught by the side of his face in a bear trap either, but he said he knew a guy, and that that guy didn’t laugh because it hurt too much.

“Well, Lia, we should get going. We can come back and visit Dad tomorrow. The doctor said he can come out and walk around a little, so you won’t have to just wait out here and be bored.”

“I wasn’t bored. Paul and I were talking. We used to live next door.”

“I know,” said Mrs. Catalino, “How are you Paul?”

“I’m fine.”

“Next time you want some cow poop, just come up to the door and knock. We’ve got wheelbarrows full if you want it. And maybe we can avoid this whole hospital mess for everyone next time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
Lia stood up and winked. So they did know that Johnny and I had been digging around their fields, and they didn’t blame us for the broken jaw. I guess they figured that Johnny falling on a dirty knife and my ankle was probably pay back enough for what we did. The automatic doors to the hospital opened, and by this time the sun had sliced all the way through the clouds, and burst in to the lobby and warmed everything up. Lia’s cheeks looked real smooth in the sunshine, even though she had to squint to walk out the door.

“We go down to Lake Fancy every Sunday until the ice comes,” she called to me. “We’ve got a couple of canoes tied up on one of the docks out there. One of these weekends you should come out with us. We can have a picnic.”

Just when I was starting to feel all mournful, because I didn’t know if I would see her again, or if I would ever get a chance to kiss her on account of my teeth, she goes and asks me to go boating with her. I’d never been in a canoe before, only swimming and fishing from the shore.

“You bet!” I said.

“Not for a couple weeks though. With your ankle, Johnny’s butt, and my Dad’s jaw, it’d be like a convalescent hospital at sea.”

I watched their car head off as long as I could, because I could still feel the warmth of the sun against my cheek when I leaned against the window. And when their car disappeared around the bend leading out of town, I watched the bend for a while, and I guessed I watched it so long I fell asleep, because when I woke up, there was a bandage wrapped around my ankle, and we were halfway home.
Doc Anderson said that my ankle wasn’t hurt too badly, only a sprain, and that the best cure for me was rest.

“You better be careful, son,” he said, “I don’t have any space left in the emergency rooms.”

I remember this only vaguely, as if I dreamed it or saw it on TV while flipping through the channels. He gave me a shot of clear liquid right below the knee. It hurt a little going in, and there were a few drops of blood, but after a while it didn’t bother me much, and after a while nothing bothered me much, and that’s when I woke up in the car.

“I’m sleepy,” I told my Mom.

“Doc Anderson said that the shot would help you sleep well tonight.”

“How’s Johnny?”

“Johnny’s going to be fine. We’ll go back and see him tomorrow. Doc Anderson said he might have a bit of a limp, but he should be ready to go home.”

“They didn’t have to amputate?”

“Nope, he was lucky. Not even an infection.”

“Oh,” I said, and I opened my mouth to ask another question, but once I got it open nothing happened. My jaw just sat there open as a garage for a minute until I thought to close it. After that I couldn’t talk anymore or fall asleep, and the ride home passed like a handful of photographs. When we got home the sun was mostly down, and already it was dark. Jim slung me over his shoulder and carried me up to my room. He strained a little as he got towards the top of the stairs.
“Hey, Sausage Butt,” he said, “Next time you’re carrying yourself up the stairs.”

I could hear Henry downstairs talking to Mom. He’d just gotten home from Hopperton’s and wanted to know where we’d been, and how come if we went out to dinner, we didn’t bring him any.

“Johnny’s in the hospital. He fell on a knife.”

“You can’t fall on a knife and hurt yourself, the knife’d lay flat against the ground,” he said.

“Never you mind,” Mom said. “And keep your voice down, Paul needs his sleep.”

Jim took my shoes off, unlacing the one on my right foot extra careful, even though my whole leg felt numb on account of the shot and I couldn’t have felt it anyway.

“You don’t need to be so careful, Jim,” I said. “I can’t feel it.”

“You’ll feel it in the morning, if I’m not careful,” Jim said. “That shot won’t last forever.”

“Thanks.”

Jim pulled the covers up over my shoulders.

“I’ll bring you a sandwich and put it on your dresser. In case you wake up in the middle of the night and feel hungry. That way you don’t have to kill yourself trying to get down the stairs for a cookie.”

I would’ve said thanks, but I was already asleep. Jim was like that sometimes. He’d give you turtle bites and pinch your arms and call you sausage butt, but when it came right down to it, he was a good guy and a good brother.
I don’t know what time it was when the phone rang, but it was pretty late because I didn’t hear the TV going downstairs, or anybody washing up, and when Mom got up to answer the phone, it was bare feet I heard slapping against the hardwood floors. Outside the moon was high over the tree that wasn’t there, and most of the breeze had slipped back off into the lake to sleep for the night, so I figured it must have been a little past midnight. When it was quiet like this I could hear the whole house, even with the doors closed.

“Hello,” Mom said. It was her sleepy voice. Slow and drawn out like a dog’s yawn. I heard another set of bare feet against the hardwood floors. This time a little bigger, and a little slower. Dad was up too, probably rubbing Mom’s back.

“No, we haven’t heard from Johnny’s mom at all.... His dad? No one has seen him for about a week I think. But he’s prone to disappear from time to time. Nothing new.... No... I have no idea where she might have gone. Paul and Johnny are pretty close, but the Appleseeds keep mostly to themselves at the end of the lake... Sorry, I can’t be of more help.”

Click.

I looked over at my dresser. Peanut butter and jelly with a glass of water and an apple.

“What’s going on, honey?” Dad asked.

“It’s Johnny’s mom. She never came back to the hospital.”

“Did they call her?”

“No answer.”

“Drive by her house?”
“Detective Peterson said the house is abandoned. Doesn’t look like she even went back there after she dropped Johnny off at the hospital.”

“Anyone reported an accident or anything?”

“No,” Mom said. “It’s like she vanished.”
By the next morning, word had gotten around town that Johnny's mom had vanished in the night, and that his dad hadn't been heard from in a week, and that Johnny was alone by himself in the hospital now, without a shirt to his name. Mom called the hospital again in the morning to see if maybe Mrs. Appleseed had showed up early in the morning, but no one had heard from her. The whole thing was so exciting that I completely forgot about my ankle, and nearly fell down the bottom two steps when I came in for breakfast.

"It looks mighty peculiar," Henry said in between spoonfuls of cereal. "With Johnny in the hospital and both his parents gone like this. I bet his mom killed his dad and buried him out in the woods somewhere."

"Henry McGrew!" Mom said.

"I'll bet the parrots are eating away what's left of his arms! Then, she tried to kill Johnny too, but something happened that stopped her, that saved Johnny, and now she has to skip town."

I didn't say much when I heard Henry talking about something that saved Johnny, because I wondered if I could've saved him through my dream, if I'd had one of those premonitions that Lia talked about in the lobby. Although, from what I knew about premonitions, you couldn't fly through time and space and actually take part in them. They were just visions. Besides, in my dream it didn't look like Johnny's mom tried to kill him.
“Someone has been watching too much TV.”

“Maybe she has a life insurance policy on the both of them, and wants to move to the big city and buy an apartment with a golden toilet, one of those ones that washes your butt so you don’t have to spend money on toilet paper.”

“That’s enough! You’ll put these crazy ideas into your brother’s head. He’s impressionable.”

“I’m not impressionable,” I said.

“Whose idea was it to go out to Catalino Ranch?” Jim asked.

“Johnny’s.”

“Then you’re impressionable.” Jim took a bite of his cereal and milk dribbled down the side of his spoon and landed on the table. He mopped it up with his napkin.

“Whose idea was it to buy napkins?” I asked.

“That’s not the same.”

“That’s enough from everyone,” Mom said. “There’s too much to worry about right now to sit around listening to all this bickering. Next person who says a word, gets a lickin’.”

Mom sat up straight in her chair and looked around the table, daring any of us to say a word. Henry fidgeting and mumbled into his cereal, and Jim picked up his bowl and drank the rest of the milk. I looked over at Dad, to see what he thought about everything, but he just winked at me as if to say he didn’t want to deal with the wooden spoon or the rolling pin neither. Smoochie curled up in the corner and put his ears over his eyes.

Even though Mom thought silence was the best way to deal with the problem, like ignoring it and demanding silence would make all our speculations go away, I couldn’t
help thinking about what would happen to Johnny if his parents never came back. There wasn't an orphanage in Lake Fancy, and as far as I knew there wasn't one for a hundred miles. I didn't think I could bear it if Johnny had to leave. Then it would just be me and Blueberry Joe, and Joe couldn't skip rocks down at the lake, on account of his being a tree.

After a while the silence got to be too much for Mom, because the clinking of spoons, Jim and Henry's milk slurping, the rustle of Dad's newspaper as he flipped through the Business section, and the gritty sandpaper sound of Smoochie scratching behind his ears, was enough to drive a person crazy. Like the water torture, but with sounds.

"How's your ankle, Paul?" she asked.

And I didn't know if she wanted me to answer or if she was doing one of those Mom mind games where she asks you a question and then smacks you on the hand when you answer because she told you not to talk. "Loose lips are the tool of the devil," she told me once. But if you don't talk, you get a smacking anyway because you are ignoring her. It was a lose lose situation no matter which way you looked at it.

I figured I'd play it safe and stall for time by looking down to inspect my ankle. The swelling had gone down, and it was only slightly bigger than my left ankle, but I couldn't remember if that had been the case before I jumped out of the car or not. It didn't hurt too much, not in a sharp, biting, and climbing up the leg way that it did in the lobby, but there was still a little aching when I put too much weight on it. I put my hand out and shook it back and forth.
Henry finished up, dropped his dish in the sink, and waved goodbye. He had to be at Hopperton’s to sort out the new candy shipment in fifteen minutes. Jim tossed him the keys to his bike lock, because Henry didn’t want to spend all the money he’d been saving on his own bike. And the rest of breakfast passed quietly.

I went upstairs to take a bath, and when I got back to my room Dad stood in the corner with a pad of paper and a tape measure. He pulled a pen from behind his ear, made a few notches on the paper, then tossed the pad on my bed.

“Come here for a second, Paul,” he said. “I need you to hold the end of this measure.”

I walked over and took the end of the tape measure. It had been Grandpa McGrew’s and the hook at the end was covered in rust, and most of the major numbers along the tape had faded or been scraped off and rewritten in with permanent marker. It was warm from sitting in Dad’s hand.

“What are we measuring for?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “your mother and I were talking last night. Hold it against the base of the wall there,” he pointed down towards the vent on the floor. “Down by the trim, because the trim sticks out farther than the wall.”

I kneeled down and held it flush against the trim.

“Yeah.”

“And we thought that if Johnny’s parents don’t come back, it would be terrible for him to have to go live in a orphanage somewhere. Somewhere where he didn’t have any friends.”
“Yeah!”

“And so we thought we’d talk to Doc Anderson and whoever else we need to talk
to about having him move in here until either his parents come back, or he goes off to
college. Whichever comes first.”

“Awesome!” I said. Now I wouldn’t have to trek through the woods, and we
could have slumber parties every night, and we could do our homework together...

“Settle down, there, Paul, you’re moving the measuring tape all around. I need to
get a good measurement, so we can figure out where we are going to put his bed.”
On the first day of winter I awoke covered in sweat and with my mouth full of blanket. It was an old gray blanket and didn’t fuzz at the corners. I’d been dreaming of buffet I saw once on TV that extended for miles and even across a river. I’d snuck in through the back door and wore a fake moustache and no one saw me. The waiters wore black uniform shirts, tall Abe Lincoln hats that brushed the condensation from the ceiling, and eye patches. Every station offered food from a different part of the world, and I got in line near the Australian section behind a family of kangaroos and a crocodile wearing bright green lipstick and a muumuu. The crocodile looked at me.

“We’ll never find a table with this crowd,” she said and motioned towards the kangaroos. The younger roos were hopping up and down excitedly and pointing towards the emu steaks. The steaks were carved into Elephant ear shapes and being roasted on a spit over a cavernous fire that seemed to originate somewhere deep below the restaurant. What caught my eye was the picture of the mixed plate with barramundi, kangaroo, crocodile, and a sausage roll. None of the portions were too big, and each came with its own colorful dipping sauce. This according to the laminated sign hanging from the ceiling.

The waiters kept bumping into me and stepping on my toes. They’d apologize quickly, then bow and drip some of the condensation on my white dress shirt. The smoke from the fires gathered with the condensation, and when I looked down at my shirt there were black spots all up and down, like a cheetah. As I got closer and closer to the fire, I sweated more and more, and soon the rivers of sweat that started at my armpits had
spread throughout my shirt and the entire thing was gray. The crocodile looked over at me again.

“Now we’ll never find a table.”

The kangaroos and the crocodile were all taller than me, and the lines for the station next to ours were so crowded that I could barely see the spread, except between the arms of the animals in front of me, and it wasn’t until I was third in line, that I noticed all of the animals were jumping straight into the fire pit and disappearing. A waiter, a tall guy with two eye patches and a thick moustache served a giant platter of emu steaks to the kangaroo family, complete with Ceasar salad, vegemite, and a sprig of parsley. The mother kangaroo thanked him, tipped him generously, and then hopped with her family into the fire.

“I’ll have the emu steak,” the crocodile called to a passing waiter. “No vegemite please. It gives me gas something terrible.” The waiter nodded and, without slowing his pace towards the far end of the buffet, pulled a platter from behind his back and handed it to the crocodile.

“Anything to drink?”

“No, thank you. I’m on a diet.”

Then the crocodile, who, on account of the heat of the fire had begun to sweat through her muumuu, pulled a fifteen dollar bill from her purse, handed it to the waiter, and jumped into the fire.

“And for you, sir?” The waiter gazed down at me, and even though his arms and legs were moving fast as a sprinter, he didn’t move away from me.

“I’m not hungry,” I lied.
“Yes, I am,” my stomach called out. The sound was muffled and wet sounding from beneath my shirt. “I want the mixed plate.”

“No I don’t. I’m going home.”

“Here you are, sir.” The waiter handed me the platter and before I knew it my stomach handed him a seventeen dollar bill and I jumped into the fire. Halfway into the fire I stuffed my mouth with crocodile, which, in my dream, tasted a lot like the fuzzy part of an alligator. Then I woke up sweaty and with a mouthful of blanket.

It was Saturday and Henry missed breakfast because it was his first day of work down at Hopperton’s. Mr. Hopperton’s stock boy, Junky Lindman, had joined the Coast Guard because he wanted to see the ocean before he turned twenty, and Henry and Mom were in the store buying mayonnaise and sausages for the 4th of July when Junky told Mr. Hopperton. Mom went straight up to Mr. Hopperton and asked if he needed a new stock boy, and Mr. Hopperton said only on the weekends. Mom lied and told him that Henry was a strong and hard-working boy. Henry doesn’t get out of bed until three or four in the afternoon on most weekends, and we have to cut his breakfast up into small pieces and feed him through a straw. Mr. Hopperton grabbed Henry by the shoulders and asked him how many push-ups he could do, and Henry said fifty, and Mr. Hopperton hired him on the spot for five dollars an hour. When Henry heard he could make forty dollars every Saturday, he ran home and started to do pushups in the shade of the tree that isn’t there. I counted. He could only do ten.
Mr. Hopperton opened his store at six. Henry had to be there by five thirty. But because it was his first day Henry got up at four in the morning and left for Mr. Hopperton’s at four-thirty. I know because he woke me up.

“Hey, Paul.”

“What?”

“I’m going to work now.”

“So.”

“Tell mom.”

I thought he was going to ask me if I wanted any Chocolate Reindeer or Sheffield’s Rainbow Drops, but he closed the door and I fell back asleep until seven, when all the good cartoons come on. Mom says I’m too old to watch cartoons, but there’s nothing else good on, so I keep the volume low and then switch it to the news or the Birds and Nature Channel when I hear her bunny slippers flopping down the stairs.

Mom made sausages, eggs, and pancakes for breakfast, even though usually we have bacon too. Bacon is Henry’s favorite food.

“Why aren’t we having any bacon?” Jim asked.

“We’ll have it Monday, when Dad cooks breakfast,” Mom said.

“But Dad always makes it crunchy. I like it chewy.”

“Then maybe you can get your butt out of bed fifteen minutes earlier and make it yourself.”

But Jim had already stuffed his mouth with pancakes and just scowled at his plate which is a much better thing to scowl at than Mom.
Mom didn’t talk much during breakfast, because even though she was the one who got Henry the job, I think she missed his presence at the table. This meant we all got through our food a little faster, because Mom told us to stop wolfing it down only halfheartedly. Dad passed her the funny section of the newspaper.

“These are fine eggs,” he said.

“I wish you wouldn’t read at the table.”

After breakfast, and after Jim and I finished the dishes and wiped down the counter, I headed out to the swinging bench. I could smell acorns and peanut butter and barbecue in the air, and the tree swayed a little in the morning breeze, and it wasn’t quite hot yet even though I could tell it was going to be from the way the paint on the side of the porch steps hung in crescent moons and spider leg strips.

I didn’t have a plan for the day. Johnny was still in the hospital and I didn’t want to go down to the lake in case I ran into Trevor and his friends or Johnny’s mom or even the lake monster. I thought about practicing my magic tricks, or dressing up in a velcro suit and trying to stick myself to people’s pets for an afternoon to see what pets do when they aren’t drooling or peeing on the carpet, but even the thought of wearing velcro made my ears sweat. I reached up to dry them out with the bottom of my T-shirt. I used the inside part so Mom wouldn’t yell at me when she saw yellow stains on the edges, but Mom saw me through the window and gave me the eye, so I stopped and rocked a few times on the swinging bench and tried to pretend like I was whispering secrets back and forth with the shirt.
The dog came around the corner of the porch because the shade was disappearing over by the garden, and I could hear the creak creak of the porch as it sauntered towards me. It knocked its head against the peeling white railing of the porch, and stumbled a step or two to the left, teetered at the top of the stairs as though it was going to fall over into the grass, then flapped its big German Sheppard ears a couple of times and wound its way over to me. The dog sniffed my knee and panted with its tongue hanging loose and wet from its mouth. Thick, warm, drops of drool stretched from his mouth like taffy and landed in globules sealed by the porch dust. He got his bearings and flopped down on top of my toes in a stack of fur.

"Hey, dog," I said. "I don’t want to wear a velcro suit or anything, but would you mind if I followed you around for an afternoon?"

The dog yawned and I could feel the grit of the dirt on its sweat matted underbelly against the tips of my toes. I curled my toes against the warm, coarse wood of the porch and felt the damp give of the dog’s ribs against my toe knuckles.

"All right," I said. "Let’s give it a go."

I grabbed one of the cushions from the swinging bench and laid it out next to Smoochie Poochie, and best I could I tried to emulate his manner of repose. Even in the shade and before ten in the morning I was sweating because the winds had died down the day after Johnny went to the hospital, and I hadn’t seen any parrot feathers in the street or at the edge of the woods in days. I didn’t mind though. The dog was sweating, and if I was sweating that made it all the more realistic. I hopped off of the porch and grabbed a handful of dirt and smeared it all over my chest so that I’d have the same gritty and dirty feeling the dog did, and I tried to imagine that I’d been eating the exact same Beef Cutlets
in their own juice for the past five years. My mouth felt thick with disgust, and I wondered if the dog ever got tired of bathing only once a month or eating the same food. But then I thought that I was trying to understand him through the lens of my own experiences, and figured that if my whole life had been spent eating the same food, sleeping in the cool dirt while tied up to a post, and barking at squirrels I couldn’t see, then I wouldn’t know any better, and would probably be happy as a bowl of water because I didn’t have as many things to worry about. Then I thought about never having homework, and this put me in just the right cheerful state of mind to copy the dog, and I curled up on the porch next to him, and tried to situate myself.

The biggest problem I had was that my arms didn’t bend the same way as his front legs, but I figured the dog couldn’t tell anyway, and I remembered a poem I’d heard once at school.

*Roses are red*
*Violets are blue*
*That’s what they tell me*
*Because I’m blind.*

If I really wanted to get the sense of what it was like to be the dog, I couldn’t open my eyes for the rest of the afternoon, maybe even until I fell asleep, because otherwise I’d be cheating. Cheaters go to hell. I didn’t want to push rocks up the side of a mountain all day, or be whipped by goat-hoofed red demons with forked tails and tongues, so I closed my eyes and put my chin on the cushion, and reached out and put my hand on the dog’s back so I could feel if he moved.

I couldn’t tell whether he opened his eyes or not, and every once in a while I had the urge to open mine and check, but I figured it didn’t matter anyway because even if he
did open his eyes he wouldn’t be able to see anything. The sun was peeking thorough the leaves of medlar tree that wasn’t there, and I wondered if the dog, even though he was blind, could sense the orange or the brightness I could perceive even with my eyes closed.

At first I didn’t think it was going to be that hard. The dog just breathed in and out, and I could feel the rise and fall of his chest. It took me a few minutes, but eventually I got my breathing in rhythm. His breathing was quicker than mine. His chest moved up and down like mine did when we played football at school, or when a truck backfires while I’m walking down a dark street, or when I had to breathe through a coffee straw when Ms. L taught about emphysema and the bad effects of smoking (even though I’ve seen her smoking out behind the school dumpster during recess every once in a while, and she never breathes through a straw). It took a few minutes, but we were breathing with synchronicity, and the pulse of our chests was an even and steady staccato. On the down breaths my bare chest scraped against the bare wood of the porch, but I kept up with the dog. That was the easy part.

The tough part was trying to keep up with his other movements. He’d rear his head back and yawn. I’d rear back and yawn. He’d throw his shoulders towards the ground and stretch out his forelegs. I’d sit back on my haunches and stretch my forelegs. He yapped once when a squirrel shot by, I know because I could hear the rush of the grass and the scampering of tiny feet against the earth, and I yapped too, though my yap sounded deeper and more rumbly than the dog’s.

“Paul?” My mother called from the living room. “What’s going on out there?”
I would have answered her, but I’d be breaking my character as the dog, and I tried to unlisten real hard, like someone who doesn’t speak English and communicates only through barking and licking and smelling butts, and by the time I heard her words, I’d forgotten what they meant.

I heard a quick clack clack on the sidewalk, and felt the dog’s ears perk up, and I tried to perk up my ears too, but I’ve never been able to move my ears much, not even up and down the way Blueberry Joe could for a quarter at recess, the way that makes it look like his forehead is dancing with his hair. I felt the muscles in my back go firm, and my legs felt taut and ready to spring, and I thought this was good. The dog darted out from under my hand and I heard it sprint down the steps and run up to the fence.

Fast as I could I scampered down the stairs, but when you can’t see it’s a lot tougher. I hit the first step with my hands and tried to spring down the way I’d seen the dog when he got excited, but my butt was high in the air because I was on all fours. When I pushed off with my feet, my hands slipped from the top step and dropped to the second, and I slammed my shoulder into the corner of the second step. I tried to stop my momentum, but it was too late because my feet and legs had already jumped, and they sailed out and over my head.

It lasted only for a split second, but I had this strange feeling of weightlessness and nausea all at the same time. The pain in my shoulder sprinted down my arm and to my hand, and my feet flapped around in the air like my legs were made of silly string. There was a thump and then two small whacks. I could feel the soft soil of the front planter behind my ears and around my neck, and smell the bitter garlic as the thin stalks
crept through my hair. I was glad I hadn’t fallen to the other side of the steps, where
Mom grew roses. My eyes were still closed.

“Paul? Are you okay?”

I could hear that the dog wasn’t barking.

“Ruff.”

My shoulder still hurt a little, but I popped up from the planter and hobbled over
towards the fence. The grass felt wet, even though it was hot and dry out, and I wondered
for a minute if grass could sweat too. Because of my shoulder every other step was
shorter, and I felt myself drifting to the left.

“Over here.”

I readjusted. The voice sounded close and I trotted over as fast as I could
considering my shoulder and my natural caution because I couldn’t see anything, and just
when I figured I was only a couple of steps away from the fence, I smashed the dog’s tail
into the ground with my hand and bumped my head against one of the posts. The dog
yelped. I yelped.

“Are you okay?”

Mary reached over the fence and ruffled my hair. Her fingers felt soft and light,
and when her thumb traced the ridge of my forehead and the top of my ears, my whole
body tingled like when Henry shoved me into the cardboard box and covered me with
stale popcorn and tried to send me to California in the mail. The time when all my limbs
fell asleep and Dad spent most of the night walking me up and down the stairs to get the
blood flowing again and Henry had to sleep with an ice pack on his butt. You might not
think so, but pain and pleasure aren’t so far apart.

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“Ruff,” I barked, but with less enthusiasm than my first because I was trying to rub the knot on my forehead with my back foot. The rubber from my shoe smelled like dead grass and damp dirt, but I couldn’t quite reach.

“Are you pretending to be a dog?”

“Ruff. Ruff.”

I heard the metallic click as the gate unlatched, and then the sound of footsteps on the grass and the smell of lilacs. I had an urge to open up my eyes and see Mary standing there with her amaretto legs, and her soft voice, and to see if she’d been crying or dancing with a broom again, but then I felt the dog flop down next to me and exhale, and I knew I couldn’t because it wouldn’t be fair.

“You’re a little old to be pretending to be a dog aren’t you?”

“Ruff,” I replied and flopped down where I thought her feet were, but I missed and got a mouthful of crabgrass. I flipped over and put my feet in the air and whined a little, like our dog does when he wants to be petted on the belly, and Mary giggled a little, but she didn’t pet me.

“You’re an odd boy sometimes, Paul.”

“Ruff,” I barked and whined a little more and kicked my legs a little to show my canine displeasure at not being petted. She giggled a little more and pushed at the bump in my forehead. It didn’t hurt, but I howled like the wolfman and rolled around. I felt the grass making small scratches on my shoulders, and hoped my back wouldn’t swell up like when the doctor drew a red checkerboard on my back and poked me with all sorts of needles when they tested my allergies. Ms. L made me show the whole class when I came in late to school, and for the rest of the week, Trevor and his pals said that I had been
cursed by God and that four horsemen were going to throw me into the sun with the rest
of the checkerboard heathens.

I howled a bit more, and with my eyes closed I noticed the warmth of the sun­grass and the cool of the shade-grass as I rolled around. And I wondered if someday soon,
when Johnny got out of the hospital, we could sit quietly in front of the house for a day
and pretend to be blades of grass. We could take turns watering each other.

Another set of footsteps.

“Paul! What in the hell are you doing?”

Jim reached down and grabbed me by the shoulders and yanked me up and threw
me over his shoulder. His shoulders were pretty square because he’d been doing a lot of
pushups the last couple of weeks, and the point of his right shoulder hit me right in the
gut and I lost my wind.

“Ruffoa,” I said, and kicked my feet at him and tried to make him let me go, but
he held tight.

“He’s pretending to be a dog,” Mary said.

“Holy Christ,” Jim said. “A dog.”

“A blind one. He hasn’t opened his eyes since I’ve been here.”

The dog barked and hopped up at Jim’s leg and bit my shoe. The dog was pretty
protective of me, on account of I was the one who fed it mostly, but the dog was also
blind and dumb and wouldn’t let go of my shoe.

“Ruff,” I barked, trying to tell the dog that he had my shoe and not Jim, but the
dog vernacular is a complex tonal system of communication, and he didn’t understand.
“Maybe,” Jim said, “If I turn the hose on him, and bring out the flea soap, and give him a good scrubbin’ with the bristle brushes, and comb his fur with the metal comb, and spray him with the deodorizer, he’ll at least be a clean dog.”

“I don’t think the flea soap or spray is necessary, but a good bath never hurt anyone.”

When Mary said “bath” the dog loosed my shoe and started hopping up and down and yipping with excitement. Saying bath to Smoochie Poochie is like saying walk to most dogs, except our dog doesn’t get excited about walks because he always gets lost in the hedges.

I heard the dragging of ears against the grass and the clink of the metal spigot against the low rumble of a canine growl. The dog was trying to turn on the hose.

“Ruff,” I said, and kicked again, but Jim just tightened his grip and ran his shoulder deep into my gut.

“You could use a bath too,” Mary said. I couldn’t tell if she was talking to the dog or to Jim, but I assumed it was Jim because he’d been out in the back trimming the rose bushes and the carnations and the dandelions and his fingers had a gravely paste of dirt and his whole torso smelled like armpits and dirt and flowers. His shoulders were bare and sweaty, and I kept slipping around and flopping like a trout in his grasp.

I could hear squeak of the hose and the coming rush of water, and I opened my mouth to bark, but when I did Jim swirled around and a full stream of iron tasting water hit me in the throat and stifled my bark.

“Hold on a second,” Jim called, but Mary was laughing and kept spraying at Jim because he would take a couple steps to the right, then to the left, and the water followed
him wherever he went. I’d seen Jim run before, and avoid the spray of a hose (most notably when Dad caught him and Henry playing pirates. The two of them had dug a three foot hole in Dad’s garden and had nearly finished burying a small shoebox full of pennies and chocolate coins, when Dad popped up from behind the fence, unleashed the yipping dog, and sprayed the two of them with the high powered wall cleaning hose. Henry got hit full in the chest and fell backwards into the mud, but Jim leapt over the fence and disappeared off into the woods for an hour) and I don’t know if it was my weight, or he was tired from trimming flowers all day in the back of the yard, but Mary didn’t have any trouble spraying him at all.

The dog was yipping and darting beneath our feet and splashing up little fireworks of mud and biting at my shoe. It rolled around in the puddle forming on the grass beneath the medlar tree that wasn’t there and lapped at the water and breathed in raspy dog breaths. I opened my eyes for a second, even though it was cheating, and saw three ants floating around a patch of crab grass.

“All right,” Mary said. “It looks like you guys are clean.”

Jim dropped to a knee and let me loose. I fell to the ground in a wet heap of mud, and closed my eyes, and joined the dog rolling around in the mud and slurping up small ponds of iron water. I slurped slow because I didn’t want to swallow any ants. I didn’t want anyone to shake me and have all the ants go crazy and have to rebuild.

“I told my Mom I’d be back in time to help her make lunch. Our grandma is in town,” Mary said. “I better leave the three of you to dry off.”

“Hold on a second, Mary,” Jim said. “Just a second.”
I opened my eyes even though it was cheating and it probably meant I’d be going
to hell, but I saw Jim, water drops flying from his shoulders and hair, sprint around the
front porch and head into the back yard. The green hedge lining the front porch to the
right hadn’t stopped shaking when he returned with a handful of flowers.

“I picked these earlier today. I put a bunch in a vase for the dinner table, but I still
had these left over and I didn’t want to waste them or let them die on the vine.”

He grabbed a sheet of old newspaper from the recycle pile behind the swinging
bench and wrapped the stems.

“Be careful of the roses. Some of them’s got sharp thorns. I pricked my finger a
few times this morning.”

“Thank you,” Mary said, and she gave Jim a little hug even though he was wet
and still smelled like armpits and flowers. When she turned to leave, I saw a wet triangle
on her blue shirt.

She ruffled my hair and I barked approvingly until the gate had closed behind her. The
dog snored a splashy snore into the puddle that gathered about his pink mouth. I laid my
head down in the mud and watched Jim watch Mary all the way back to her door, and
then through the windows until she disappeared, skipping, into the kitchen.
When I woke up this morning, Johnny was standing at the foot of the bed and wearing a pair of cardboard wings. His face was all scrunched up at the cheeks and his tongue was darting in and out of his mouth like a two o’clock lizard. The wings were duct taped to his arms above and below the elbows, and I could smell the burned plastic aroma from the tape lingering in the corners of the room.

“Arr arr arr arr arrgh,” cried Johnny. He flapped his arms and hopped on his left foot. With his black flannel pajamas he looked like a baby crow.

“Johnny,” I said. “What in the heck are you doing?”

“Did I wake you up?”

“Yeah you woke me up. You’re dressed up like some kind of crazy member of the raven family, hopping around my room using my storage boxes for wings, and making bird sounds. I thought one of those parrots had broken in here in was trying to steal my sausages.”

“Good,” he said. “I think Jim is up to something.”

He motioned me over towards the window with his wing, which bent at a sharp right angle towards his head right where it should have come to a hollow boned point. The whole design wasn’t anything close to aerodynamic, and I hoped he didn’t want me to hop on his back so that we could fly out the window and off to Never Never Land. I know we probably would have died, or at least bent our legs so that they looked like a dog’s, but I would’ve had to because Mom says you should be kind to people who’ve been through a rough time.
“Johnny,” I said, “I don’t know if those wings are seaworthy.”

“Caw. We’re not jumping out the window,” he flapped his wings for emphasis.

“Caw. Just take a look down at the porch.”

I reached over and pulled back the curtain. The sun was only half way up and only half of a warm blast of air hit me in the face before Johnny slapped my hand with his wing.

“Caw,” he said.

“What did you do that for?”

“Caw. He’ll see you. Just peek out through the holes.”

“I wish you’d stop knocking me with those wings.”

“Caw.”

Jim sat on the edge of the porch with twelve packets of flower seeds laid out at his feet in a square. In his hand was a book, and I’d never seen Jim holding a book before, except for the TV Guide, and I wondered if he was trying to start a fire and the newspaper boy had thrown his delivery into the gutter again. He was barefoot and wearing his new pair of overalls rolled up to his knees. His leg muscles were rounded and stuck out in sharp ridges, and I could tell that he’d been running because Henry’s legs looked like L’s ever since he started working at Hopperton’s and stopped playing football with the rest of the guys. The sun glistened off of the tiny bald spot a few inches above his left ear, the remnant of one of my casting lessons from a couple years ago in the willows of Lake Fancy.

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day,” he asked.
“What’s he talking about?” I asked Johnny. “It’s the end of winter.”

“Caw.” Johnny flapped his wings and shrugged his shoulders. I don’t even know if birds have shoulders, because I’ve never seen one in a sweater or on the football field, so it took my eyes a second to reconcile the image.

“Plough art more lovely and more temperature.”

“Caw. I think I saw some plough art once, at the county fair. Remember that Farmer from Goya Farms in the southern part of the state?”

“No.”

“The one with the green donkey.”

“Oh yeah.”

I couldn’t hear Jim’s voice anymore. He gathered up all his seed packets from the porch and moved around towards the garden.

“Caw. I heard your Dad saying last night that he was going to give Jim a little section of the garden all for himself.”

“Did they say that over dinner?”

“No.”

“When did they say it?”

“Caw,” Johnny said, “A bird never tells its secrets.”
Harmonica Shopping

After Mom found, piled halfway to the smiling donut poster in the corner where the morning sunlight hits, the nest Johnny had made from dish rags, old T-shirts, newspapers, and twigs from the garden, she and Dad told Johnny he couldn’t pretend to be a bird anymore.

“There’s a difference between pretending to be a bird,” Dad said, “and actually being a bird. You know we love you Johnny, but we can’t afford the insurance it would cost to put you in a tree. Birds are birds because they’re birds. You are not a bird.”

“How’d you like a nice cowboy hat and plastic gun?” Mom asked.

“I don’t see the difference between pretending to be a cowboy and pretending to be a bird. Pretending is pretending. Besides, birds are peaceful, other than when they poop on your fish and chips. Mrs. Anderson told us that despite their heroic image in the American National myth, cowboys were directly responsible for the complete destruction of an entire indigenous culture.”

“Your teacher is Ms. Lancaster.”

“Sometimes Mrs. Anderson comes over to watch the class when Trevor’s dad comes by to drop off his lunch.”

“Oh,” Mom said.

“How ‘bout we teach you to play the harmonica?” Dad said, “Then you can make songs like a bird, but you can also slap your toes on the ground like a human.”

“Did you know humans are the only species who consume the milk of other animals?”
"Did Mrs. Anderson tell you that too?"

"No. I just thought about it one day."

There was a moment of awkward silence while Mom poked at the edge of the nest with her toe. There was a look on her face, it sort of split down the middle, like half of her was disgusted by the giant pile of garbage ruining the complete and sovereign order she imposed on the house from the alphabetized cans in the cupboard, to the dressers sorted by color rather than by type of clothes. But on the other half of her face, just at the edge of her mouth, flap of her ear, and in the wisp of hair sticking out from the tight bun atop her head, you could see the rudiments of a smile, as if she wanted to build a giant nest in the corner of her room as well. As though she wanted to strap on a pair of wings and fly around the house and through the willows of Lake Fancy and out over the cow fields and dirt ruts and breezes of the county for an afternoon or so.

"All right, boys," Dad finally said. Mom adjusted her bun so that all of her hair was tight against her skull. "It’s decided. Help me clean this nest up, and tomorrow we’ll get the both of you a harmonica."

"I don’t want a harmonica," I said. "I want a flute so I can lead all the children away from the city."

"Paul, imagination can be a dangerous thing," Mom said, and she went downstairs to watch her show.

It took Dad, Johnny, and I about fifteen minutes to return the makings of his nest to various storage areas and garbage cans throughout the house. I kept looking over at Johnny to see how he was taking the whole thing, but in between loads he was stamping his foot on the ground and holding a fake harmonica up to his mouth. He was holding it
all wrong of course, like a corn cob, and I wanted to tell him you couldn’t play a
harmonica if you were smiling as big as he was, that it’d come out sounding like a
wheezing donkey, but I didn’t want him to worry about anything.

When Dad went down to drop a pile of shirts in the laundry, I folded Johnny’s
wings up and stuffed them between my mattress and my box springs.

“Just ’cause you spent so much time making them,” I said.

Johnny nodded.

When Dad came back we told him we threw them in the garbage can.

The next morning Johnny got dressed up in his best blue jeans, the ones with the
holes in the knees and the red permanent marker stains from when Trevor Lindman tried
to draw a picture of a bloody knife on the back pocket, and he, Dad, and I piled into the
front seat of the Dodge and headed down to Hopperton’s. It was a cold morning. Still
mid-January, and though we didn’t get much snow in Lake Fancy, the shingles of the
houses were frozen over. The grass, coated with ice, didn’t sway in the frosty morning
breeze. When I was younger, in the days when I was the first one up in the house by a
couple of hours, and all the echoes seemed ten times louder, I would go out on the back
porch on days like this and pee into the garden. Steam rose from my pee and dissipate
before drifting into the branches of the tree that wasn’t there. There weren’t any leaves on
the trees in wintertime unless I glued the paper ones on for shade. Sometimes, mostly in
his puppy days, Smoochie Poochie would come over and raise his leg on my bare foot in
a sign of solidarity, brotherhood, and blindness.
We got to Hopperton’s only a few minutes after it opened. The reindeer bells jingled against the door as we entered, and shook for a few seconds after the door closed on account of the draft.

We were the only people in the store, even though we could hear a few people, probably Mr. Hopperton and Henry, muttering around in the back behind the moth riddled curtain. Most of the farmers didn’t come in until later on Saturday mornings, especially cold ones because it took a while for them to warm up their trucks and scrape the ice from the tires and windshields and drive in from the outer parts of the county.

“Be out in a minute,” Mr. Hopperton’s deep voice came through the holes of the curtain. “Just don’t steal anything until I can get out there. Henry,” he said to my brother, “don’t forget to stock up the taffy barrels and the pancake flour this morning. They’re still on sale, and they’ve been selling like... hotcakes. Ha Ha hotcakes!”

Mom called Hopperton’s a fat man’s Valhalla. I don’t know what Valhalla is, because I’ve never been anywhere near a Viking, and every time I try to put on a hat with horns, Mom tells me that horns are for sheep, bulls, and devils.

“Sheep don’t have horns,” I tell her.

“Not that you can see.”

“It means paradise,” Dad said.

“Why would a fat man want to wear Viking horns, paddle a giant boat, and sit around on an ice flow drinking wassail?”

“Not that kind of paradise,” Dad said.
The store is laid out in concentric layers of food. Rather than arranging the store by department or by group, Mr. Hopperton arranges the store according to his own particular food whims. There are sixteen giant wooden barrels of candy laid out like a gauntlet right as you enter the store. Each barrel has “Niagara Falls Travel Co.” stamped out in faded black lettering along the side. Above the barrels are all sorts of wonderful toys, dolls, and electronic gizmos reaching up to the ceiling, where Mr. Hopperton paid a local artist to do a rendition of the Sistine Chapel. Adam and God touch their fingers (green as a couple of pickles because Mr. Hopperton didn’t want to spring for the flesh colored paint) right above the Chocolate Reindeer. All of the purely functional stuff, the milk, the eggs, the firewood, the light bulbs, the can openers, and the aluminum foil, all of the stuff like that was as far against the back wall as possible. In certain spots, Mr. Hopperton had even carved hollow spots out in the wall to stack plastic wrap and garbage bags so that people had to walk through all of the “impulse buys”- like candy, cookies, and plastic parachute men with lizard shaped heads who spit flames out of their ears when they were dropped from heights of thirty feet or more- to get to the goods. Candy, gum, ice cream, and anything that was packaged in bright shiny colors was put at hip level for adults- eye level for children.

Henry told us this was what Mr. Hopperton called good business. He said Mr. Hopperton said that kids were just as reliable and lovable as raccoons and ants- anytime they see something shiny or get a whiff of something sweet, they have to have it. They won’t get it every time they whine for it, and sometimes they’ll even get smacked or yelled at for whining, but there are enough parents who give in that Mr. Hopperton is the
richest man in the county. Mom said Mr. Hopperton is the reason why our county was rated the heaviest, per capita, county in the state.

"Mr. Hopperton isn't shoving candy down anyone's throat but his own," Dad said.

"That's what I mean," Mom said.

Then they both laughed and Dad shoved a couch cushion under his shirt and offered Mom a barrel full of taffy.

"You shouldn't make fun," Henry said. "Mr. Hopperton's a nice man. He gave me a job."

Then they both felt kind of bad because Henry never had a job before.

"We didn't mean anything by it," Mom said.

The harmonicas are located in aisle 3. I say aisle, even though there isn't a straight line anywhere in the store. The whole thing is caddywumpus, with shelves and old bookcases stacked randomly throughout the store so that it is more of a giant maze than a properly laid out, straight aisled supermarket like the one they have at Super Foods, but Super Foods is over an hour and a half away. Every six feet or so, Mr. Hopperton has a hand painted sign hanging from the ceiling that lists the contents of that area.

Aisle 3 read: "Crayons, Coloring Books, Small Musical Instruments, Costumes, and Candy."

Actually, the last line of every sign read: "and Candy."
“Looks like we are heading to aisle three, boys,” Dad said. He started weaving his way around the bright green martini glasses that were stacked precariously, wobbly, and ten feet high at the end of each aisle.

“Don’t knock anything over, boys,” Dad called. “You know the rules.”

All over the store Mr. Hopperton hung signs that said, “You break it, you buy it.” The signs were all hand painted by people who had broken glasses or jars of pickles, because Mr. Hopperton had a policy that you could either pay for the broken item, or hand paint a sign. I estimate there were sixty-seven signs hanging from the ceiling by fishing line and little chains, but you never could be sure. Henry, Jim, and I had our own little section of signs in the corner from the time when Henry panced me in the stewed tomato aisle and Jim tackled him and knocked over twelve jars of tomatoes. We had to pay for all twelve of them out of our own allowances, but Mom made us each make a sign too. Mine had a parrot wearing an eye patch.

Mr. Hopperton stocked thirteen different harmonicas. The cheapest was the Daisy Do-Little green plastic harmonica for fifty three cents. It played only one note and wasn’t any good after the age of three for anything but catching ants. The most expensive one was the Harmony-I-Can made from solid gold. According to the gold leaf information sheet taped up next to it, the Harmony-I-Can 3000 was personally blessed by the Reverend Bacon of the Harmony Life Church congregation of Modesto, California. Mr. Hopperton kept only one of these in stock. It was locked behind a glass case with an alarm system that looked suspiciously like the innards of an old calculator. Hanging above this was a sign that read, “If you have to ask, you can’t afford it.”
“I don’t have to tell you boys that the Daisy Do-Little isn’t worth the plastic it’s made from, and the Harmony-I-Can is not an option either. Besides, who wants to put gold in their mouth? You’d probably get hepatitis or gold lips. So, I’ll give you about five minutes or so to pick one out. I’m gonna go talk to Henry and pick up some aluminum foil.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Johnny said, and saluted him.

“You’re a fine sailor, Ensign Johnny.” Dad disappeared behind the curtain, and we could hear him laughing with Henry and Mr. H.

Johnny took a few minutes and picked up the different harmonicas. I don’t think he knew what he was looking for, because he was testing them like they were fruits and vegetables. He’d pick one up in his hand, give it a little bit of a squeeze, hold it up to his ear, look at it with his right eye closed, then out of the side of his eye like it was trying to creep up on him. I don’t know much about harmonicas either, but I know he wasn’t doing it right.

I took a few steps farther down the aisle and left Johnny alone to choose. I wanted to see the costumes, and try on some of the masks and wigs and fake beards. Mr. H had a whole bunch of costumes in stock year round, not just at Halloween like most stores, and I think he was on to something because dressing up in a costume shouldn’t be a one time a year deal. Plus, when you get dressed up in the costume you have to go around saying Trick-Or-Treat and getting a sack full of candy. Not that I mind saying Trick-Or-Treat, and I certainly don’t mind the candy, but no proper pirate is going to waste his time asking little old ladies for chocolate covered coconut shreds when he could be out on a boat with a parrot on his shoulder and making bankers and mangy dogs walk the plank.
A lot of his costumes were dumb costumes: princess costumes with pink veils and shiny purple shoes, little pumpkin costumes with bibs, white doctor jackets with plastic stethoscopes, stuff no one in his right or left mind would be caught wearing unless his mom made it with her own hands or something. I liked the professional costumes, the ones that came with swords or knives or coonskin caps, and not real swords or knives but the huge thick plastic ones that are twice as big as a real sword and are always crooked because you accidentally sit on them. While Johnny was listening to his harmonicas like ocean shells, I tried on a bushy black pirate beard and a plastic knight’s helmet with a green ostrich feather coming out of the top.

“Arrgh, Johnny the Cruiser,” I said, “Yee’ve plait yer hermenicy in theez parts long enough. Now, yee’ve got te walk the plank inta the meth of a firesome dragon!”

I picked up two plastic swords and leveled them at Johnny.

“And if ye don’t, I’ll cut ye bleck hert like a themble!”

“Avast,” Johnny cried, dropping his harmonica back in the bin, “You’ll never take me alive.”

Johnny grabbed the three-foot orange crayon from the giant crayon bin and twirled it above his head. Then he picked up a giant coloring book as a shield, and took a deep crouch.

“Have at ye,” I cried, and I lunged for Johnny. Though the strength of my plastic swords was no match for three solid feet of tempered wax, the weight of the crayon was too heavy for Johnny, and it took him longer to reload his arm and thrust again. With my two swords I was striking at him about four times for every one. His shield work was
admirable, though, and I guess he must have been used to protecting himself from his mom, and I couldn’t hit anything but the coloring book.

The beard slipped into my mouth after Johnny bopped me on the helmet, and I hoped that the pirate who had owned the beard before me hadn’t drunk too much whiskey because I didn’t want to come back from the store teetering and tottering and telling everyone how much I loved them like me own brother.

The bells on the door jingled in the background, and I thought maybe we should stop before we knocked something over or got in trouble with Dad or Mr. Hopperton or Henry who’d been a real jerk since he got his job in charge of stocking the shelves. But Johnny bopped me again and the helmet slammed shut over my eyes, and then he started poking me in the stomach.

“’I’ll play my harmonica while dancing on your watery grave!’” he said.

“Hpph mmph,” I called through the beard. “Nevpph.”

I dropped to my knees and stuck out my leg and swirled around real quick like I saw in a karate movie once, hoping I could knock Johnny over long enough to open my helmet and stick him in the ribs or under the armpit and claim the aisle in the name of the Queen. So I turned as fast as I could and caught Johnny in the ankle, and I heard a small crack and then the slap of his hands and arms against the floor as he tried to catch his fall. Then the thud of his body. Then the clink of body against glasses.

“Oh, no,” cried Johnny.

I flipped my helmet open and saw a tower of martini glasses leaning towards the floor.
“Ah nmmph,” I cried. I froze like I was a picture of myself on a wall somewhere, and Johnny froze too, and the glasses landed on top of us in a line. I closed my eyes and cringed, but there was no breaking sounds.

“They’re all glued together,” Johnny said. “And made of plastic.”

“Well,” said a voice, “If it isn’t Merlin the Dorkerer and his crayon totin’ pal, Johnny Candyass.”
Rats

Winter sneezed all over the city and it must've had emphysema or something because the wind blew hard through the town and all the mailboxes were leaning away from Lake Fancy and over towards Hopperton’s. Johnny was outside playing in the tire swing wearing nothing but a one of grandpa’s old button down sweaters, a ski cap with only one eye cut out, long johns, and a pair of green sandals made from Astroturf that Dad’s company had given as a Christmas bonus one year. His wings were still in between the mattress and the box spring, but he was flapping his arms and cawing like a crow. Crows make sense in the winter, and I hadn’t seen the parrots since the night they stole the sausages I buried for Joe.

“I swear that boy is going to catch a cold,” Mom said. She brought another plate of waffles over to the table. Johnny had woken up early and done some of his school work, and Mom let him eat a bowl of cereal while she waited for the rest of us to get up. Henry was at work, and Jim was still sleeping. “His feet are blue as the sky.”

“He’s not going to catch anything,” Dad said, “except for a few glares from the parents in the neighborhood, and the envy of all the kids.”

Mom cracked the window, and Winter, who was dying to get in, swept in through the crack and started licking our faces.

“That wind is trying to get in here and eat some of these waffles,” Dad said. “I would too if I was the wind. Nothing better on a winter morning than warm homemade syrup. I’d like to bathe in it.”
I pictured my Dad neck deep in a bathtub full of warm syrup with a squadron of rubber ducks stuck to the surface and his Admiral’s cap tilted over an ear atop his head.

“Johnny, you’ve got ten more minutes then you have to come in and get something warm to drink, and put on some socks. I don’t want to have to saw off your toes because of frostbite. It’d ruin my best steak knife.”

“No problem, Mrs. McGrew,” Johnny said. He knew better than to caw with her. “I’ll be in in a few minutes.”

She slammed the window and winter took one more lick at my cheeks and ruffled the napkins on the table. Dad rubbed his hands together until they were warm and put them on my forehead. The dog sat curled up in the corner of the kitchen, right on top of the heating vent, with its ears covering its eyes.

“One of these days,” Dad said, “Smoochie is going to fall asleep and cook to death.”

“It’s not proper to eat a dog.”

“Wouldn’t you have to boil Smoochie first to get all the hair out?” I asked. “Seems to me we’d probably choke.”

“We are not going to eat the dog,” Mom said. Smoochie raised his head and ears and looked over in the direction of our voices with his glazed over eyes. If he was concerned about us eating him, he didn’t let on. He just whined a little and fell back asleep. The hair on the side of his head fluttered upwards with the heave of the heater.

“We should get Johnny a pet,” Dad said. “His birthday is coming up, and maybe it would make him feel more a part of the family than a harmonica or a bird’s nest. I know we’ve already got our dog, but I get the feeling that Johnny feels lonesome. Even though
he’s got Paul as a buddy, and us and Jim and Henry, it’s still tough for a boy to go through a change as much as he’s done.”

“Smoochie is just as much Johnny’s as he is the rest of ours.”

“Yeah, but a blind dog isn’t the right kind of pet for a kid like Johnny. Stumbling down the stairs, knocking into walls, sleeping all the time. Johnny needs a playful pet. Something to lift up his spirits when he’s feeling down.”

“Like a boa constrictor?” I asked. I wondered what he meant by ‘a kid like Johnny’ and why Smoochie was a good enough pet for me. Don’t get me wrong, I love the dog, but I’d much rather have a llama or an alpaca or a monkey with a pistol. “We can feed it rats and maybe Trevor Lindman too! If it gets big enough we can ride it to school and sell tickets to see it at recess.”

“We are not going to have a boa constrictor,” Mom said. “It smells with its tongue. You can’t trust any animal that doesn’t have the sense to use its nose.”

“Does it taste with its nose?” I asked. “That’d be weird.”

I dipped my finger in the syrup on my plate and pushed through the gluey solidified crust to the part that was still warm against the plate. I brought it to my nose, inhaled, and started choking and coughing and the whole time syrup mingled with snot dripped from my nose onto the plate in thick raindrop spurts.

“I wouldn’t eat that if I were you,” Dad said. “Otherwise you’ll turn into a Booger vampire.”

“What about a cat?” Mom asked. “A kitten. We’d have to keep it in a pen for a while, until it learned that it isn’t allowed to scratch the couch or pee on the linoleum. We
could get Johnny a ball of string and some cat nip, and he could have hours of fun. Plus it would teach him responsibility.”

“A cat?” Dad said. “I don’t know.” ‘I don’t know’ was Dad’s way of saying ‘no way in heck.’ “Grandma’s got twenty-three cats. Every time we go over there we get a year’s worth of cats in a couple hours. Besides, what if it starts bringing home dead mice and birds and leaving them on the doorstep. You know how Grandma spends half her day burying small animals.”

Smoochie hopped up from his curl and put his ear to the heating vent.

“I don’t know what has gotten into that dog recently. In the last few weeks it has been listening to the ground all the time.”

“Maybe there is a giant worm burrowing up from the center of the earth, and it’s gonna eat our house,” I said.

“Or maybe we’ve got a rat living down there in the insulation.”

Smoochie whined and pawed at the vent. There was a click clack of nail against copper. He sat back on his haunches and barked once.

“Let’s let him out and see if he can catch it.”

When Smoochie heard ‘out’ he ran over and started pawing at the door. There were three inches of scratch marks on both sides of the door from the dog either wanted to go out or come back in from outside. Dad sanded it even and repainted the door at least once a year, and the door was about a quarter of an inch thicker by the hinges. Mom opened the door and the dog started yipping and tore off around the corner and off the porch and disappeared under the house as Mom closed the door.

“Maybe we should get a cat,” Dad said. “That dog couldn’t catch a cold.”
“Paul, clear the table. Leave a few waffles out for Jim. He can microwave them when he wakes up. He’s not going to have fresh syrup, but he’ll make due I’m sure.”

Mom hung her apron on the back of the pantry door and went into the family room to watch her show. Dad dropped his plate in the sink and I gathered the rest of the plates and the syrup saucer and all the balled up sticky napkins and glasses with orange rinds stuck to the sides and chapstick lip prints and brought them over to the counter.

“I knew there was a reason I had kids,” Dad said. “After you throw those napkins away, grab a towel. I wash, you dry. Except for that plate covered in snot. You wash that one. You couldn’t pay me to touch the vile things that come out of your nose.”

“Not even for a nickel?” I asked.

“Where’s the nickel?”

I dug around in my pocket and pulled out four pennies.

“You insult my talents as a dishwasher. I’ll probably lose a finger or two, but all right.”

Dad grabbed one of the pennies.

“This is a funny looking nickel, but I’ll take you at your word.” He handed me plate after plate. “Make sure you don’t leave any streaks on the glasses. You know how your mother hates streaks.”

“I know.”

“And make sure you put them back in the cupboard by size, rotating the ones that are already in there to the front.”

“I know.”
“And make sure you don’t stick your hand in the garbage disposal when it’s running. Otherwise you’ll be mangled.”

When I got upstairs Johnny was lying in bed and reading through my encyclopedia of animals through the one eye hole in the ski mask. His blue feet were hanging over the edge of the bed, and the sandals were neatly lined up on the floor of the closet next to his blue slippers. Mom was already having an effect on him.

“How’d you get up here?” I asked him. “I thought you was down on the swing.”

“I was. I came in through the front door. I didn’t want to disturb you guys.”

“We’ve got rats.”

“Where?” Johnny sat up and peeked into the closet and under the beds.

“Under the house. I bet they’re there for the winter. Probably living in some old sheets or something. Mom let the dog out after ’em.”

“I wonder how far you could throw a rat if you swung it by the tail?”

“It’s bad luck to throw rats.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It just is.”

“How is it different than throwing a baseball?”

“Is a baseball gonna come back with fifty of its friends and eat your eyes out?”

“No.”

“Then there.” I wasn’t sure that a rat would come back with fifty of its friends and eat your eyes out either, but I didn’t want Johnny thinking it was okay to throw rats. If he got dizzy when he was spinning around and let it go too early, it might end up right in the
kitchen. Then Mom would skin us both with a vegetable peeler before a pounding with the wooden spoon.

"I don’t want a cat," Johnny said. "I don’t like the triangular ears."

I wondered if Johnny knew we’d been talking about getting him a cat for his birthday, or if he just happened to be looking through the animal encyclopedia and stumbled across them. I figured I could do what the French call *reconnaissance* for my Mom and Dad, and find out what kind of pet Johnny wanted. That way we could get him an animal he’d really enjoy. One that would make him feel good. But I didn’t want to let on that I knew he was getting a pet, so I had to play like I didn’t know.

"Well," I said, "And this is just a speculative discussion, but if you could have any pet in the world, let’s say five years from now when you are seventeen and have your own wife and kids and a house made out of spaghetti and chocolate with pizza doors, what kind of pet would you have?"

"An elephant. A baby one so I could tame it and use it as transportation. I’d name it Orville."

"You can’t have an elephant. You know how big elephants get? Besides, it’s illegal to have an elephant in city limits. The only place you are allowed to have an elephant is at the zoo, but then it’s not even yours unless you want to wear those short shorts and shovel elephant poop all day."

"What about a baby elephant. Those aren’t nearly as large. They ain’t any bigger than a dog."

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“How long do you think an elephant stays a baby. They ain’t like humans who stay babies for three or four years...”

“I heard your Mom say that some men are babies well into their fifties.”

“Or fifty years. Elephant babies are babies for three months or so. Then they double in size overnight.”

Johnny flipped through the animal encyclopedia to the section on elephants. His forehead got real tight and he read through the paragraph on elephants. Then he held up his thumb to the baby elephant on one side of the page, and compared it to the adult elephant on the other. I didn’t remember anything about elephants doubling in size overnight, but I prayed to myself that it would be in there, that God Himself or perhaps a minor angel in charge of animal books would cast a magic spell and reword the paragraph so that it said what I was telling him. This was probably a foolish and wasteful prayer, and I should have used it on something like world peace or love or happiness or some such thing, but I knew we wouldn’t be able to get Johnny an elephant no matter what, and I was lying to save his feelings because he didn’t deserve anymore trouble than he’d already had. I hadn’t prayed in a while, and I figured I had a few saved up in my account.

“Doesn’t say anything in here about doubling overnight, but they live to be up to 60 years.”

“No one is gonna buy a full grown elephant from you.”

“Yeah.”

“What else would you want to have?”

“A salmon.”
A salmon? It wasn’t a normal sort of pet, and you couldn’t have it tag along on
adventures down at the lake, but I didn’t want Johnny to get too discouraged about pets,
and the way he was going he’d probably pick a falcon or a shark next, and he’d get
disheartened and just sort of sit there staring at the ceiling or out through the window in
that Johnny stare of his, and I couldn’t bear to break his heart.

“That sounds good to me. Your wife would like it, your kids could feed it once a
day and knock on the side of the aquarium and tell it to come over here or go over there,
even though salmon don’t necessarily understand human languages. A salmon is a heck
of a lot more practical than an elephant. Heck, I’d rather have half a salmon than a
thousand elephants.”

Johnny got a big smile on his face and flipped through the encyclopedia to the
salmon section, and leaned back against the pillows and must have read the paragraph
three times and measured the salmon with his thumb six times before I decided I should
leave him alone. His feet were getting their color back, and already the morning wind had
died down a little. Mom’s show murmured its way up the stairs, and I could hear Dad’s
snoring floating intermittently up the stairs. There was a beep in the kitchen followed by
a rattling of silverware, and I figured Jim was finally up and probably pretty cross as he
usually was in the morning. I decided to go out on the porch and sit on the swinging
bench for a while and see if maybe the dog had found a rat.
Dancing in the Cold

“You go.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“You chicken?”

“I’m not the one with a set of wings and a nest.”

“All right, I’ll go first.”

Johnny took his socks off and pulled one over his right hand as a mitten. His bare feet looked like those big California highways on a skin colored roadmap, and I wondered if we could figure out where the X was if we could find pirate treasure.

“Remember,” I said. “Fifteen seconds. No hopping.”

Johnny took his other sock and threw it at my face. We’d only been up for an hour so his socks didn’t smell that bad except for by the toes, but even then I only got a passing whiff because it hit me in the ear. You can’t smell with your ears unless you live underground.

Johnny ran down the stairs. It was the beginning of winter and the early winter frost covered the ground in excuse me layers of white and gray frost. The sky was cloud upon cloud as far as the horizon, and with all of the leaves gone and the cars in the garages so that the windows wouldn’t freeze over, the whole street looked like a black and white picture except for Johnny. The tire swing whirled with wind and the rope creaked and the clouds made everything somber and dark, one of those days of eternal twilight where you feel sleepy and quiet all day. Where you talk in short sentences and
whispers because you don’t want the sound of your voice to bring down the rain. One of those days where you feel like you are on the brink of something mournful.

“How much time?” Johnny said.

“Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.”

Johnny scampered up the steps and hopped around on one foot and then the other and finally wrapped his feet in the hand towel we’d brought from the bathroom. The grass was white except for two green ovals where Johnny’s feet had been.

“Rub my feet for me.”

“I ain’t rubbin’ your feet. You’re the one who did it without socks.”

“You said that was the rules.”

So I helped Johnny rub his feet, and the whole time he was hoo-hooing and blowing on his hands and saying how standing on the frost grass with no shoes was a dumb idea, and that I’d never last for more than fifteen seconds, not in a million years even if I was wearing a pair of socks.

“Oh yeah? Twenty seconds. I won’t even shiver.”

I took my socks off and stuffed them in Johnny’s shirt. My big toe curled up once it hit the cold wood of the porch, colder where the nail heads flushed even with the wood, sharp and painful cold like the nails were pointing up instead of down. I tossed him my watch and ran down to the grass.

“No fair standing on my patch. There’s no frost left.”

“You can have your stupid patch,” I called, but I cringed because he figured out my plan. I stood right next to his patch thinking that maybe the heat from his body spilled
into the earth and was now radiating out in circles like when you throw a rock in the lake and it ripples all the way over to the shore.

“One,” Johnny said.

And I knew he started the watch late because I’d been standing there for at least five seconds before he said one, and already my ankles felt like they were made of peanut brittle and I was standing in fire. My little toe, which I have no control over unless I move it around with my hands or a fishing rod, curled up by its lonesome on both feet, trying to get back into my body.

“Have courage, men,” I whispered to my little toes. “We have not yet begun to fight.”

“Five, six.”

And now I know he’s just playing around because I’ve already been here for ten seconds minimum. I know because I’m counting in my own head and even saying one thousand after each number, though I might have skipped a few because I don’t think too good sometimes when I am standing barefoot in the grassfrost.

“Ten.”

When Ms. Lancaster was out sick one day, and Mrs. Anderson combined her class with ours, we learned about frostbite. She brought in some pictures of some skiers who got caught in an avalanche and lived under a pile of snow for two days while people tried to dig them out. People who lived only by licking the snow for nourishment. When they got out, their hands and feet were all black, like someone had smoked them in a barbecue pit for too long, and they had to chop them off. Mrs. Anderson said your body is designed like a medieval fortress, where the outer regions of the castle, the fingers, toes, hands, and
feet, are abandoned first when it gets cold, that’s why they are the most susceptible to frostbite.

“Fifteen.”

“Johnny,” I called, “Do my feet look black to you?”

When Ms. L got back from being sick she said that sometimes people who get frostbite do so because they aren’t living a Christian lifestyle. They don’t care about anyone but themselves and their sycophant haughty taughty friends. I told this to Mom and she said Ms. Lancaster should stop driving to Colorado to rendezvous with the men she meets on the internet.

“Nineteen, twenty. Holy cow!”

Johnny didn’t have to holy cow me twice, I ran back up to the porch like a robot because my legs were frozen to the knees and I couldn’t bend them. Johnny tossed me the towel and both of us rubbed my feet until the blood flowed again and my pinky toes returned to their rightful place as the most useless of all the toes.

“Nice job,” Johnny said. “I’m not even going to try and break it. Until tomorrow.”

He gave me a high five, put on his shoes, and went over to the tire swing.

I walked over to the tree that wasn’t there and climbed up to the lowest branch. I didn’t like it as much in the winter because the trunk and the branches were slippery, and, because all the leaves had fallen except for a few that had separation anxiety, there wasn’t any shelter from the breeze.

The neighborhood was quiet mostly, except for the creak of the rope and the bend of the branch from Johnny’s swinging, and the occasional “wheee” as he closed his eyes and waved back and forth. There was a squirrel climbing the tree across the way with
wide black eyes and his left cheeks puffed up with acorns or some sort of winter provision, and he moved up the trunk of the tree and into the branches like one of those stop motion cartoons, smooth at first, then some quick jab like twists of the head, then a scamper and a jump. It was Saturday morning so most of the people on our street were inside watching their Saturday morning shows. I could see the blue glow reflecting off most of the windows, and of the three houses across the street two of them had a couch full of family members sitting with plates and bowls in their laps, leaning on each other and blinking in unison. There was no glow coming from Mary’s house. A couple of lights were on and coming from the small bathroom window on the side, but other than that it looked like everyone was still asleep.

Mary’s dad either died or left the family when she was still a baby. I don’t remember which. My Mom told me about it when I was younger, and you know how when you’re younger and every time someone dies in the news, and you ask them what dies means, they tell you some nonsense about going away on a long trip that you never come back from and you don’t need a passport or to forward the mail. So I never can be sure about the things I heard when I was younger. This world is full of varying degrees of fictions.

At any rate, Mary’s dad isn’t around anymore and Mary’s mom works three jobs so that she can pay the rent. She and Blueberry Joe’s mom are the only ones in town who have to work more than one job, but Mary’s family doesn’t have cable. They don’t even have a TV if what Jim tells me is right. I can hardly believe there’s a family anyway in the world today that doesn’t have a TV. I asked Jim what she did when her show was on, and Jim said she didn’t have a show, and I figured he just thought I was too young to tell
me the truth about it. It probably gets kind of embarrassing for her to always be going over to someone’s house and have to put up with all of that friendly chatter and finding out what’s new in other people’s lives when all you want to do is watch your show. I figured she probably had to go over about forty-five minutes early for the sake of appearance, and probably had to bring a bag of chips or cookies or something so she didn’t feel guilty about bothering them when their show is on.

Mary’s mom doesn’t have a show either because she works all the time. She works as a waitress at the coffee shop in the morning. Not many people go to the coffee shop, except the old men whose wives went on a long trip that they are never coming back from; because anyone knows it doesn’t take much to make coffee at home. They always overcook the eggs there, but the waitresses, Mary’s mom and Blueberry Joe’s mom are pleasant and the food is hot. They have free refills on coffee and hot chocolate if you pay for a meal. Otherwise the old men would just come in with the paper, sit in a booth, and drink coffee all day. In the afternoon she works at the Laundromat. In the evening she drives fifty miles to organize meat shipments at the packing plant. Every morning she leaves at five. Every night she gets home at eleven. Seven days a week. I don’t even know what she looks like, and I’m guessing Mary doesn’t know either.

Jim came out of the house and stood on the front porch. His shoulders were getting too broad for the jacket he’d gotten two Christmases ago. It was a brown down jacket with poofy cotton lining and twelve pockets. He couldn’t button but the bottom two buttons, and the sleeves only went halfway down his arms now, almost to the cracked canvas gloves that used to be Dad’s. His head was covered with a dark beanie, and he had about a day’s worth of stubble on his square chin.
“Be careful up in that tree,” he called, “I don’t want to be scooping your brains out of Johnny’s hair. Might get the shovel dirty.”

“Say, Jim, why is it that Mary’s mom works three jobs if they don’t even have a TV.”

“Maybe it’s because they don’t have a TV and she doesn’t just want to sit around bored all day staring at the wall or playing puppets,” Johnny said. “Or maybe she doesn’t have any friends she can play with or talk to.”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “Maybe you can ask Mary.”

“What are you up to today?” I asked. “It’s too cold to be working out here. Must be about twenty-five degrees.”

Jim walked down the steps and over to the corner of the house where Dad kept all the gardening supplies in a white wooden bin with fold up hinges and a twist tie lock. I used to pretend that bin was a treasure box until I got bit by a spider hiding in the pirate hat I made out of newspaper. I had a huge lump on the back of my head that Henry tried to hang hats on.

Jim pulled on the big rubber boots that went up to his knees, then he grabbed a shovel, a sack of fertilizer, and some seed packets.

“You’re not planting again are you?”

“Yep.”

“More flowers? Those’ll never grow in the winter. It’s too cold for them.”

“They’ll grow. Anything is possible.”

“You can’t touch your right hand to your right elbow,” Johnny said. “Unless you break your arm in a door.”
Jim stared at Johnny for a couple of seconds, like he was trying to think of something to say, but then realized that sometimes you can’t say anything. That sometimes it’s just better to keep your mouth shut and maybe your brain will work a little better. Johnny didn’t notice.

“I’ll see you guys later.”

Jim turned and headed back towards the garden.

“You need any help?” I said.

“You know what would really help?”

“What?”

“You staying in that tree.”

“I was gonna anyway,” I called, but Jim was already behind the house, and if he heard me he didn’t answer.

“There’s more breeze when you swing,” Johnny called up to me. “I wonder if you put a rope around one piece of breeze and followed it, where would it go. Do you think breeze just keeps going around the world looking for fun, and that tornados are breeze parties because there’s nothing else for breeze to do in the mid-west?”

“Maybe,” I said. But I was looking around the neighborhood again and didn’t want to think about Johnny’s question, because a lot of times he didn’t ask questions for answers, he asked them for the sake of the questions themselves. I think if we went down to the school and got one of the high school science teachers to give us a real answer about breeze and where it goes, we wouldn’t have liked the answer anyway. Dad says science takes all the fun out of imagination.
Not much had changed in the neighborhood. There were still blue reflections on most of the front windows. Down the street, a couple of kids were running and sliding across the grass on pieces of cardboard. I hoped they cleared all the rocks off first. The light was off in Mary’s house, and now I could see her coming into the living room from the kitchen where she must have been eating breakfast. She was wearing a white sweatshirt and a purple dress that went all the way down to the floor so you couldn’t see her feet, and her hair was still frazzled and sticking out all over the place from sleep, but I thought it looked prettier than those ladies who did their hair in the magazine styles and looked like the moms from the macaroni ads.

She walked over to the stereo and turned it on. I couldn’t hear what sort of music she played, on account of the wind coming through the trees, and Johnny’s oohing down in the swing, and the squeak of the rope, and the groan of the tree, and the crying of the kid down the street who forgot to remove all the rocks, but it must have been something slow and mournful, because that’s how she was dancing. She grabbed her broom and bowed to it once. A serious head and shoulder bow with no smile. Then she gathered the broom and began to float around in circles, the hem of her dress hovering a few inches above the ground. Her elbows were jagged smooth edges of broken glass, rolling round one two round one two.

“Johnny,” I said, “get up here quick, Mary is floating.”

And I didn’t have to tell Johnny twice. He scooted up the trunk and slipped to the bottom twice before I grabbed his hand and pulled him up next to me in the branches. I wished I could’ve heard the music, because the breeze all of a sudden disappeared, got sucked right in by the music, I could tell because the door and the windows of Mary’s
house were shaking as it snuck in through the cracks and chimney. She shivered a little at first, as people do when the wind strikes them, but then she steadied and went back to her dance.

“She must be powerful sad about something,” Johnny said. “To take in all the breeze upon herself like that.”

“I bet she gets lonely because she never sees her mom, not even on holidays because she works a full 24 hours for holiday pay.”

“I get lonely sometimes,” Johnny said. “But I can’t float.”

Mary floated around for a while, and the wind swept her back and forth across the house, never too high so that she’d hit her head, and never too fast, and after a while Mary floated back down to the ground and leaned the broom against the wall and turned off the stereo. The windows shook and the doors heaved, and soon the tree branches swayed again, and Johnny blew on his bare fists. Two of the leaves that had been hanging on couldn’t bear it anymore and fluttered down to the yard.

Mary looked out the window and saw Johnny and me up in the tree. I was a little embarrassed at first, and I didn’t want her to think that I had been watching her, so I looked up and down the street, and yelled to the kids with the cardboard to pile all the rocks in the yard up by the curb so that the neighborhood could get some sleep. When I looked back Mary was standing and the front porch. She waved.

“Hey, Paul. Hi, Johnny. What are you guys doing up there without any jackets?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Watching you dance.”

I socked Johnny in the arm.
“That’s okay,” she said. “I only danced so that I could see what was going on in that tree of yours.”

“Two leaves fell,” I said.

“I saw.”

“Well, it’s too cold out here for me,” said Mary. “Maybe you guys should go inside and warm up by the fire.”

“We’re not allowed to use the fire,” I said. “The flue is all clogged with bird’s nests and twigs. Every time we start a fire the whole house fills with smoke and we die of carbon monoxide poisoning. Then the birds fly down into the living room and peck our eyes out and steal our souls away.”

“That sounds dangerous. Say hello to Jim and Henry for me,” she said. “And your mom and dad too.”

“We will.”

Mary turned around to go into the house.

“Hey, Mary,” I called.

“Yeah.”

“Why does your mom work three jobs when you don’t have a TV?”

Mary paused in the door, with her jagged smooth glass elbow propped against the frame.

“So that I won’t have to.”
Grandma’s New Boyfriend

The mid-winter rainstorm had frozen the glass fuzzy, and all I could see out of the window was the twisted pinks and grays of sunrise locked in the frozen swirl of the morning. I looked over at Johnny. He slept with his mouth slightly open, which I thought was dangerous in the summer time, but in the winter it wasn’t too bad. In the summer the cockroaches and spiders crawled around everywhere and you were likely to wake up with something crawling around your mouth and snacking on cookie residue because you forgot to brush your teeth, but in the winter nothing crawled around because it was too cold. About the worst that happened in the winter was waking up with a frozen tongue, which is only scary the first time, then after that you look forward to the hot chocolate and the crackling of your tongue.

Downstairs the phone rang. Mom picked it up on the first ring, and I could hear the muffled sound of her soft voice coming up the stairs. Smoochie whined outside in the hall and pawed at my door, but I didn’t let him in because you give an inch and the dog will take a mile. That’s what Mom says, and sometimes I wonder if she has the same philosophy with her kids as she does with the dog, and what exactly that means about her, and what that means about us. I don’t wonder too much about what it means for Smoochie, because I heard in school that dogs don’t have the higher thinking capacities that us humans do.

We didn’t used to let dogs sleep in the house because of the whining and scratching and paw marks on the doors, but one of our dogs froze to death when Jim was a baby and I wasn’t born yet, and Mom felt guilty. Dad told me about it once, not too
graphically of course because I was younger and woulda gone crazy or shot butterflies or
something if I knew the true horror of the details (Henry told me later that the dog’s nose
was blue and that his tongue was frozen to the porch and they had to scrape little bits of it
off with a pocket knife because they stuck there when they pulled him away and buried
him in the woods).

“Sometimes,” Dad told me, “giving an inch ain’t such a bad thing to do.”

There was a sharp knock on the door. Mom poked her head in.

“Boys, we’re going to meet your grandmother’s new boyfriend today. She’s
putting together a brunch.”

“Grandma’s got a boyfriend?”

“Make sure you wear something that grandma made or bought for you. You know
it makes her smile.”

Mom closed the door and walked down the hall to wake up Henry and Jim.

“It makes everyone else smile too, because I look like a sausage,” I whispered
under my breath.

“What’s that?” she called.

“I think I’ll wear the sweater. It’s cold out.”

“Who’s got a boyfriend?” Johnny said. His eyes were still closed, but he rolled
around and pulled the blanket over his head and groaned. Johnny was not a cold morning
person.

“Grandma McGrew.”

“I didn’t know grandmas could have boyfriends.”

“Me either.”
“That’s like a horse having a car.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Boys,” Mom called from the kitchen. “Get a move on.”

As I got dressed in my bright pink sweater with the three eared teddy bears, I ruminated on the implications of Grandma having a boyfriend. Did that mean the two of them were going to sneak off into the woods and smooch and carve their initials into trees? Did that mean Grandma was going to go around pulling the petals off of flowers and dropping them into the lake, and hole herself up in the water tower and let her hair down only when she heard the magical password? What was I supposed to call my Grandma’s boyfriend? Grampfriend? Was I going to call him by his first name like we were buddies? Were Jim and Henry and Dad and I supposed to defend Grandma’s honor if her new boyfriend took liberties or abused her or caroused about the town? Would we have to challenge him to a duel if he broke her heart? I didn’t know. The whole prospect of Grandma having a boyfriend shook me up something considerable, and I wished they taught you this sort of thing in school. They say knowing your history is supposed to help you deal with situations in your own life, but Thomas Jefferson didn’t write anything about how to handle Grandma’s new boyfriend.

Johnny didn’t have anything made by Grandma, so I thought I’d offer to let him wear my purple shorts. They were a little big around the waist for Johnny, but just as short, and they looked a little strange with his long winter coat. You could only see the bottom inch of the shorts, and it looked like he was a pervert.
“Well, it’s not the sort of outfit that I’d wear to school,” Johnny said, “But if it will make your grandma happy, then I’ll wear it.”

When we got downstairs Mom had three bowls piled up on the counter next to two boxes of Grainberry Bran and a jug of milk. Dad sat at the table, reading the business section of the newspaper, which didn’t even have the funnies, with his bow tie hanging untied down his chest.

“How some cereal, boys” Mom said. She peered into the oven and I could tell her apple pie was almost done because the oven door was smiling and the cinnamon sticks were cuddling in the spice basket. “Eat quickly. Henry’s not coming. Mr. Hopperton isn’t going to be in today, and Henry is running the store all by himself. He says it might be the first step towards his becoming a…”

Mom turned around and caught a glimpse of Johnny helping himself to a bowl of cereal.

“My God, boy, you look like a pervert. Get upstairs this minute and put some pants on.”

“But Paul said I should wear some shorts that Grandma McGrew made, so that she wouldn’t feel awkward.”

“She’d probably feel a little awkward trying to explain your snow white chicken knees to her boyfriend. My Lord, you’re going to scare him away with those things. Put some pants on, and then I want you to have two bowls of cereal. And I’m making you some bacon. Going to get some meat on those bones.”
Johnny put his bowl down with a clank on the counter and scooted up the stairs. He was moving pretty fast, and I guessed he wasn’t disappointed at all to put on some pants.

“Can I have some bacon too?” I asked.

“You’ve already got meat on your bones.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s not fair that two plus two is the same as two times two, when five and five is completely different than five times five,” Dad said, not even looking up from his paper.

“Eat your cereal.”

By the time Johnny got back downstairs Jim was done with his shower and halfway through a bowl of Grainberry Bran. Jim was lucky. Grandma made him a pair of socks last Christmas, black ones with his initials monogrammed on the side. They didn’t look too strange except that each toe had its own hole, he looked like he had frost bite because they were so tight, but in a pair of shoes you couldn’t even see the toes and they looked like a normal pair of socks. Other than the socks, Jim was wearing his Sunday best. A white collared shirt and a black pair of dress slacks with his shoes shined so bright you could almost see yourself in their reflection. I didn’t look too much at my reflection in a pair of black shoes because Mom always said it was bad luck to see yourself shining in a dark light. That it meant the devil or some other dark force had designs for you. Dad said for some people it was bad luck to see yourself at all.

Jim had borrowed one of Dad’s work ties and, from the smell of it, had sprayed himself with sixty-three sprays of ninety-nine cent Breeze of the Ocean Mist cologne. It
had been a gift from Henry at Christmas. The card had read, “Because you smell like a


goat.” I guessed meeting Grandma’s new boyfriend was a big deal because usually Jim

just put on an old polo shirt and his nicest pair of jeans and boots for grandma’s house,

and I’d never smelled him wear cologne before.

“Can I borrow some of your cologne?” I asked Jim.

“It’s all gone,” he said, kind of half heartedly. His cheeks were all red except for

the splotches of white and a streak of purple hair gel that had dripped down from his

sideburns. I didn’t understand how somebody could sweat on a day like this, because

even inside by the oven half of my chews were chatters, and I was going through my

cereal twice as fast as usual. Johnny sat down at the table and crumbled his bacon into

little bits and sprinkled it over his cereal.

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

“It all goes to the same place.” Johnny dumped some milk over the bacon and

Grainberry Bran and dug in with gusto.

“Since Henry isn’t coming, can I bring a guest to Grandma’s?” Jim asked.

Dad looked up from his paper, but only for a second, before turning back to the

 corporate acquisitions section. He smiled a bit and winked at Jim, and this caused Jim to

blush even more and run his hands through his hair and dap at his cheeks with his napkin.

“Which one of your friends,” Mom said, “would want to go to Grandma’s house

for brunch? A bunch of 18 year old boys walking around your Grandmother’s house,

knocking things over because they haven’t grown into their bodies yet and they think

everything’s funny. Don’t think so. We need to be at our best. Most of your friends don’t

even own a pair of pants without three holes or grease stains on them.”
“It’s not one of them,” Jim said, and he turned even redder and started fidgeting with his arms and adjusting his watch. I wondered who Jim wanted to bring that made him turn all aw shucks and feel so uncomfortable in his skin. Jim didn’t have a whole lot of friends in Lake Fancy. Some guys he played football with back in junior high, and some guys from the traveling basketball team that lived in the outer parts of the county, but no one that ever came around the house. Mostly Jim kept to himself and worked in the garden. Mom said if he was a type he’d be the strong, silent, rugged individual type, but that types don’t apply to the McGrews.

“Who is it?” Mom asked.

“Mary,” Jim said.

“Whoa!” Johnny said, and I smacked him in the knee with my spoon and splashed some milk on the floor. Smoochie ran over and started licking it up, and for a minute there wasn’t any sound in the house except for the slapping of the dog’s tongue against the kitchen linoleum.

“It’s just that I feel bad for her. She’s always closed up in that house by herself, with no other brothers or sisters, and her mom is always working. I think she gets pretty lonesome.”

“I don’t think he’s asking her because she’s lonesome,” Johnny said, and I slapped him with my spoon again, but this time he tried to block it and the spoon clattered on the floor. Smoochie picked it up and ran off to bury it under the couch along with the rest of his treasures.

“I don’t see that it could hurt anything,” Mom said, “to have one more guest along. Make sure she wears something nice though.”
“Mom, you know she always dresses nice.”

“Just make sure. This is a big day for your grandmother. Paul, you better catch Smoochie before he buries that spoon under the couch, otherwise you’ll be eating with your hand until you get a replacement. That goes for soup too.”

There was one piece of bacon left on the plate. Jim, Dad, and Johnny had already had three pieces each.

“Can I have a piece of bacon if I get the spoon back?”

“You can have something else if you don’t,” Mom replied. She smacked the wooden spoon a couple of times against her hand and I jumped up and headed for the living room.
A Sea of Leaves

It didn’t take me long to find the spoon, but by the time I got back to the kitchen Jim had gone to Mary’s house, and judging by the smile on his face when he got back she said yes. Mom put Johnny and me in charge of loading up the car, which didn’t take too long because all we had to do was put a bag with two bottles of wine and two bottles of sparkling cider in the trunk. We weren’t allowed to put the pie in the trunk. Mom held the pie on her lap so that it wouldn’t be smooshed when Dad took a corner too fast.

Mary came over a few minutes later. She wore a knee length cream colored skirt, a black sweater, and a pair of pink mittens. Her hair was in a pony tail, which I never understood because a tail is right above the butt and most girls don’t look anything like a pony, and her smile made it seem like spring again.

“I don’t understand how your front lawn never frosts over,” Dad said. And the rest of us looked over and saw that her lawn was green as paint.

“We cross breed it with chili peppers,” she said. “So that it stays warm all year long.”

Jim took a minute to introduce Mary all around and said hello, and when I tried to shake Mary’s hand she gave me and Johnny a hug, and said she didn’t need to be introduced to anyone because she’d lived across the street from us her whole life.

“I really appreciate you letting me come along Mrs. McGrew. I’ve heard rumors about your apple pie, and if it’s half as good as Jim says it is, I won’t need a ride back. I’ll just fly home.”
Then Mom got all red and said it wasn’t anything all that special, and Smoochie ran up and started licking Mary’s knees. Everyone was so darned in love with each other I could hardly stand it anymore, with all of us standing around smiling we’d be there till summer.

Like a bucket full of babies with gas.

I sat in the middle of the backseat as usual, but the ride over to Grandma’s was a lot more pleasant because Jim wasn’t pinching my legs or giving me turtle bites, and Johnny just stared out the window and watched winter taking hold of the town. Most of the leaves were in the streets now because we don’t have a street sweeper like the big towns do, and no one has a leaf blower because they make so much noise and the residents of Lake Fancy are liable to fill anyone who makes too much Sunday morning noise’s guts with acorns and walnuts and set the squirrels loose. I liked looking out the back window at the way the leaves swirled up into the air after Dad drove by them. The leaves either fluttered about in the air for a while, running into each other and landing along the curbs and dirt roadsides, or got stuck in the leaves of the hedges. The wet ones, the ones damp with the melting frost, stuck to the ground and just got blacker and blacker as cars rode over them. Gradually they lost their sharp edges and cracked and faded into a pile of leaf mush. Once they got into a situation like that, they almost never got out.

In front of some of the houses the leaves were raked into piles or white garbage bags and they didn’t spatter as much. In front of other houses the leaves were scattered evenly more or less, across the lawn and the bushes and the rock beds and even in the fountains that people who lived at the edge of the town in Lakeside Estates had. Lakeside
Estates wasn’t the official name, and they didn’t have a fence or anything to keep people out or cars in or to block off the special oxygen they breathe the way folks on TV do. Mr. Hopperton lived in one of the houses, and there were a few seasonal people who came during the summer and owned fancy canoes and bright orange life vests, but I liked them alright. Mom’s the one who called them Lakeside Estates, and she always called them that with a sneer because they were the newest houses in town and had pools in the backyard. Most of these houses had leaves sprawled all over the yard, clogging up the sewers and lying in a thick blanket by the side of the road.

“Who needs a pool and a fountain when you’ve got a perfectly good lake half a mile away? And you’d think they could afford to hire one of the neighborhood boys to take a rake to the lawn and in the street for an afternoon.” Mom said as we drove by.

“I think those houses are lovely,” Mary said. “I like the leaves. It gives it the look of the forest.”

“A pool’s not so bad, Mom,” Jim said. But Mom shot him a look and Jim pretended like he dropped something on the floor and put his head down and rustled around and kept looking up at me to see if Mom was still looking. When she turned back around, I poked Jim in the shoulder and he came back up.

“A forest and a home are two very different things,” Mom said.

Grandma was waiting outside for us with a plate full of cookies in one hand, and her red and white checkered towel in the other. Grandma’s driveway was about four inches deep with leaves, what with all the trees she had around the house, and I always loved to be at Grandma’s house in late fall and early winter because Dad took the car real
slow and it felt like we were floating through a sea of orange and brown. Jim let me lean over him as we pulled into the broad half circle driveway, and Johnny and I both dragged our fingers in the golden softness of the leaves. I hoped Mom would let Johnny and I play outside later. I loved to grab Grandpa’s old fishing poles, climb up to the tree house, and cast from the window down into the leaves and see how many I could pull up. The most I’d ever gotten was three.

We crackled to a stop in front of the porch and Grandma waved her towel up and down like we had just finished a race, and then slapped her hand a couple of times against her thigh.

“Bravo,” she said. “A car full of people. You’re the first ones here.”

“What do I win?” Dad asked. It was tough to open the door with all the leaves... in some spots they came nearly up to the windows, but Dad propped his open and winked at Grandma.

“Everyone gets a cookie.”

After Dad got out, Jim ran around the car (when I say ran, I mean he waded fast as he could through the knee deep leaves) to get the door for Mom and Mary, both of whom were sitting in the front seat.

“Ladies,” Jim said, “Your carriage has arrived.”

Jim leaned his elbow on the ridge of the door and extended his hand towards the house, like they didn’t know where it was and wouldn’t be able to find the giant two story house unless he pointed it out to them.

“Does Jim do this all the time?” Mary asked.
“Only on special occasions,” Mom said. Which was a lie. Jim had never opened the door for anyone before, except for Grandma when we took her to the county fair to see the two pouch kangaroo, or for Mom on Mother’s Day picnics, but other than that he never opened the door. Jim kicked through the leaves to carve a path for Mary and Mom.

“I feel like Moses,” Jim said.

“Well, Moses,” said Dad, “let’s see if you can’t part the trunk and carry in that bag of goodies back there.”

Johnny waited until Mom’s back was turned and he jumped straight out the window and dove into the leaves. There was a clunking sound as his boots hit the roof of the car, but he disappeared into the leaves, and the only way you even knew that he was there was the brown and orange shower he was kicking up. He cawed a few times and flopped around and jumped from one spot in the leaves to another like a whale breaching the ocean surface and making a splash on its way down. He did this for about a minute and I wished I could join him, but Mom shot me a look that said “Don’t you dare,” and I figured I could wait until later.

“And who is this fine young man,” Grandma asked when Johnny finished and came up on the porch.

“I’m Johnny,” he said, and he reached for a cookie.

“I’ve heard a lot about you. I hope you don’t go into the back yard and try to eat any worms. And you’ll want to steer clear of my cats. They don’t take too kindly to birds. Or fish.”

“And this, Grandma, is Mary,” Jim said, “She’s a friend of mine from across the street.”
"I know who it is," Grandma said. "There isn't a young man or woman in this town who hasn't been through on the tour. I remember you, Mary. You like the dancing figurines. The little French ballerinas and the Turkish mazurka dancers. You, my dear, are stunning," Grandma said. "Have a cookie."

After that we all went inside and Grandma slipped me an extra cookie.

"That sweater of yours looks ridiculous," she whispered.

"You made it for me," I said.

"I didn't mean for you to wear it."

We all sat down in the parlor to wait for Grandma's new boyfriend. The parlor was my favorite room at Grandma's place. The walls were painted bright red with random spatters of orange and yellow going up and down the walls and along the vaulted ceiling, and in a couple of spots the paint had been too much and hung down in frozen stalactites of goo. Portraits hung from the wall at odd angles and they were all lavishly framed with carved wood or wrought iron or even copper plated banana peels. Most of the portraits on the wall were family members. On the far wall, the one you see when you enter the room, Grandma had all of the McGrew family pictures, starting with her grandparents (these ones were painted in dark, somber looking colors because they were alive before jokes were invented), and spreading out across the wall like ivy all the way down to Jim, Henry and me in the bottom right corner just above her bright purple sofa. The other walls were covered with portraits of animals (every one of Grandma's twenty-three cats, two elephants from the Washington Zoo, a rhinoceros, Smoochie Poochie, and one picture of a frozen dog half buried in a garden), minor celebrities, and gameboards.
According to family tradition, each and every picture had a moustache painted onto the portrait. Even the cats. These were all done by grandma, who claimed her biggest regret as a person was that she would never artistically master the nuances and subtle beauties of the moustache. The moustaches ranged from the traditional big white bushy moustache (on Great-Great Grandpa McGrew), to the abstract pickle moustache painted on Mom. The parlor was Mom’s least favorite room.

My portrait was framed with a bunch of Hot Wheel racing cars glued to some PVC piping, with the cars all pointing outward like a lion’s mane. Grandma let me choose what sort of moustache I wanted to have when I was a kid, so my moustache was an unwrapped Snickers bar that Henry always called the poopstache.

“When’s Henry coming over?” Grandma asked. “I want him to be here too.”

“He’s working right now, but he said he’d try to make it over later.”

We talked for a while in the parlor, and I never did like times like this where everyone had to sit around and be pleasant and ask questions and say how interesting everything that everyone says sounds. Johnny, Mary, Jim and I sat on what Grandma called her Cleopatra couch because one of the ends sloped down and didn’t have an armrest. I wondered if Grandma ever dressed up in Egyptian clothes and sat around in the parlor, having her cats serve her grapes and wave at her with either palm fronds or, because there weren’t any palm trees in Lake Fancy, an old broom with oak leaves and cottonwood bark tied to the end. I heard once that Cleopatra used to shove pins into her slave women’s chests, just for the fun of it, and I reckoned if Grandma knew that she’d probably call the couch something else.

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Jim was on the very end of the couch, trying to give Mary enough room, but he gave her so much room that he kept slipping. There was a good eight inches of empty couch in between Mary and Jim, and I figured he could have moved over because Johnny and Mary’s knees were touching, and neither of them seemed too bothered about it. Jim held himself up with only a tenth of his backside and his right leg wedged against the brick fireplace and shaking with the strain. His cheeks were tight with concentration, his eyebrows sweated something fierce, and all of his conversation was curt.

“You okay, Jim,” Dad asked.

“Fine,” he said. And that’s about all we heard from Jim until later.

Grandma, Dad, and Mom sat on the big purple couch. It was oversized and Grandma always told us that the couch used to belong to a giant.

“The very same giant who lived at the top of the beanstalk,” she told us when we were younger. I didn’t know how the giant got the couch to the top of the beanstalk, because I’ve seen some of the beanstalks growing in the backyard gardens, and even the big one at the county fair, and I don’t see how a delivery van, no matter how big the stalk is, could ever get up one of those things. And the giant couldn’t have been all that big anyway, because the back of the couch only went a couple of inches over Dad’s head, though it did look funny to see him dangling his feet over the edge.

And I guess Grandma’s cats must have caught a whiff of Johnny’s wings or known that he wanted a salmon, because twenty of the twenty-three were piled up on top on each other on the back of the couch and along the armrest, all of them trying to lick Johnny’s arms and ears and neck. I never did like Grandma’s cats all that much. They have rough tongues and I had some bad experiences with Jim and Henry putting cat food
in my socks while I was taking a nap, and then locking me in the room with all the cats. The other three were out in the leaves and the cornfields chasing rats and birds.

Grandma talked mostly to Johnny and Mary, asking them what they wanted to do with their lives, besides living.

"I want to be a thief," Johnny said, and I didn’t think he was telling the truth, but he might have been because I noticed that every once in a while one of my socks went missing, though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what he’d want with a single sock unless he was pretending to be an elephant or a goat.

"Not a bad profession," Grandma said. "If you are going to steal from people, you might as well be honest about it." Grandma pulled a broomstick out from behind the couch and batted at the cats.

"Leave that boy alone," she said. The cats scattered, but only far enough to be out of broom’s reach. The started creeping back again when she turned her attention to Mary.

Mary was talking about how she wanted to be either a dancer or a teacher when there was a rumble outside, and some leaves came flying in through the windows and down through the chimney. The cats leaped about and pawed at the leaves, and Johnny jumped up from the couch.

"I wonder what that is," he said, and bolted out to the porch.

"Sounds like a V-8," Dad said. "And probably at lease a few hundred horses."

I figured Johnny wanted to get another leap into the leaves, maybe diving from the railing this time, in order to get away from the cats and cover himself in dust, frost, and leaf smell so that the cats wouldn’t find him so tasty, and I jumped up and bolted too.

"Paul McGrew, don’t go jumping in those leaves," Mom said.
Everyone got up, and Dad grabbed Grandma’s arm, they joined Johnny and me out on the porch. Jim limped a little, and Mary reached over and grabbed his hand and asked him if he was okay.

“Fine,” he said, though this time he was a little more believable.

“What’s Mr. Hopperton doing here?” Johnny asked. “I thought Henry said he was taking the day off.”

“He is taking the day off,” Grandma said.

I’d never seen Mr. Hopperton outside his store, except when he sold Johnny and me the bus tickets and every once in a while when we drove out to Grandma’s I saw his truck parked in the driveway and his shadow moving around the upstairs part of his house behind the curtains. I’d also never seen him dressed in something other than his storekeeper apron and a pair of black slacks, but there he was dressed in a full white suit (and I guess any suit is full once Mr. Hopperton squeezes his way into it) and bow tie. He was freshly shaven and cleaned, and there were a few razor nicks along his jaw line and under his nose that hadn’t quite stopped bleeding.

The bow tie was yellow, and Mr. Hopperton’s cheeks were bright red, even in the spots that weren’t bleeding, like he’d been scrubbing them with sandpaper, and his gray hair was slicked back and pulled away from his ears, and with his big round face atop his big round body, and standing in the middle of the leaves so you couldn’t see his legs, he looked like the smilingest snow man I ever did see. In one hand he was holding a bouquet of pink and red daisies, and in the other he had a brown paper bag.

“Hello McGrews,” he said, “And Johnny and Mary. I hope you all like taffy.”
He held up the brown paper bag and shook it.

"I brought this from my personal reserve. Straight from Catalina Island. Only share it with *the* most special of people."
We didn’t end up starting the brunch until nearly two o’clock. Grandma kicked us all out of the kitchen and told us not to come back until she’d rung the bell and that we should take the time to get to know Mr. Hopperton a little because he was a heck of a lot more than just a grocery store owner.

“He’s a heck of a lot more, that’s for sure,” Mom whispered to Dad as Mr. Hopperton gave Grandma a kiss on the hand.

Dad put his arm around Mr. Hopperton’s shoulders like they were old buddies and led him into the parlor. Well, not all the way around, only to the neck, and from behind it looked like he was holding Mr. Hopperton’s head up. We all went back into the parlor and Dad started pointing out all the pictures and explaining the significance of the room, and how everyone had their own special frame and moustache, but Mr. Hopperton interrupted him.

“Your mother already gave me the tour,” he said. “I know all about the moustaches. I don’t mean to be rude or cut you off, but I figure we can spend the time talking about more interesting things...”

Mr. Hopperton pulled the brown bag of taffy from under his coat.

“Like candy!”

He held out the bag to Johnny and me, even though we were sitting on the couch and trying to be still and polite and on our best manners. For Mom, being on your best
manners meant having your mouth and all your fidgety parts frozen solid, only speaking when spoken to, and then making sure to say please and thank you.

"Please, Mr. Hopperton, may I have a piece of candy," I said.

"Why, of course, Paul. Only one piece though, I don’t want to spoil your appetite for the delicious meal your grandmother is preparing."

"Please, Mr. Hopperton, I too would like to consume a piece of sugary deliciousness," Johnny said.

"You boys should go outside and play for a while. You’re so polite you’re going to hurt yourselves," Dad said. I imagined in my head how someone might hurt themselves being too polite, and how doctors might be trained to fix a ruptured please or a permanent smile. Mom said you could never be too polite, and I knew now that one of them was lying.

We thanked Mr. Hopperton and ran outside before Mom could tell us not to jump and roll around in the leaves.

"You know what this is," Johnny said when we got out to the porch. He held up his piece of taffy. I could see through the wrapper that it was a green piece with a brown center, and figured it was probably flavored like seaweed or algae or something like that. You never knew what you were getting with taffy, not with all the hippies in the candy business these days. I picked a red one because I figured it could be cherry, watermelon, raspberry, or strawberry. I hoped it wasn’t cinnamon because cinnamon always burns my mouth, and gives me sores along the insides of my lips, and I’ve often thought that if I ever have to go to hell, the devil is going to make me eat cinnamon candy all day.

"A piece of taffy," I said.
“No. It’s a power cube.” Johnny stuck the whole thing in his mouth, wrapper and all, and started chomping away.

“You’re not supposed to eat the wrapper. It’s coated with plastic and wax, and that will coat your esophagus with plastic, and pretty soon you’ll be crapping out sandwich bags. That’s what Dad told me.”

Johnny didn’t hear me or he didn’t pay attention or maybe the power cube was already taking effect, because his eyes got wider and wider, and his chest puffed out, and he raised his arms over his head and started hopping around on his toes and bouncing and taking some swings with his fists like he was boxing.

“Into the night!” he yelled, and sprinted off into the leaves.

“There’s rats out there,” I called. But he buried himself and threw leaves in the air and made cannonball noises. The leaves flew up about twice as high as his head, and I decided I needed to eat the power cube too, sandwich bags or not. It’s not like I had to use them for sandwiches at any rate, because we wrapped all our sandwiches in foil. So I chomped down the taffy and the wrapper, though the plastic wasn’t easy to swallow and the slick feeling of the wax paper against my teeth reminded me of the time Henry convinced me to eat a hot dog shaped candle. The taffy was cinnamon, but the wrapper covered most of the taste, and it wasn’t so bad.

Johnny told me later that his was mint chocolate.

Seven of Grandma’s cats crept out through the open windows and four crawled out of the chimney, and the eleven of them lined up in a row along the railing of the porch. All of them were back on their haunches with their noses twitching against the cool late afternoon breeze. They sat like an iron gate across the railing, and through them
I could see Jim, Mary, Mom, Dad, and Mr. Hopperton leaned back against the sofas and laughing. Jim had scooted a little closer to Mary on the Cleopatra couch, and in between their legs the two of them had locked pinky fingers.

“Rarrgh,” I yelled at the cats, but none of them jumped or even blinked, and I took a running dive into the leaves.

We spent the better part of an hour flopping around in the driveway, and I suppose the good side of having a pile of leaves that big, is that you don’t have to go and rake it up at the end into nice neat little piles again. It wouldn’t have mattered much anyway because even all of the trees around Grandma’s house were completely bare of leaves except the banyan tree, because the banyan tree is a tropical tree and doesn’t know quite how to handle our middle of nowhere climates. The banyan tree hadn’t lost a leaf in twenty years according to Grandma; they just kept growing on top of each other and looked as drippy as the branches and the trunk do. And there were some places where a single leaf was more than five feet long. This gave the tree house a thick and quiet layer of protection, like the fiberglass insulation you find in the attic of houses that you’re not supposed to eat or stuff down your pants unless you wanted a rash. Rain just dropped down the leaves and off into the soil without ever touching the tree house, and even on the coldest days the tree house was reasonably warm. It did a pretty good job of blocking out sound too, especially on the side closest to the house where the leaves were so thick that the tree house itself was soundproof. Despite the fact that all the trees were bare except for the banyan, and the banyan didn’t lose its leaves, there were still gusts and swirls of wind that brought all the leaves from the highway and the edges of the
cornfields and all over town into Grandma’s front yard in a soft steady rain of browns, oranges, and red.

You couldn’t even tell that Johnny and I had been playing in the leaves except in the bed of Mr. Hopperton’s truck. We’d filled the bed of the truck all the way to the top just to see how many armloads it would take. Johnny said it took sixty-five, but he dropped a lot of leaves on his way to the truck, and kept smashing the leaves down instead of letting them fluff up and fill out naturally, so I figured it only took about forty.

After that we tried to see how many leaves we could stuff down our shirts, and since I had a sweater, instead of a button down jacket like Johnny, we stuffed my shirt all the way down the sleeves and so full that the leaves were spilling out by my neck and getting in my mouth. The cats watched us the whole time with general disinterest- that is to say they stared at us with the intense nonchalance that cats have as a counterpart to the dog look of dopey fealty. Twenty-two yellow eyes monitored each handful.

“I look like Mr. Hopperton,” I said.

“You shouldn’t make fun. What if he becomes your new grandpa?”

“I’m not making fun.”

Wouldn’t you know it, as soon as my sweater was just as full as it could be, Grandma came out on the porch and started ringing the bell and looking out towards the gray cornfields like Johnny and I were a couple of cows who’d wandered away from the stead.

“Boys,” she screamed out towards the fields, “Dunch is ready.”
And I knew she could see us because we were only a few feet from the bottom of the porch and facing her, and the leaves were only a little above our knees so it wasn’t that we were hiding. Mr. Hopperton came out and put his arm around Grandma.

“Will you look at that?” he said. “They filled up the back of my truck. I bet that took about fifty armloads of leaves.”

Johnny bounded up the stairs his thick boots echoing off the wooden steps and I shook as many leaves as I could from my sweater before I headed up too, even though I’d sweated through my shirt and the armpits of my sweater turned from pink to red with dampness and now my arms itched all over.

There were seven places set at Grandma’s dining room table, and Johnny and I got to eat at the kid’s table. This wasn’t so bad because the kid’s table was two gray toboggans glued together on top of four of those old garbage cans that look like elephant legs, but really are just plastic. Grandpa McGrew made the table for Dad when he was a kid, and glued two huge googly eyes near one end and a gray rubber hose on the other two ends for a tail and a trunk. It was almost like eating off of an elephant except we didn’t have to worry about the fleas.

The dunch was mostly good because Grandma made pancakes and pastrami sandwich casserole and abelskivers with raspberry jam and powdered sugar that made me cough when I inhaled. Other than Johnny making elephant noises and knocking me in the leg with the tail, Jim coming over every five minutes to muss up my hair and ask me, “Hey big fella, how’s it going?”, and the fact that leaves kept falling into the raspberry jam from my sweater, everything was good. Especially the abelskivers. Mom said
abelskivers were good, but that they went straight to your thighs. After each of the eight abelskivers I ate, I poked my thighs with my thumb to feel for the crispy dough, but it didn’t feel like anything but skin and muscle and pants.

All eleven cats had followed me and Johnny in from outside, and had joined the others sitting around the kid’s table in a circle and licking themselves with their hind legs sticking out and up at everywhich angle like a furry barbed wire fence. Every once in a while one of them would get up and go over to the table and lick Mary’s fingers, because she dipped them in jam and let them dangle at the fold of the tablecloth so no one else could see. I figured that by the end of the night her fingers would be bleeding because the cat’s tongues were so rough, but I guess she didn’t mind.

Mr. Hopperton and Dad were swapping stories and talking about cars and all the fish they’d caught in Lake Fancy, and kept slapping each other on the shoulder and laughing at each other’s jokes. Mr. Hopperton said he once caught a fish nearly as big as a log with teeth a long and sharp as knives, but that he couldn’t reel it in because his boat wasn’t big enough.

“I can’t imagine that anything you own, Mr. Hopperton, isn’t big enough,” Dad said, and he reached across the table and patted Mr. Hopperton on the belly. Mom reached over and grabbed Dad’s wine glass and moved it away from him, and everyone got real quiet for a minute, waiting to see how Mr. Hopperton would react.

“Well, Mr. McGrew, it was one hell of a fish!” And then Mr. Hopperton leaned back in his chair and looked up toward the ceiling and slapped himself on the thigh a few times and let out a big laugh that sounded like a bear getting bit by a talkative and jovial
horse (and I don’t even know what that means but I couldn’t think of nothing else to compare his laugh with). Mr. Hopperton grabbed Dad’s wine glass from Mom, refilled it, and clinked their glasses together.

“To stretchers.”

Then they laughed some more, and everyone else laughed too because Mr. Hopperton had the sort of happiness that rubbed off on you.

I think Dad was glad to have a new audience for his jokes because Mom and Jim and Henry and I had heard them all and didn’t laugh anymore unless it was the one about the preacher and the dune buggy, and he just kept rolling them out one right after another, and clinking his wine glass with Mr. Hopperton’s. Other than his jokes Dad said: “I’ll drink to that!” at least seventeen times. Even Grandma, who I’d never seen clink glasses on account of her bladder, had half a glass of wine and two full glasses of sparkling cider. At one point during the dinner Mr. Hopperton, who’d been drinking the wine and whose cheeks had reached the brightest shade of red I’d ever seen, exclaimed:

“Never again will the McGrew family pay full price at Hopperton’s General Store. I’ll let Henry and the other clerks know. The ten percent discount,” he said, “does not apply, however, to candy.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Mom, who up until then had been pretty quiet and kept pinching Dad’s leg every time he made a joke. And the cats poked their heads up to see what all the clinking was about, but went back to licking themselves because they didn’t get the discount.
Johnny, Jim, and I did most of the clearing, and Mary scrubbed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, and every time there was some jam left on the plate she held it out to Johnny and me so we could dip our fingers in it, and when we didn’t want anymore she put the last two plates on the ground so that the cats could lick ‘em clean.

“It’s no good wasting food,” she said. “Might as well give it to someone who wants it.”

With all four of us helping, it only took a few minutes to get the kitchen clean, even though we kept having to pull leaves out of the dishwasher on account of my sweater and my shirt drying up.

When the cats saw there was no more jam, a few of them came up and sniffed at Johnny’s legs, and then sauntered off into the parlor to line the backs of the couches.

“I was thinking you and I could take a walk, Mary,” Jim said. “It’s nice in the cornfields, especially when the sun is going down because you feel solitary out there. Kind of like the sun is setting just for you.”

“And the rats,” Johnny said. “They’re thick in the cornfields.”

“A few rats don’t scare me much, not after some of the men I’ve met,” Mary said. “At least you can grab a rat by its tail and fling it. A walk sounds good.” She grabbed Jim by the elbow like they was getting an award, and Jim turned red again.

I thought about asking the two of them if Johnny and I could go along. Maybe try and convince them that Johnny and I could fling any rats that come along so they wouldn’t be bothered. That way Mary, who was wearing open toed shoes, wouldn’t have to worry about getting rabies or the plague or having the rats lay eggs in her ears. Though I’d never done it, I figured I could fling a rat at least twenty feet, even though Trevor
Lindman said I threw like a girl. Johnny could throw twice as far because he had to keep the rats out of his tire field and had some practice. But while I was building up my case, Jim and Mary snuck out the back door. They didn’t let Mom or anyone know they were going for a walk and I had a hunch they were up to something more than walking.

“Johnny,” I said, “Do you think they’d go out there to fling rats without us?”

“I don’t think Mary would be too keen on throwing rats. She’s a girl.”

“Yeah, but she’s the one who brought it up. Maybe a walk is Jim’s codeword for ‘Let’s go throw rats.’”

“Should we follow them?”

“Nah, they’d hear us in the corn. It gets hard and crackly in the winter. Let’s go up to the tree house. There’s a set of binoculars and they’ll never see us because the leaves are so thick.”

“You’ve got a tree house?”

“Yeah. You have to get there by a drawbridge from the bathroom on the second floor.”

“And binoculars?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”
In the Cornfield

Johnny was faster than me, and by the time I got up to the second floor bathroom, Johnny was standing tip toe atop the furry pink toilet cover, and reaching for the window latch. His jacket brushed against the garden gnome and the plaster statue of St. Francis of Assisi that Grandma kept on a shelf behind the toilet. Grandma had painted St. Francis’ moustache green. It was a little unnerving to go to the bathroom in there, because even though you knew they were just statues, you could still feel the eyes and the green moustache boring into the back of your head every time you sat down to leave a deuce. The statues rattled around a little, and then Johnny sprung the latch.

“Let’s move the St. Francis and the gnome first,” I said. “So we don’t knock ’em over.”

So Johnny grabbed them and put them in the bathtub on their sides, and then turned to me with the corner of his mouth and the edge of his eyes all scrunched up.

“All right,” he said, “before we go in the tree house to spy on Jim and Mary, we have to make sure that we are doing it right.”

“Come on, Johnny, let’s get out there.”

“If we’re not going to do it right, we might as well clod along through the corn and yell, ‘We’re spying on you.’”

“We’re gonna miss everything. By the time you get done telling me what we gotta do to do it right, they’re gonna be back downstairs and we’re just gonna be spying on rats.”

“I’d rather spy on rats than partake in shoddy clandestine activities.”
“What in the hell does that mean?”

Johnny didn’t say anything. He crossed his arms and tapped his right forefinger against his bicep. I figured I could probably grab the gnome out of the bathtub, and beat him about the head until he either ran away crying or passed out senseless so that I could get past him, but I didn’t want him to have issues with gnomes later in life and I figured I’d get in trouble if Johnny ran downstairs bleeding from the ears and saying that I’d hit him with Grandma’s bathroom decorations. Besides, I was afraid of violence.

The sun was hovering over the horizon anyway, and I figured we had twenty minutes at the most before the sun went down and the dark dwelling breeze of the lake felt comfortable enough to come around and scare everyone back indoors. So the only other way to see what was going on out in the cornfields was to do it Johnny’s way.

“All right,” I said, “What do we have to do to do it right.”

Johnny got all excited and uncrossed his arms.

“Take off your shoes. They might squeak against the wood.”

“Well why didn’t you say that in the first place? We coulda been out there already.”

“And you might want to take off your jacket so you don’t get caught on a nail. Plenty of spies have been killed because they had to wear their fancy winter coats and got caught on a nail, and were stuck there until the enemy came and shot them.”

“Where’d you hear that nonsense?”

“Joe’s mom gave me all of Joe’s old Colby spy books when I was in the hospital. She said she’d hoped they wouldn’t bring me as much trouble as they brought her poor son.”

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Johnny tied the laces of his shoes together, then wrapped them in his jacket.

“We should have sunglasses too. All spies wear sunglasses. That way they can’t tell when you lie.”

“Books is books. Mom says they put a bunch of nonsense and lies in books, and you don’t know what to believe because all they’re interested in is making a buck or two.”

“But we don’t have any sunglasses, so you just have to make sure your eyes don’t move around when they take us to the basement for questioning.”

“Besides, Jim and Mary ain’t the enemy. And they sure as hockey sticks ain’t gonna shoot us. You know what kind of hidin’ Jim would catch from Mom if he ever thought about shooting us. Dad would have to get a new rolling pin...”

But Johnny had already made his way halfway across the drawbridge.

“Aw, shoots,” I said, and I wrapped my shoes in my jacket, dropped the whole bundle in the bathtub, and followed Johnny out through the window.

Johnny made quick across the bridge and through the door, and already I could hear him ‘oohing’ and ‘awwing’ about the tree house. I never liked the bridge too much. Even though there were guard rails and sheets of plywood lining both sides, and an old fisherman’s net coated with dead leaves and dangling tree moss protecting you from falling, it still gave my spine the wiggles to look over the side and see the ground below. Leaves were still flying in from all over town, and the cats were down below chasing and batting at the leaves and scampering about and jumping on each other and screeching. It had been a while since I’d crossed the bridge into the tree house, a couple of years at
least. Jim and Henry used to take me there when I was little, and after a while they stopped going and I went by myself for a year or two before I couldn’t think of anything else to do in a tree by myself.

The tree had grown in the last few years, and the bridge was now crooked up at an angle steeper than I remembered as a kid. It wasn’t anything drastic, but you couldn’t sit your marbles on one end and not expect them to roll back into the toilet anymore. It’s strange how the banyan tree gets bigger every year. It doesn’t grow equally in all directions like the cottonwoods or the oak trees or even Blueberry Joe, whose needles had filled in nicely in the past few months. The banyan only grew straight up towards the sky and on the side closest to Lake Fancy, like it eventually wanted to find its way back to the Pacific and the tropical sunshine. We don’t have tropical sunshine in Lake Fancy, which Mom says is a good thing because now we don’t have to worry as much about skin cancer. But I did feel sorry for the tree.

When I finally crossed the bridge, it took a minute for my spine to feel normal again, but it felt good to be on solid ground.

Johnny grabbed a handful of Dad’s old wooden army men and stretched himself out on the straw mattress. The mattress had holes in it, and looked like more than a couple of rats had nibbled their way through to nest, have babies, and poop in the straw. In various spots, the straw stuck out and folded over like gray pieces of spaghetti, and every time Johnny moved his elbow a cloud of dust rose and settled again, and all the army men sneezed. The house itself didn’t smell too bad because the windows were always open and smells don’t take to well to fresh air.

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Johnny seemed like he was having a good time. He smashed the army men into one another and kept saying things like:

“You’ll never take me alive.”

And

“So that’s how a communist wears his bedclothes.”

And a whole bunch of other gobbledygook that didn’t seem normal, but I figured he must have got it from those books of his, and now I could see why Blueberry Joe got into so much trouble. If I never read another book again, it’d be too soon. I didn’t need my brain boiled down to a few half eaten canisters of jelly. I figured I’d just let Johnny alone to tend his army and impose his rules. He’d make a fine dictator some day, if only he could get a fancy hat and a few medals to pin on his chest. And a country.

I grabbed the binoculars from the table, and screwed them onto the old broom handle that stuck out of the ground by the observation post. They were a little rusty, with hints of copper visible in the grooved along the sides. Dad told me that the binoculars had been Grandpa’s during the war, and that they’d seen their fair share of things that wasn’t worth mentioning or even thinking about, things that made Grandpa wake up in the middle of the night and go out on the porch and fire his gun at the cornfields. When Grandpa was alive, the breeze pretty much left the house and the cornfields alone because even the slightest movement and Grandpa would fire. And Grandma refused to talk to him during the hottest parts of the summer, because even the fans wouldn’t work, and a couple of times she almost had heat stroke.
So I figured the binoculars had been used for things a heck of a lot worse than just peaking out over the cornfields, and didn’t feel too guilty about checking up on Jim and Mary.

It took a few turns to get the binoculars in focus, and then another adjustment or two before they fit my eyes, but they worked good as new, even though the metal felt cold against my eye sockets. I swung them back and forth a couple of times over the cornfields, because I didn’t see Jim and Mary. I was about to tell Johnny that all of his dumb rules made us miss the rat flinging, when I saw Jim’s head bobbing up and down about halfway between the house and the edge of the field. Like the straw in the mattress, most of the cornstalks were gray and dead, and none of them had yielded any corn since Grandpa passed away. Jim led the way, and was waving his arm back and forth, clearing a path so that Mary wouldn’t have to get herself all cut up and scratched or covered with cobwebs.

“What do you see?” Johnny asked.

“Nothin’. They’re just walking around and talking.”

“You see any rats.”

“No.”

“You’re not lying are you, just so you can watch longer?”

I moved aside and let Johnny come over and have a peek. He scrunched up his forehead and watched them make their way towards the clearing in the middle of the field, a little half acre patch of grass out by an old tool shed and outhouse.

“You can’t even hear what they’re saying,” he said.

“Nope.”
“That’s boring.”

And Johnny went back to playing with the army men, and every now and then he’d set them up in a triangle, and throw the rubber hand ball at different angles off the wall and ceiling and try to knock them all down.

“I call it Surface to Air Bowling,” he said.

I wasn’t too interested in bowling for army men, and unlike Johnny I didn’t care too much that I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Truth be told, I think you can eavesdrop just as much with your eyes as you can with your ears. Better even. I haven’t met a man yet who can lie with his arms and legs. And even though I didn’t think Jim and Mary were going to throw rats, because there never were any rats in the clearing anyway, I figured I could find out just exactly what people do on a walk when they’re sweet on each other. Sure, I’d seen people take walks on the TV before, but they always cut to a commercial before anything interesting happened, and when they came back from telling you to that 8 our of 10 dentists want you to brush your teeth with this sort of toothpaste, and 5 out of 6 Mom’s fed their kids this kind of soda, the walk was over and someone was getting married or in the hospital. Even Mom and Dad would go out for a walk after Christmas and Thanksgiving dinner to help their food digest, but I didn’t think that Jim and Mary were walking for the sake of digestion. Jim had the same mischievous twirl to his lips when he asked Mary to go on a walk as he did when he told Henry that Smoochie had eaten all his baseball cards, or when he gave me a cat food sandwich and told me it was tuna. He fessed up later, and I threw up a few times and pretended to be grossed out, but to tell the truth I never would have known, and I actually liked it better that way.
Jim and Mary got out to the clearing right as the sun started to go down. As far as sunsets went, it wasn’t all that exciting. The clouds were low on the horizon and thick among the cottonwoods, and blocked out most of the color. Except for a thin streak of orange at the edge of the horizon, it was a gray end to a gray day.

Mary was leaning with her head on Jim’s shoulder and he had one arm around her shoulders and the other was pointing off towards the horizon. I imagined he was telling her that story that Dad always used to tell us when we were younger and used to watch the sunset from the clearing, or deep in the thick of the cornstalks, or even at the edge of the lake.

“If you watch real close,” Dad said, his arm tracing the edge of the sky just like Jim’s was now, “You’ll see a flash of green right after the last bit of sun sinks below the horizon.”

Dad said that every time we watched the sunset for years, even though none of us ever saw a flash of green.

“That’s because you blinked,” he said. And Henry even went so far as to have me tape his eyes open with duct tape once the sun got about three quarters of the way down so that he could be sure he didn’t blink, but by the time it disappeared his eyes were all watery and he said I taped ’em wrong. At any rate, we never saw the green and I doubt Dad did either.

I could see Mary wringing Jim’s hand with excitement when he dropped his arm, and I guess my Dad never told Mary about the flash of green, and I guess Jim didn’t tell her that he’d never seen it either, because after the sun got more than half way down the two of them just sat there, leaned into one another, and stared out at the sunset.
Right about this time Johnny decided he wanted to see how many times he could bounce the ball off the ceiling if he threw it real hard into the ground. I heard him take a deep breath and then jump up and as he was coming down he threw the ball. I guess he didn’t check to make sure the ground was level before he threw, because he hit a knot in the wood and the ball flew over and hit me in the ear. Not in the flappy dangly part of the ear that doesn’t hurt even when you poke at it with a fork, but right over the ear hole with a loud pop that sucked all the hearing out of my left ear and knocked me over.

“Sorry!” Johnny yelled, and he ran over to check on me. “Are you alright?”

I was bent over crooked on a mini wooden chair with my head hovering above the ground and my feet holding up the binoculars so that they wouldn’t crash to the ground. The hearing was coming back a little in my left ear, because I could hear a low whining, and I felt sure that he had popped part of my brain because I felt liquid running out of my ear, and down my jaw.

“Yeah,” I said. “I feel fine. Where’s the sun?”

“What?”

“The sun, is it all the way down?”

Johnny took a quick peek through the bushes.

“Almost... yep, it’s gone.”

He reached down and pulled me up to my knees and handed me the binoculars.

“I’m real sorry, Paul. I just wanted to see if I could make it bounce off the roof twice.”

“I thought you said you wanted to do spying right. Does it say anywhere in the books that you’re supposed to try and make your spy partner deaf?”
“No, but I haven’t read all of them yet.”

“And you made me miss the green flash.”

I grabbed the binoculars and pressed them tight against my eyes, and looked out again. The sun was gone, and even the thin orange edge of the sky was thinning, and it all looked like a giant mouth closing over the world. Mary clapped her hands a few times and Jim clapped too, and I wondered if Mary had seen the green flash. She reached up and kissed Jim real quick on the cheek.

“Holy cow, Mary kissed Jim.”

“Let me see.”

Johnny grabbed at the binoculars and I tried to hold onto them because I wanted to see if he was going to kiss her back, and we wrassled a little bit and even though I was bigger than Johnny, he was stronger and quicker on account of his work in the tire fields, and eventually it got so that he had the binoculars, but I was lying on top of him and pretending to be a dead elephant.

“First,” Johnny called, and then I had to get up and let him have a peek, because that’s the rules of calling first.

“Ten second rule,” I called. The ten second rule was from the school water fountain, and Ms. Lancaster said that anytime there was a line for the water fountain, the kid drinking the water could only drink ten seconds before he had to get to the end of the line and go again. This rule worked pretty well unless Trevor was standing behind me, because every time he said a number, he’d push me in the shoulders and make my teeth clank against the spout.

“Jim’s kissing her back!” Johnny yelled.
“One alligator, two alligator...”

“He’s got his arms all wrapped around her, and you can hardly even see her, and they’ve both got their eyes closed.”

“Eight alligator, nine alligator, Ten!”

And Johnny pretended like he hadn’t heard, and I poked him in the ribs, and he finally handed them over.

“One...”

“No fair, you’re still holding them!”

Jim did have his arms around Mary, and the two of them were kissing each other like something out of the movies. Jim wasn’t quite as smooth as the guys on TV, and he kept opening his eyes for a split second, and getting his hand tangled in Mary’s hair, but it was getting tougher to see them because the fog was moving in quick from the lake, and the darkness wanted to get there before the fog, and the clouds were dropping in to see them as well. The two of them fell backwards onto the grass, and were rubbing each others arms, and touching each other’s cheeks, and I was beginning to think we should just let them alone and go back into the house.

“Nine alligator, Ten!”

Johnny reached out and tried to grab the binoculars.

“I think it’s better if we leave them alone from here on out. There are some things you don’t need anybody else watching. Some things are just for you.”

“You got to look twice.”

“And that’s all either of us is gonna look.”
Johnny pinched me on the back of arm and twisted, and I dropped the binoculars, and the two of us started pushing and rumbling around and knocking chairs over.

“I thought I might find the two of you up here.”

We looked up and Henry stood in the doorway with one of his arms behind his back and a big grin on his face. We hadn’t heard him coming in on account of the thick soundproof leaves and all the racket we’d been making. Even with his thick black work shoes with the steel toes and the clunky rubber molding on the bottom that you could hear echoing even when he walked on the grass. His dark hair was slicked back, and he was still wearing his nametag from Hopperton’s on the bib of his stock boy apron. I figured it was because he knew that Mr. Hopperton was coming over for brunch, and he wanted to let everyone know just close he was to Mr. Hopperton, and how he’d been getting the ten percent discount for five weeks already even though he really couldn’t do fifty pushups. Johnny and I were all tangled up. He let loose the back of my arm, and I let loose his hair, and the two of us stood up and started righting the chairs.

“Should I leave you two lovebirds alone?” he asked.

“We’re not the lovebirds,” Johnny said, and I looked over at him and raised my eyebrows because Henry was sweet on Mary too, and if he found out that Jim and Mary were making time down in the cornfields, there’d be more trouble than we needed.

Johnny raised his eyebrows back to me and winked, like he knew what I was getting at, and wasn’t going to let on what we’d seen. Like he’d figured some clever way to make up some story about parrots or rats, and lead Henry off the trail.

“The lovebirds are out there in the cornfields, kissing like a couple of guppies.”
Henry grabbed the binoculars from me and looked out the window for only a few
seconds before he said:

“I’ll be damned.”

Henry didn’t say nothing on his way out of the tree house. Not even when he
threw a handful of nylon red daisies into the fisherman’s net.
Rain Drops

Henry hadn’t been home in three nights and the blue glow of the TV made the bags under Mom’s eyes seem even deeper than they were. All the lights in the rest of the house were out except the TV, and the whole family sat in silence watching the program guide scroll up the screen for the eleventh time in a row. The program guide had been going so long some channels had changed shows three times. Johnny ribbed me in the elbows when he saw the program about the moon was about to start on the Southern Science Network, but I pretended not to notice and just kept staring at the screen.

“I wish you boys could iron this out,” Mom said. “No call for a family to be not talking to each other like this. Blood is thicker than water. Thicker than most things.”

Dad didn’t say anything. He rubbed Mom’s shoulders through her frayed blue bathrobe and whispered in her ear, but she shook her head. The coffee table was covered with cigarette butts. Mom didn’t smoke. She always told Johnny and me during Tobacco Awareness Week that there were only two habits nastier than smoking, but she wouldn’t talk about them. The county had programs and curtained off sections of video stores for that sort of nonsense. She didn’t smoke, but in the last three days I hadn’t seen her without a puff of smoke sneaking out of the corner of her mouth like a winter walk to school. When Mom got up to go to the bathroom earlier, Johnny told me that there were one hundred and twenty three cigarette butts on the coffee table, including the three swimming in the orange juice glass.

“Yes indeed,” she said. In the blue glow of the TV the smoke looked like murky water. “It certainly does tear a family apart.”
Jim sat next to Johnny on the couch, as far from Mom as he could manage. There were bald patches about his head from where he’d been pulling out his hair.

“It’s not my fault,” he said. “Henry being unreasonable. I can’t help it if Mary likes me and not him.”

“Yes indeed. Blood is certainly thicker than water.”

“Why can’t he find his own girl? There’s plenty of girls in this town. Even Paul’s got a girl he’s sweet on, and everyone calls him Sausage.”

“I just hate to think that you boys can be torn apart like this.”

“Mary’s got blood too.”

“Why don’t you try talking to him? You guys could figure something out. Why not take turns taking her out on the town? You could take her out on Friday, he could take her out on Saturday. Makes sense to me. I thought I taught you boys to share. You could try talking to him.”

Jim pointed towards his eye. It was still purple around the edges, and around the nose and socket it was brown and in some places black.

“This is what happened when I tried to talk to him. I told him Mary had a friend who liked him, and that maybe the four of us could grab a chicken bucket down at Hopperton’s. No sooner do I say that then he socks me in the face. Sucker punch. Then he runs away.”

“I don’t know what to do with you boys,” Mom said. She took a long drag on her cigarette and crushed it out on the TV Guide, and left a black oval over the face of TV’s sexiest grandpa.
"I'll go out in the Dodge and see if I can find him," Dad said. "Paul, Johnny, you guys wanna come with me?"

Johnny poked me in the leg and nodded. I think he thought my Mom was going crazy, and he didn't want to be around when she snapped. He'd seen enough of that, and the smell of the cigarettes was making him wheeze, and I wondered if it might not be good for my Mom if Johnny had an asthma attack. Maybe that way she'd snap back to her old self and dump out all the cigarette butts and fix something other than microwave popcorn covered with peanut butter and jelly for us to eat.

"Yeah," I said, "we'll help look. That way we can look at both sides of the street at once. Johnny can bring his flashlight and we can pretend like we're the cops."

"I'll come too," Jim said. We all stood up and headed towards the door. The dog was passed out under the low end table that we put the mail on, and the moonlight crept through the slit of the door and played with Smoochie's ears as he gurgled and cooed and yipped in his sleep. We were only halfway there we heard the sound of work boots against wooden steps, and the moonbeams were cut off by a shadow. The key rattled in the door, and Henry walked in. He was wearing a new leather jacket, a black one with three pockets on each side and a chain hanging down into his jeans for effect. He put his key back on the chain and slid it into his pocket.

"Henry!" Mom cried. "I've been worried sick."

"Sorry I've been gone for the past three days. Mr. Hopperton had me ride along with one of his overnight shippers. I shoulda called, but I didn't have any quarters and we were on a tight schedule. We had to go up to Chicago and back. He gave me some money for food, but I bought this jacket instead and ate leftovers at the truck stops. Turns out the
trucker was shipping some jackets, and said I could get one at cost direct from him. Lucky me.”

“Are you all right son? You look tired,” Dad said.

“I am a little tired,” he said. “Think I’ll be getting to sleep now. Mr. H wants me to come in early tomorrow. Help him stock the shelves for Valentine’s Day. Got a whole bunch of candy and cards he wants put right up front in the window before people start coming in for coffee and eggs. Good night, Mom, Dad. Good night, Johnny. Good night, Paul.”

Henry brushed by Jim and down the hall to his room.
Things in the McGrew household took a turn for the worse after Henry saw Jim kissing Mary down in the cornfields. Henry sure acted nice when they came back in after their walk, and asked them how they liked the cornfields at night, and wasn’t the sunset marvelous in the beginning of winter, and how come Jim didn’t get a coat for Mary when he knew the tendencies of the Lake Fancy breezes, and how she was liable to catch a cold if she didn’t have someone looking after her. Mr. Hopperton patted Henry on the shoulder and told Mom and Dad fifteen times that he’d never had a boy who worked half so hard at Henry did, and that he’d make a fine store owner himself someday if he kept it up.

After that everyone hugged and kissed and said goodbye. It was strange hugging Mr. Hopperton, because I’d never hugged a man as big as him, and I didn’t want to get sucked in or suffocate if he held me for too long, so I tilted my head to the side right before he hugged me, and that way I could breathe. It wasn’t so bad though. He slipped a taffy into my pocket.

“You can come work for me when you get old enough,” he said. I didn’t really want to go work for him when I got older, I’d much rather play the harmonica and tap my foot down at the Bar and Grill on Friday night, but I didn’t tell him that.

Henry got a ride home from Mr. Hopperton because we didn’t have any room in Dad’s car, and Henry just tossed Jim’s bike, which he rode to work most of the time, in the bed of Mr. Hopperton’s truck. Mom was worried because Mr. Hopperton’s cheeks and nose were still bright red, and the wine hadn’t worn off him yet, and she suggested
that maybe Jim could drive Mr. Hopperton’s truck home and then Dad could swing by and pick him up after he dropped the rest of us off (Jim had his license but he never drove because everything within town was within biking distance), but Henry insisted that Mr. Hopperton was fine to drive his truck. Mom drove behind them the whole way, just to make sure, and though he changed lanes a lot, and the spokes of the bike tire spun and gleamed in the moonlight, Mr. Hopperton made it back to our place fine.

“A fine young man, you’ve got here!” Mr. Hopperton said, “A plethora of fine young men.” Mr. Hopperton pointed in turn at each one of us, and then at Mary and Mom, “and fine young women too!” He honked three times and pulled out into the street. “Don’t forget, I’m having you all over to dinner at my place one of these days. One of these soon days!” Then he cranked up the radio and drove halfway down the street on the wrong side of the road before he signaled the wrong way and changed lanes.

“I hope he makes it home okay,” Mom said.

“He’ll make it just fine,” Henry said, and he leaned Jim’s bike against the tree that wasn’t there.

When we got up to my room and were lying in bed with the lights off, Johnny whispered to me.

“Paul.”

“Yes.”

“You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think the breeze wasn’t the only thing icy out at your grandma’s tonight.”
"What do you mean?"

"I mean I think Henry’s pretty sore."

"I know." When Jim walked Mary home to say goodnight, Henry had slammed the door of his room and cranked up his music. Mom said it was too loud, and then he plugged in his headphones, but the headphones were so loud you could still hear the music down the hall, and Smoochie whined because his ears and nose are so sensitive. Like I told you before, he had powers of supersmell, and I imagined he could smell trouble.

It was a full moon night, the first full moon of winter, but you could only see the shine in little holes through the clouds, thin rods of light piercing the dark sky. It was so dark you couldn’t even see the clouds or the stars, just little slices of moon every now and then through the darkness. Johnny sat up on his bed and peered out the window.

"Jim’s still over there," he said. "I can’t see ’em too good, but I think they are just sitting there on Mary’s porch and talking."

"Are they kissing?"

"No, just talking. Mary’s wearing Jim’s jacket."

"That’s good. She won’t catch a cold."

Over the next couple of weeks things got pretty strained. Henry was gone the next morning when Jim woke up, but the bike was still leaning against the tree that wasn’t there. It wasn’t locked up, and Henry had taped a note to the handlebars.
Flat tire. Must have run over a nail. I’ll pick up a spare at Hopperton’s today. You can pay me back later.

Jim picked up the bike and looked at the tire, and then called me and Johnny down to look at it too.

“Does that hole look like someone ran over a nail?”

The treads of the tire were coated with dirt and worn on the edges, but the hole in the tire was thin and about an inch long. I’d never seen a nail that was thin and an inch long, and that made a cut like that when you rode over it, but I didn’t want to say anything, and Johnny didn’t either, so we just said we hadn’t seen any nails lying around anywhere.

If Jim was upset, he didn’t let on, and he just went back in the garden to work on his winter roses.

Henry didn’t come home at his usual time that night, and by the time he got home we were all done with dinner. It was a good one and Henry would have been sorry to miss it, because Mom made honey-glazed baby back ribs, which was Henry’s favorite, and apple cream cheese pie, which was Jim’s favorite, and broccoli bacon salad which was my favorite, and her special fruit punch with sparkling cider and vanilla ice cream which usually we only had on birthdays. Mom had saved a plate for Henry, even put it in the oven, which she never does, to keep it warm.

“I’m not hungry,” he said. “Mr. Hopperton bought me a hamburger because I stayed on late and helped him total the registers and rearrange all the shelves so he wouldn’t have to do it by himself.
“Did you get that tire for your brother?” Mom asked.

“We’re all sold out. Mr. Hopperton said we probably wouldn’t get another shipment in for a couple of months. Not a big demand for bike tires during the winter.”

Johnny and I were playing slap jack in the living room, and Mom was pacing back and forth with her show on in the background, and Dad was asleep on the couch and snoring so that all the light fixtures were shaking. Jim was in his room and didn’t hear this, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t make him very happy.

“I’ve got to get to sleep,” Henry said. “Another long day tomorrow. We’re changing all the stock over to winter items. Heaters, jackets, you know. It takes a while.”

Johnny laid down a jack, and we both slapped at it, but he won, and I only had three cards left. Henry went into his room and closed the door, and Mom pulled his plate out of the oven and scraped the food all together into a tupperware bowl.

“Well he can just have it for lunch tomorrow,” Mom said to herself. She turned off the oven.

Henry came back out into the kitchen a minute later. His fists were clenched but he had a bit smile on his face that didn’t look at all natural.

“Paul. Johnny. Have you guys seen my headphones?”

I looked at Johnny, and he looked back at me. Neither of us had been in Henry’s room since Johnny moved in. It smelled bad and had dirty clothes all over the floor, and we knew that Henry would be upset even if we just went in there to dump bleach on everything and make it livable again.

“No.”
“Thank you,” he said, and disappeared back around the corner and slammed his door.

“Who is it?” Dad asked, the reverberation of the door shaking him awake.

“Henry’s home.”

It escalated like this for a while. Jim’s notebook, with some poems he’d written for Mary, went missing. Mom found Smoochie burying Henry’s favorite jacket in the backyard. The bottom three inches of Jim’s Sunday pants mysteriously disappeared (Dad laughed about that one, because Henry had to pay a tailor to take them up and hem the edges because he didn’t want to just slice them off with a pair of scissors. And when Dad laughed Mom punched him in the shoulder and said pants weren’t anything to laugh about.) But it was when Henry came home and found thirty-seven night crawlers in his pillow case, that the fireworks really began.

“What’s that noise?” Johnny asked.

“Maybe the salmon got out and is flopping around on the floor,” I said.

“How’s a salmon going to open a door and come in a house?” Johnny asked. “It doesn’t have any thumbs.”

“Well then, Johnny, I don’t know what it is.”

Then we heard Henry’s voice booming through the house.

“Jim McGrew! I know you ain’t asleep. Get out here and we’ll settle this like men!”

“What’s he doing yelling like that? He’ll wake up your mom and dad.”
Sure enough, a few seconds later, Johnny and I heard Dad’s big footsteps clunking down the hall, with Mom, who’d slipped into her slippers, right behind him. Johnny and I didn’t want to miss the action, so we snuck out of bed ourselves and crouched in the shadows of the hallway on our bellies so that we could see down the stairs and into the hall.

“Get out here, now,” said Henry. He was wearing a pair of green athletic shorts over his long johns because in the winter we just bundled up instead of keeping the heat on. The house was insulated pretty good, but it was an old house and we had too many windows and doors to keep out the cold. His black LFHS shirt was half ripped off and there were streaks of mud along his right shoulder that looked about worm size. His right hand was clenched in a white fist, and in the other hand he held a pillow case full of worms. I hated worms because they always made me ears throb when I touched them, and I was glad it wasn’t Jim and me in a feud.

“Keep your voice down,” Mom said. “You’ll wake the neighborhood.”

“I don’t care.”

Jim opened the door with a half-smirk on his face. You could tell he hadn’t been sleeping, because his eyes were too sharp, and his fists were clenched and ready to go. Henry wound up and threw the pillowcase at Jim, but Jim must have been expecting it because he closed the door and the pillow case fell to the ground. Five night crawlers wiggled out into the hallway in a daze, then crawled off in different directions. Smoochie ran in from the living room and sniffed at them, but ran off again and hid behind the couch when they weren’t flavored with chicken liver.
Henry flung himself at the door with his shoulder, but Jim was bigger and held it shut.

Dad, even though he was older, and not as quick or strong as he used to be when he played right guard for the third place Lake Fancy Trout Smelters, grabbed Henry around the waist and pulled him away from the door. He still had Dad strength. Jim stepped out into the hall too and Mom went over and stood in front of him.

“I reckon you two are old enough now, so that if you want to settle this like men, your Mom and I can’t stop you. You’re too big to whip, and if you really want to fight each other and see what’s what, then you’ll find an opportunity. However, it’s late tonight and I don’t want to be kept up by the two of you rolling around in the hall, punching each other in the face, and calling each other names. It gives me a headache and you’re not very creative with the names.”

Dad relaxed his grip a little on Henry, but still made sure to position himself between the two of them. I looked over at Johnny, and he had his eyes closed. I felt kind of sorry for him lying there on his belly, with Jim’s old hand me down long johns hanging past his arms and feet, and his hair all flat and mussed against the back of his head from where he’d been lying on the pillow. I reckoned he’d seen enough violence in his day to last a while.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“I don’t want to see it if they fight.”

“So you have two options,” Dad continued. “And two only. You can take it outside, behind the house and away from the neighbors. And so long as you promise to keep it quiet so the rest of us can get some sleep, you can hit each other until you’re good
and tired, and you feel like everything is solved 'cause you can see the blood of your brother’s mouth steaming in the snow.”

Henry nodded at this idea, and I had a feeling if it was up to Henry, there wouldn’t be an option two, even though Jim would have licked him something good without breaking a sweat.

“In the end this won’t really solve anything because it’s not really about punching each other, or hurting each other, or getting back at one another for a bike tire or worms in a pillow. This is about Mary. You both fancy you like her.”

“What’s option two?” Jim asked. He was hoping for option two as well, because he knew his shoulders were twice as broad as Henry’s, and that he was stronger, and probably would’ve hurt him pretty bad if the two of them went in the back yard to settle it, and Jim wasn’t the kind of guy who liked to profit from the advantages he had over other people. Plus he knew that whipping would just make Henry madder.

“Option two is: you agree to let Mary choose. You both have an equal right to woo her, she isn’t married. Eventually she’ll choose who she likes more, and the other one will just have to deal with that and find another girl. Or maybe she’ll choose neither of you, the way the act like a couple of barnyard three year old hiding each other’s toys. You two idiots are acting like Mary’s the only girl in town worth buying a soda for.”

“She is!” Jim said.

“Shh,” Mom said.

“So what’s it gonna be?”
Things quieted down a little after that. Henry agreed that Mary should be the one to choose, and I figured that Henry had made the right choice because he was gonna lose either way, and like Dad always says, if you’re gonna lose, you might as well lose with all your teeth. Dad made Jim and Henry shake hands and apologize to one another. Mostly the apologies were for show, because I didn’t think either one of them was too sorry, and during the apologies Johnny fell asleep on the floor.

I grabbed him by the excess long johns and, hoping he didn’t get rug burn on his face, pulled him back in the room. Johnny didn’t weigh much, and I picked him up and tucked him back in, and even poked the sheets and blankets so that they were tight around his shoulders because sometimes Johnny got restless in his sleep and threw everything on the ground. But I didn’t tuck him too tight because I didn’t want him to dream that he was an enchilada. There’s a fine line between weird dreams and waking up shivering like a wet cat.
On the Sunday morning after Jim and Henry shook hands and agreed to be men, Old Man Winter finally decided to finish up his leftovers, and we had six inches of green snow piled high everywhere around the house, except in the garden. When Johnny and I woke up, we could see Jim had cleared off more than half of the garden with the snow shovel. He’d started in the corner where he planted the white winter roses, and made his way out in three foot by three foot squares. There was snow in the folds of his sleeves.

“I don’t know why he’s clearing the rest of the garden too,” I said to Mom.

“There’s nothing else growing.”

“Sometimes,” Mom said, “when a man doesn’t know what else to do, he works.”

Dad came out to join us at the table. He was still wearing his pajamas and hadn’t shaved yet. You could always tell when Dad hadn’t shaved because his beard and moustache grew in patches. Real thick on his right cheek, along the upper parts of his jaw line, and under his right nostril, and not at all everywhere else.

“Must be a sign,” Dad said. He sat down, grabbed the mug of steaming coffee at his place at the table, and pointed out towards the green snow with his pinky. “Haven’t had green snow in years.”

“We’ve never had green snow,” Mom said.

“Well,” Dad said. He paused to take a sip of his coffee, sour his face, and add a packet of sugar. “That’s exactly what I mean.” He soured his face again, added a few drops of milk, and stirred.
"You boys should go down to the lake today, or do something outdoorsy. There’s enough tension in this house to run a carnival Ferris wheel, and it’s got nothing to do with you boys, so you might as well head out and enjoy the snow. Make sure you dress warm, and get plenty of oatmeal in you so you don’t pass out hungry in the snow. Lord only knows what kind of jail they’d throw me into if two of my boys were found dead in the snow with empty bellies."

I guess Mom was real worried about us dying in the snow, because she forced us to eat three bowl of oatmeal apiece. She wouldn’t have to worry now, because I could feel the oatmeal all along my esophagus waiting to get into my stomach like it was the line for the DMV.

"Now you boys go out and play."

"Lord," Johnny said when we got upstairs, "I don’t even know if I can go out and walk."

He patted his belly.

"If your mom keeps forcing me to eat like this, pretty soon you’re going to have to grease the door frames with lard just so I can squeeze through."

While Johnny was getting dressed, Smoochie ran up the stairs and bumped his head on the last one. Not only was the dog blind, but he couldn’t count either. He pawed at the door until I let him in. Downstairs I could hear Mom calling him and rattling his food bowl.

"Didn’t she feed him already?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

"I think your mom has gone loopy."
“Mom’s do a lot loopier things than feed the dog twice in a morning.”

It probably came out harsher than I meant it, and Johnny got quiet and zipped his jacket up and down three times. It weighed on him still, I suppose, not knowing where his mom was.

“You afraid she’s gonna come back?”

“I’m afraid she is and I’m afraid she isn’t,” he said, and his answer didn’t make any sense to me, like when you’re standing in the doorway and someone asks you if you’re in one room or the other, and I thought about asking him what he meant. But by the way he was looking at his shoes all mournful like, I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

Smoochie whimpered when we kicked him out of the room, though I wondered what a room was to a blind dog. I knew he didn’t want to eat anymore, but we couldn’t leave him in the room because he always peed on the pillows when people left. Always bumped his head on the steps and along the halls, but he never missed a pillow if your left your door open. The vet said it was separation anxiety, but I don’t know about all that. When Mom and Dad go off to a show and no one else is around, I still pee in the same place I always do, even when I get a little anxious when it’s dark out and I’m watching the escaped criminals show.

“We should go by and see Joe,” I said. “We haven’t seen him in a while, and I’ll bet he’s mighty lonesome. We can take him a sausage or two, so long as we keep an eye out for the parrots. He’s the only tree that has more than branches in the winter time. On
account of his needles. And even though it’s the other trees that are naked, I’ll bet he’s the one they make fun of. That’s how people always are.”

Mom kissed us goodbye and slipped three granola bars into our pockets, and I was beginning to wonder if maybe she had signed some sort of contract with the Quaker Oats company. Just the weight of the bars there, and the thought of eating them at some point in the future made me sick to my stomach. I had visions in my head of an endless stream of oatmeal flowing out of my mouth until I was so tired of leaning over a toilet that I just had to lie back and let it choke me to death for a respite. Dad pulled them out and put them in his back pocket when Mom wasn’t looking though, so it was okay.

“Have a good time,” Mom said.

“Don’t eat the green snow,” Dad said. “It might be radioactive.”

Jim was on the porch when we got outside. He stamped his boots and wiped the snow from his sleeves.

“What are you up to today, Jim?” I asked.

“Mary and I are making a snowman.”

“A green one?” Johnny asked.

“We don’t have much choice.”

“Cool.”

Johnny and I spent most of the walk to Joe throwing green snowballs at each other. It was strange because the green snow wasn’t cold like winter white snow, and it wasn’t hot like that ice they put on your fingers when you have warts, it was just regular, and soft without the wetness. Say your lawn formed itself into a bunch of little dots that
fell from the sky and stuck to each other, in particles so tiny and soft you couldn’t even
tell what separates one from another and it just looks like a giant green blanket. Like a
painting you see from across a room out of the corner of your eye. It didn’t even melt in
our hands, or hurt too much when we nailed each other in the ears. It still had that same
snow smell to it though. That neutral, nostril-clearing, exuberant smell. I can’t explain it
right, but you know what I mean if you don’t live too close to a sewage plant.

Without the leaves, you could see clear to both the school and the Lake. The Lake
wasn’t frozen over completely. There were small ice flows that bobbed up and down but
didn’t stir much because there wasn’t a current. Out on the far side three people hopped
into a canoe and paddled out towards the middle of the lake.

“You couldn’t pay me to go out on the lake right now,” Johnny said. “If you tip
over, you might as well slice off your fingers and toes before you get back to shore.
You’re getting frostbite.”

On top of the school roof you could see layers of both white and green snow,
three inches thick at least, and with all the Christmas decorations up in the classroom
windows, and the peppermint stick looking banners flying from the flag pole, the whole
thing looked like a really bad gingerbread house.

“Look at that,” Johnny pointed off to the school.

Mrs. Anderson’s sunflowers had continued to grow despite the onset of winter.
All twenty-five of them stretched twelve feet tall and were higher than the rain gutters on
the school roof.

“Someday we’ll be able to climb those things and find a giant,” I said. “Then all
of our problems would be solved.”
“I don’t know what kind of problems a giant can solve,” said Johnny. “And I don’t think one could live in the sky. You can’t even stay off the ground for three seconds. And a giant has got to be five times bigger than you.”

“I can too,” I said. I took a deep crouch and jumped as high in the hair as I could. There was a rush of wind and my head felt funny, on account of I jumped so high the oxygen was low, but it wasn’t so bad among the trees. I figured I could live here just fine, so long as I had some strong clouds to hold me up, and a wife, and seventeen chickens.

“Two seconds,” Johnny said. “And that’s being generous.”

“You count too slow.”

Blueberry Joe looked nice in the green snow. His needles were dark green and the snow was lighter, with a bit more yellow to it around the edge, and with his trunk and the knotholes and the carving, he looked quite regal.

“I hope no one ever decided to cut down Joe and use him for a Christmas tree,” I said.

“He’s too big. He wouldn’t fit in anyone’s house.”

“Yeah, but they might take him up to New York and put him in front of a mall or something.”

“I don’t think so. No one from New York would come here. Unless someone pushed them out of a plane.”

I told Johnny to keep an eye out for the parrots, even though I figured they flew off somewhere for the winter. I thought maybe they fly down to Peru, and in the cottonwoods there, they speak English. Maybe they’re just slow, and by the time they
realize everyone around them is speaking one language, and they switch over, they’ve already arrived in a totally different country where the vernacular isn’t the same.

Johnny pretended to take his eye out and hold it over his head.

“You shouldn’t make fun,” I said, glad to have an opportunity to say that to him for once. “What if someone who carries their eye in their hand comes by and needs directions to New York?”

“I’m not making fun,” he said. “I just see parrots better this way.”

I buried the sausages down by the roots, even though I figured Joe had adapted to minerals in the soil, and water, and all of that natural hippie food that Mom refused to buy. And I didn’t want his cholesterol to go up, because if trees started having heart attacks there’d be a swarm of doctors and investigators, and they’d probably cut chunks out of Joe and ship them off to laboratories or outer space.

“I know you don’t get much exercise anymore,” I said to Joe. “But I figured just two sausages wouldn’t hurt you.” I broke the sausages into little pieces and buried them a couple of inches deep in the soil. I covered them with dirt, patted the dirt, then added rocks, and covered the rocks with snow.

“That should keep the parrots out,” I said.

“You never can trust a parrot.”

After that we went down to the lake. We figured we wouldn’t have a whole lot more time to skip rocks before the lake froze up completely. The rocks still skipped on the ice, but there were no ripples, and you were liable to hit an ice skater and have to hide
in a ditch somewhere so they didn’t steal your pants and make you walk home naked in
the snow.

It was tough to find good rocks along the shore anymore, on account of most of
them were covered in snow, and there’s something about a cold rock that makes it even
more of a rock. Not that warm rocks are softer, or anything, but cold rocks just seem a lot
harder. Maybe when it gets cold out, the rocks just don’t care as much about other people
anymore, and they have to harden themselves. Like a hardened criminal, except a rock.
We were watching one of those reality shows, and there was a lady who refused to open
up and share her innermost feelings with a group of strangers who were throwing buckets
of paint and bowling balls at her children. Mom said she was hardened because no one
had ever shown her any love, and that this was why she was gonna lose the million dollar
prize. And I guess the rocks were like this too. It’s not their fault, I suppose, it’s just that
you don’t give much thought to a rock. I’d probably be pretty hard too if people just
stepped on me and tried to skip me across the lake all day.

“I love you, little rock,” I said.

Johnny, who stood fifteen feet away and had gathered four rocks already looked
up.

“What’s that?” he said.

“I found a good one.” I held up the rock for him to see.

“That’s not flat. You won’t get more than three skips out of that one.”

I’m not getting any skips out of this one, I thought, I’m not getting any skips out
of any rocks anymore. They’ve got just as much right to live as anyone else.

“Then I can’t find any. My fingers are too numb.”
“You can have a couple of mine.”

Johnny handed me two rocks. They weren’t all that flat either. A couple of bumps, probably from some geothermal activity in the latter part of the geodesic era, and the fact that they had never been smoothed over or eroded by a river, or even a really active puddle, made them just average rocks. Johnny and I went over to our favorite skipping spot, on top of a boulder and among the cat tails over by the south end of the shore, the opposite shore from Johnny’s old house. It was nice because we got a good angle at the lake on top of the boulder, but we were sheltered from the wind and snow by the cat tails. There was a thin path in the cat tails leading to the boulder, and you had to scale the boulder a little. Johnny didn’t have much trouble, but I couldn’t lift my leg high enough to get to the crack in the rock, and Johnny had to help me up. The boulder sat right on the edge of the lake, and you could see the spread of the lake from the trout farm up to the Appleseed house and off towards the Blue Hills in the next county. The boulder sloped down towards the lake, and was wide enough for two people to stand on, so Johnny and I took a deep crouch and flung the rocks at the lake side-armed.

His first rock sunk straight away.

“The water’s cold. Once it warms up, we’ll get a good skip out of it. Blow on the rock too.”

So I blew on my rock, leaned back and chucked it. I tried to use my wrist and follow through like Jim taught me, but I didn’t yell “Kee-Yai” like he told me too, because it would’ve echoed across the lake, and I didn’t want to canoers to freak out and tip over. I already had enough on my conscience without having to worry about people
falling under the ice, getting hypothermia, and drowning. Plus Johnny would have looked at me weird.

“One, two, three, four. Not bad,” Johnny said. I’d gotten twelve once, a couple of years ago when Jim had ordered a sack of real smooth skipping rocks from a catalog. It was a deal too. Ten flat rocks for only $23.99 plus shipping and tax. I remember when we showed the rocks to Mom, she said we were damned fools and that she wasn’t giving us allowance money to spend on rocks when we could find rocks in our back yard, when there were plenty of blaming rocks in grandma’s cornfields for free. But Dad took one look at the rocks, felt the smoothness against the back of his hands, and held them up to the light and crunched it between his teeth.

“I’ll bet you get double digits with these rocks. 10 skips at least. I would’ve paid double for them.”

“It’s not that good,” I said to Johnny.

So Johnny blew on his second rock, and rubbed it with his hand, then took off one of his gloves, dropped the rocks in, and banged it three times against the boulder.

“This should wake it up,” he said. He blew on it again, and then swirled around once and chucked it at the lake.

One, two, three, four, five.... eight, nine, ten, eleven. The rock disappeared into the lake. Eleven sets of ripples expanded out over the water.

“Holy Cow!” I said. “You almost broke my record.”

“I broke my record by three! You try.”
So I dug down in my pocket and pulled out the little lopsided rock that I loved. I figured that if I was gonna break the record, I was gonna do it with a rock that deserved the record, not some smooth, flat rock that had never worked a day in his life.

I blew on the rock four times, rubbed it with my hands, dropped it in my glove, banged it three times against the boulder, took it out, blew on it again, twirled around twice, and yelled.

“Kee-Yai!” I shouted, and the echo hit the water at the same time, and sound was rippling, and water was rippling, and Johnny flattened himself out on his belly and held his forefinger in the water so he wouldn’t jinx me, and the rock took off.

Five, six, seven, eight.

I dropped to my stomach too, and dipped my finger in the Lake, and I forgot to take off my glove so it soaked water in up to the wrist and my whole arm started quivering on account of the water was so cold.

Nine, ten, eleven.

Johnny inhaled, and didn’t let his breath out because he didn’t want to disturb to surface of the lake with his breath. Not on a day like this where even the wind had stopped for a second to watch, and the green snow piled up at the edge of the cottonwoods so it could see the thousand yards to the lake.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

Johnny slapped his hand on my back, and I shot him a look. Not yet, I said with my eyes. The Lake Fancy all time record, held by Great Grandma McGrew’s high school boyfriend, was seventeen. He went on to play professional baseball for two seasons before he fell out of a zeppelin trying to do a loop de loop.
Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.

The rock was halfway across the lake now, and showed no signs of coming back.

"What if it touches the other shore and comes back?" I whispered to Johnny.

"What if it just keeps on going over the Blue Hills and out towards the ocean?"

"What if it goes past the ocean, over China and Russia and Europe, and then makes its way back here?"

"Then we'll lose count and the record won't be official."

But we didn't have to worry too much, because it only took twelve more hops and disappeared with a splash right next to the canoe.

"Hey!" Yelled the people in the canoe. "You got us wet."

"Sorry!" I waved. Johnny and I stood up. They started to paddle over.

"Should we run?" he asked.

"No, what if they saw it bounce. It would be nice to have witnesses when we go to school."

"You're right."

The sun was behind the people in the canoe, so as they paddled over, it was tough to see anything of them except for three dark outlines silhouetted against the sun. Two of them paddled, and one sat low in the canoe.

"I hope it's not Trevor," Johnny said. "If it's Trevor we should run."

"You must have had twenty-five skips on that last one," one of the voices from the canoe said. It was a girl's voice, and as they pulled up to the shore, I saw that it was Lia and her parents.
Sunday Afternoon

By the time Lia and her parents arrived on the south end of the Lake, the afternoon sun had scared all but the smallest bits of ice below the murky brown surface of the lake, and the green snow wilted and had yellowed at the edges and dripped into the lake in small trickles from the steeper shores towards the east.

Mr. and Mrs. Catalino tied the boat to the cat tails, steadied it for Lia to get out, shook our hands, and said they were very pleased indeed to meet Johnny.

“So you’re the one who got me this iron jaw,” Mr. Catalino said. He was a tall man with dark curly hair that had poofed up in the breeze. He wore sunglasses with no lenses and had thick, hairy forearms that bulged around the elbows and wrist like a dumbbell, and the bottom of a dragon tattoo snuck out from his green polo shirt and curled around his tricep. He gave his jaw a knock with his knuckles, and it didn’t sound natural at all. He had a deep voice that echoed off of the metal and sounded a lot like the Wizard of Oz.

“Sorry,” Johnny said. “I never heard of chocolate fever before.”

“That’s okay, we save a lot of money on can openers now.”

Pay no attention to the man behind the canoe! I am the great and powerful Catalino!

Mrs. Catalino insisted we take the canoe out for a spin on the lake, and she and Mr. Catalino said they were sore from paddling around all morning, but that Lia loved to be out on the lake in the early winter, and they didn’t mind so much. At first, Johnny and I said we couldn’t, that we’d never been in a canoe before and didn’t want to tip it over,
and that we didn’t know how to paddle. Mr. Catalino grabbed the oars and handed one to me and one to Johnny.

"Take a seat," he said.

"In the canoe?" I asked.

"Well you can’t paddle a boulder around."

So Johnny poked me in the shoulder, and motioned that I should go first. I scowled at Johnny and motioned that he should go first, and we both stood there motioning at each other until Lia spoke up.

"One of you hop in there before the sun goes down. I never do like to be on the ground when the sun goes down."

And I scowled at Johnny one more time and he scowled right back, but I was first because I was closest. Mr. and Mrs. Catalino held the two ends of the canoe so that it wouldn’t shake too much and Lia steadied the middle with her foot.

"Let me hold your paddle until you get in," said Mr. Catalino. So I handed him the paddle and crouched down and dropped one of my knees against the boulder and eased my way into the boat. It sank a little as I hopped in, and when Lia let go with her foot, it swayed back and forth pretty heavy and I thought I was going in. I put my arms out and I must have looked pretty frightened because everyone laughed except Johnny, whose face had gone white.

"It takes quite a bit of shaking to swamp a canoe," Mrs. Catalino said.

"All right," Mr. Catalino said, "Here’s your paddle. You see that spot in the water about two feet ahead of you, right next to the canoe?"

"Yes, sir."
“And do you see that spot two feet behind you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Put the paddle in there, pull it to there, and then pull it out and do it again.”

So I reached the paddle into the water and pulled as hard as I could. It hit some rocks because we were at the edge of the shore, and the paddle slipped out of my hands and slapped the water.

“Oh, crap!”

“Don’t worry, they float. And there’s not a lot of rocks out there in the middle of the lake.”

So I leaned over the edge of the boat, and grabbed the paddle. The water wasn’t so cold as I thought it would be with the ice flows and snow and everything. My toes didn’t curl up and none of my digits turned black with frostbite. It wasn’t much colder than the spring water. After a while I got the hang of it, and was going pretty good, and I was even turning the paddle flat when I went forward to cut down on wind resistance.

“Now you’ve got the hang of it,” Mr. Catalino said. “You’ll be an Admiral someday.”

“I’m not going anywhere though.”

“That’s because you are tied to a huge boulder,” Lia said.

“Oh yeah.”

“Now let’s get Johnny in there so he can try.”

Johnny scowled at me again, but I’d already gone so he had to go too.

“Can I put on the lifejacket first?”
Mr. Catalino handed him the jacket, and snapped it up in twelve different places, and showed him where the whistle was so that if he drifted out to sea and he wanted to call the sharks he could.

Johnny sat stiff as a chair in the boat. His back was straight, his knees were straight, and his strokes were really fast and splashed water all over. He stopped every two strokes to wipe his forehead.

“Loosen up a little,” said Lia. “That way you won’t splash me and Paul when we get in there.”

Johnny tightened up even more though. Even his hair stood straight up, and his forehead stretched tight, and it looked like he was holding his breath because his chest hadn’t moved in twelve seconds and he was rocking back and forth like he was about to pass out.

“Dad,” Lia said. “Help him loosen up.”

Mr. Catalino pulled an apple out of his pocket.

“You know what the cool thing about having iron teeth is?”

“No.”

Johnny stopped paddling.

“You can chew and talk at the same time.”

Mr. Catalino reached into his mouth and pulled out a bar with five iron teeth welded across the top. They were rectangular and bumpy on the top, and for all accounts they looked like normal teeth except for they were completely silver in color, and extremely well brushed. I guess good hygiene ran in the Catalino family. He plunged the teeth repeatedly into the apple, and little chunks of apple went flying all over the boulder,
and into the lake, and three little trout with silver stars around their eyes came over and swallowed the apple bits in big O shaped gulps. While he did this, he talked about his days as a kid when he had to ride cows to school and got made fun of because all the other kids had horses. The best part of the story was when one of the other kids tried to milk his horse to prove that it was better than a cow.

When he finished he held an apple core in his hand.

“Absolutely delicious. Healthy too. Good for your teeth.”

Mr. Catalino put the core in his back pocket and slipped the teeth back into his mouth. Johnny laughed and laughed, and soon he was paddling along smooth as could be, loose and natural as a pair of jeans.

“You kids better head out,” Mrs. Catalino said. “The sun is gonna be getting low soon. You know how it is in the winter time. You’re eating dinner at lunch time because it’s so dark out, and then when dinner comes along you have to eat again, just so you don’t get confused.”

So we all climbed in and Lia jumped from the boulder, and even watching her close I couldn’t figure out how she landed in her seat and didn’t spill into the lake. She looked back and me and winked.

“Let’s go.”

And the three of us headed out on my first sea adventure. Mr. and Mrs. Catalino sat down on the rock and waved at us until we were out of earshot, about twenty yards away. We went pretty slow at first. Both Johnny and I stopped paddling and held our breaths every time the canoe rocked even a little. But after a while, and after Lia told us not to worry, we became more and more confident with our strokes and soon we were
moving at a pretty good clip. A zig zag trail of ripples cut through both the murky brown water and the reflections of trees and clouds in the lake and followed us out into the middle. The canoe was smooth for the most part. Johnny sat in the front, Lia in the middle, and me in the rear because I was the biggest and it was my job to steer. I thought Dad would be pleased to know that I was the rear Admiral, even though he’d probably accuse me of mutiny and make me eat an extra dessert.

It was nice being out on the water. Quieter than the land. All we could hear was the slice of the paddle against the water, and the occasional ploop sound from a fish. None of us talked. Not because we decided not to, but because the lake itself demanded a sort of silence. Like a church or a funeral or the night time. Where you’re silent not because any one has asked you to be, but because the nature of the place demands it. The sort of place where babies don’t even cry because there’s something inherent in the silence, and you could feel it even if you were a rock.

Even the breeze kept its blowing to the edges of the lake. Only sporadically would it dart across from one side to the other, but even that was quiet and apologetic. Just a few strands of hair whipped around the ears for a second and then nothing and silence again. The water seemed to swallow everything but the sound of the paddles and our breathing.

I liked to watch the water along the side of the canoe. The paddle left a little whirlpool every time I pulled it out of the water, and that would suck down small bits of moss and sticks that floated around before the swirl disappeared behind the canoe. Johnny watched his whirlpools too and we got so caught up watching the whirlpools that we lost any sort of rhythm and just paddled around in big crooked circle for a while.

“You think the lake monster is out here?” Johnny asked.
“What lake monster?” Lia said.

“The one that eats your memory.”

“What kind of nonsense is that?”

“I mean, when it eats you, no one even remembers that you were ever alive.”

“And how’s he do that? Does he go to houses and eat brainwaves and clothes and repaint the rooms? I think someone would notice if they saw a lake monster dripping all over the carpet and repainting the rooms.”

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. “That’s just what I heard.”

“Name one person whose been eaten by the lake monster.”

“How am I going to name a person if his memory has been erased from everywhere?”

“Sounds dodgy to me,” she said. “I don’t believe in it. I’ve never seen anything out here but fish and tires.”

Johnny turned red when she said tires, and then he just paddled around some more and watched the whirlpools. I figured his dad must have thrown all the really bad tires into the lake. You know: the ones he couldn’t slice up and sell for tennis shoes, and the ones that the locusts got to because in a haze of drunkenness he forgot to spray them with the pesticides. I remember there was an article in the newspaper a couple years back about illegal dumping going on in the lake, but nothing much ever came of it because Detective Peterson was deathly afraid of water and refused to go out on a boat and investigate.
“The two of you are so keen on records, what do you say we see how long it takes us to paddle from one side to another?” Lia asked. She poked her chin towards the far shore, over by the trout farm. “I’ll do the counting.”

Johnny and I didn’t have much experience canoe racing, and we couldn’t blow on the canoe or smash it against a boulder for luck, but we figured we’d try.

“Just let us know when to start.”

“Now. One, two...”

Johnny popped up onto his knees and took some hard paddles. The life vest was a little bulky for Johnny, because he was such a skinny kid and the vest was designed for Mr. Catalino’s broad chest, and when he moved to paddle, he had to swing the whole of his torso and lean towards the front of the boat. The nose of the canoe dipped a little when he leaned forward, but once we got into a rhythm, we moved fairly quickly, and in no time at all we were at the trout farm.

Johnny slapped the edge of the wooden slatted retaining wall and fish on the other side darted away in a frenzy.

“Done!”

“Fifty-three seconds,” Lia said. “That’s not too bad for first timers.”

“I can do it faster without the life vest,” Johnny said.

“Not a good idea,” Lia said. “You never know when you’ll need it.”

“We’ll be okay. Just for one trip across. I just want to beat fifty-three seconds.”

So Johnny took his life vest off, even though it took him about five minutes to remove all twelve of the straps and maneuver them through the loops of the jacket. When
he was done he tossed it into the middle of the canoe, where it landed with a click as the plastic snaps hit the bottom of the canoe.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Now!”

We got a lot faster start this time. Johnny paddled with the frenzy of a thirsty dog lapping at a water bowl, and we rocked a little more than the last few times, but we moved quickly across, and even Lia was leaning forward to cut down the air friction. We got to the halfway point at twenty-one seconds, and when Lia called it out, Johnny leaned so far forward that the nose of the canoe dipped under the water. He kept paddling, and the force of the water lifted my end of the boat out of the water, and I took two strokes in the air before the canoe capsized and all of us were in the water.

The water was a lot colder in the middle of the lake, on account of it was so deep that the sun never warmed up the bottom, and all of the warm water kept to the sides of the lake to fool people into canoeing. My legs got real tight, and I felt something slimy brush against them.

“Aagh!” I screamed.

“What?” Lia said. She popped up and her hair was all wet, and her cheeks were even more pomegranate than usual on account of the frosty water. There were a few bits of twig and lake moss draped over her ears, so I doggy paddled over and took them out.

“Thanks,” Lia said.

“I think a fish brushed against me. Or the lake monster.”

“Probably just some moss. There’s a lot of it in here.” She shivered as she spoke, and I looked around for Johnny.
“Help!”

There was a cry from the other side of the canoe, and I could see the tips of Johnny’s fingers slapping at the slick red bottom of the canoe, and trying to pull himself up.

“Help!” he cried again. “I can’t swim.”

His fingers, which had turned blue from the cold of the water slapped one more time at the boat and disappeared on the other side.

“Oh, no,” I said. And I started to kick and doggy paddle my way around to the other side of the boat, because with the life jacket on I couldn’t swim under and grab him. Johnny didn’t have anything to him but skin and bones, no blubber like me to keep him warm or afloat. And he was so small, and with all his screaming he must have already lost most of the air in his lungs that would keep him buoyant.

“Hold on,” I called. I kicked as hard as I could, but the jacket was too big for me and floated up to the bottom of my chin and kept me from moving my arms in circles big enough to go anywhere. Basically I was swimming in place. I turned back to look at Lia, to see if she had any ideas, but where she’d been floating not two seconds ago, there was just four little air bubbles and an empty life vest.

I didn’t know if she’d slipped out because her arms weren’t there to hold her, or if the lake monster had swallowed Johnny, and then gotten her and spit out the life vest because it didn’t like the taste of foam. Maybe the slimy thing I felt on my leg was the lake monster, and he was saving me for dessert. Or maybe he was going to pull me under and twist me and stuff me under a log like alligators do. And there I was in the middle of the lake with my best friend drowned, Lia had disappeared, and now the lake monster
was just laying back and taunting me because it knew I couldn’t swim away. Maybe it was even going to let me freeze so it could have a Paulsicle.

“Paul!” Lia’s voice came from the other side of the canoe. “I need you to flip over the canoe so we can toss Johnny in. He’s shivering pretty bad over here. His lips and cheeks are blue and his eyes are closed.”

“How do you flip a canoe?” I asked.

“Just grab the other side and pull it towards you. I’d flip it myself, but my legs are wrapped around Johnny.”

I’d never flipped a canoe before, and my legs felt thick and stiff as ice and the lake water felt like it was seeping into my lungs and freezing them because it was tough to breathe, and every time I took a deep breath fog came out of my lungs, and I wasn’t sure I could do it. My arms are a little short, maybe shorter than they should be I suppose. Mom says they haven’t caught up to the rest of me, and Henry just says I am part Tyrannosaurus. But I couldn’t quite reach all the way across, especially with the life vest pushing itself up towards my shin and out towards my elbows. I could just touch the far side with the tips of my fingers, but I couldn’t get a firm grasp.

“Hurry up, Paul,” Lia said. “Johnny’s getting heavier and I don’t know how much longer I can hold him up.”

I gave one last heave, and ducked my head as far as I could under the water, and stretched as far as I could, trying to dislocate my arm so it could reach farther like snakes do when they eat, and I got a firm hold of the other side of the canoe, and pulled as hard as I could. Water dripped from my ear and the side of my mouth, and made little dents in
the surface of the lake, and the fog was coming from my lungs so much it made it tough
to see very far, but I pulled myself up and into the boat.

Lia was lying on her back on the other side, with her legs wrapped around
Johnny. Johnny was in a bad state. His lips, cheeks, and even the ends of his hair were
blue, and his eyes were closed.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Look at his chest."

His chest moved up and down, and when I looked close at his lips I could see
little sighs of vapor escaping from his lips.

"Don't look too long, though," she said. "The sun's going down any minute, and I
don't want to miss it."
The three of us lay there face up in the canoe. There was half an inch of water on the bottom of the boat, but we couldn’t feel it. Lia and I had rubbed Joe’s cheeks till they turned pink again, and now his eyes were open but he didn’t say anything, and the three of us, with our heads rested on cold, wet life vests, just sat there and stared at the sky. Most of the sun was gone. Johnny was the only one still breathing fog, and as the sun set little rainbows appeared on his lips and disappeared again easy as you please, and then the sun was gone and there were no rainbows.

“This is my favorite time of day.” Lia said.

I nodded and Johnny breathed some more. I poked my head up. The canoe had drifted up towards the north side of the lake, over by the Appleseed dock. The dock looked even more ramshackle than usual, because you could see the moss on the ropes, and the holes and cracks in the mood, and the last bits of daylight shone clear through everything that was wrong with the dock and magnified it three times. Johnny’s dad’s truck was still parked under the tree, with the passenger side door open and a pile of aluminum cans and cigarette boxes peeking through the snow intermittently. Green and yellow snow filled the cab and the bed of the truck completely and spilled out through the windows. Three lopsided tires leaned against the back fender.

“We should be getting back soon,” Lia said. “My parents don’t like me to be out on the lake long after sun down. There’s no lights out here.”

I nodded and picked up a paddle. I figured it would take a little longer if I was the only one doing the paddling, but Johnny had been through enough today, and we needed
him to rest up until we could get him some blankets and a hot meal. Looking back on it, three bowls of oatmeal might have saved Johnny from some serious trouble. I know because it still sat in a warm lump in my gut.

After a few strokes we were gliding along pretty smooth. I wanted to keep it pretty close to shore in case the snow picked up or we got into some kind of trouble and flipped over again. That way we could get out and walk back to the boulder.

“Say Johnny,” Lia whispered. “I don’t to wake you up or anything, but I think there’s a light on at your house.”

Johnny sat up quick, and all three of us turned around and stared at the Appleseed place. It was tough to tell because we were a few hundred yards down shore and it wasn’t completely dark out, but it looked like one of the upstairs lights was on. There was an orange glow against the window pane. The rest of the windows were dark.

“Maybe someone left it on when the cops went over.” I offered.

“Maybe,” Johnny said. “I haven’t been back.”

We stared at the window for a while, but there was no sign of life. No shadows, no silhouette against the window, no other lights in the house.

“Maybe the blinds are open on the far side.”

“Maybe.”

We stared at the window for another two minutes and nothing happened.

“Well, let’s get back,” I said. “Probably just an optical illusion.”

A shadow passed against the far wall and the light flicked off.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Johnny said. He picked up his paddle, and in three minutes we were back at the boulder.
Mr. and Mrs. Catalino dropped gave us a ride back to our place. When we told them about the light at Johnny’s place, Mrs. Catalino pulled out a cellular phone and called the police.

“There was a light on at the Appleseed place... No, Detective Peterson. They didn’t see anyone. Just a shadow and then the light went off... Thank you.”

Mrs. Catalino hung up the phone.

“They’re going to check it out and give you a call at the McGrew’s to let you know what they find.”

They had a nice truck with leather seats, and didn’t even mind that we were sopping wet. Mr. Catalino turned the heater up high, and told us that with his iron jaw, his mouth stayed warm long after he turned off the heater.

“It’s like a mouth stove.”

We pulled up to the house and Mr. and Mrs. Catalino hopped out and gave Johnny and me a hug, and Mr. Catalino’s jaw was warm against my shoulder and I wondered if, on a really hot day, the days so hot when the flowers fall over and eggs fry inside of chickens, he could brand cows with his jaw.

“You guys be careful. Don’t go outside unless you got someone watching over you.”

“We will.”

“Don’t think you can get out of giving me a hug,” Lia said.
“And so Johnny and I walked over, and hugged Lia, and we patted her on the back because neither of us had ever hugged a girl other than Mom before, but she didn’t count because when you hug your Mom you don’t get all quaky kneed.

“Let me see your teeth,” Lia said when I hugged her. I opened my mouth. I’d brushed my teeth pretty regular since the hospital, but I forgot after the oatmeal, mostly because I couldn’t have put another thing in my mouth and didn’t want to get oatmeal on my toothbrush.

“Not bad,” she said. “You can kiss me on the cheek if you want to.”

I looked up at Mr. and Mrs. Catalino. They stood with their backs to us on the other side of the truck, and they were talking to Johnny.

“Quick,” she said, “Or you won’t get another chance.”

I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. My lips were kind of tight because I didn’t want my tongue to slip out and get slobber all over her, and she closed her eyes when I leaned in, and in a second it was over and I wished I could’ve taken a picture so I could remember it right.

“I’ll see you soon,” Lia said. And the Catalinos piled into their truck and took off back to the ranch. Johnny and I stood and watched them until their tail lights disappeared around the corner onto the main highway. We could hear the engine for a bit, and then it was quiet.

“Are you worried about your mom?” I asked Johnny.

“Nah,” he said. “She wouldn’t come here.”
We walked back towards the house and heard the murmur of voices coming from the swinging bench. I put my hand out and stopped Johnny. We were still in the shadows because the street lamps were five houses away on the other side of the street and afraid to shine too close to the tree that wasn’t there for fear of being swallowed up and forming a black hole.

Jim and Mary sat on the bench. Mary leaned over with her head against Jim’s shoulder, and Jim had one arm wrapped around her back and his fingers were plowing her hair. They were so close you would’ve thought it was one of those Siamese twins if you stumbled across them in the darkness.

“Let’s see if we can creep up and listen to them,” I said. I dropped down to my knees and figured that if I kept away from the light coming out of the front windows they wouldn’t be able to see me, and Johnny and I could lean up against the porch right behind them. Johnny grabbed my leg before I got too far.

“I’ve got a better way.”

Johnny crept off towards the fence on the side of the house, and I wanted to tell him the fence was okay for spying, because you could see through the knots, but we’d never be able to hear them with the wind and the sound from the highway. But he walked right past the knots and into the backyard. The backyard was cold and our shoes crunched in the snow. There were squares of light coming down from the living room window and dividing the back yard. There were uneven hills of snow along the base of the fence from where Jim had shoveled out the garden in the morning. The garden looked brown, and the white roses had sprouted during the day. The petals were still tight and blue along the tips.
“Right over here.” Johnny walked over to where Jim’s bike was chained to the water pump, the front flat and the spokes gathering snow. He pushed the bike out of the way and poked his finger through a hole in the wood. There was a click, and a small doorway about three square feet opened up.

“Do we have a basement?” I asked.

“No, it’s just a crawl space. There’s not much under here except some rusty pipes, a few spiders, and a pile of broken garden tools. But you can hear the whole house. Depending on where you crawl to, it’s like a bunch of radio stations.”

“How’d you find out about this?”

“I come down here all the time.”

Johnny dropped to his knees and crawled under the house.

I’d never been under a house before and my first thought was I sure hope there isn’t an earthquake or an old Indian graveyard under here. My second thought was, if the house falls on top of me, I hope some girl from Kansas doesn’t come along and steal my shoes. It’s cold out there and I’d probably get frostbite. The bottom of a house isn’t nearly so pleasant as the inside or even the roof of a house. It’s just a whole bunch of rock hard dirt, twigs, and pipes on the ground, and the wood of the house isn’t even painted. No light came in from anywhere in the house, and once we got three feet in, even the light from the streetlamps was blocked out. Johnny knew his way around pretty good, and he’d point at a spot where there was a nail, or a pile of animal poop, or a particularly rusty pipe, but he didn’t say anything.
The dirt under the house was warm and dry. Along the edges of the frame there were some wet spots from where snow had gotten in, but the snow didn’t get towards the middle.

“You can feel the warm air here,” Johnny said. He poked at a vent, and as I felt my way up the crinkly side, a thin stream of hot air tickled my fingers.

“This one leads into the kitchen. You can hear a lot from here.”

Sure enough, right after Johnny said that, I heard Mom’s voice over the simmer of a pot on the stove and the clank of glass against the aluminum sink.

“They should be here any minute now if they got a ride home with the Catalinos,” she said. I didn’t hear anything back, so I figured she must have been talking on the phone. Her voice resonated a little coming backwards through the vents, and sounded a little deeper than it would if we were in the same room, but you could hear her clear as water.

“I’ll tell them. You didn’t find any signs of disturbance up at the Appleseed place.” There was a click as she hung up the phone.

“What were they doing at the Appleseed place?” Dad asked.

“They thought they saw a light from the lake.”

Johnny tapped me on the shoulder and we moved towards the front porch. When we got up under where the porch would have been, there was a huge pile of old T-shirts, magazines, and newspapers, and everything was laid out in a pile on top of a hammock. The hammock was tied to a couple of screws and just sat there flat on the ground, and all of the ropes were covered in mud, but it served mostly to arrange the other things.
“I take a nap down here every once in a while,” Johnny whispered. “It’s mostly quiet, but you can hear the sounds of the house and the street. I sleep better when I hear noises. Not loud ones like horns or airplanes. Just everyday noises. Let’s me know the world is still moving. And these,” he said. He held up three broken rake handles about three feet long a piece. “These are my weapons. I haven’t used them yet. I pound them on the ground when I hear rats scampering. But it’s dark and I haven’t seen any rats.” There were also three pairs of wings made from tree branches and newspaper, all of them smaller than the ones he ended up making in the house. I figured he must have tried out a few prototypes first.

“There’s enough room for both of us,” he whispered. “That way we don’t have to lie in the dirt.”

“Henry brought me twenty-six nylon daisies today. They were red, white, and blue, and he left the price tag on a few of them. And a heart-shaped box of chocolates with some dust on the cover. And three teddy bear Valentine’s cards.”

Mary’s voice.

“Did you accept them?”

Jim’s voice.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because he left them on my porch, rang the doorbell, and then ran away. I saw him hiding behind the hedges and watching me, but I pretended not to see, and took them all inside. He must have spent half his paycheck on me. Maybe more.”

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“Oh,” said Jim. “He gets a twenty percent discount.”

I could hear Smoochie pawing at the front door, then Jim’s footsteps across the porch. Smoochie let out an excited yelp, and sprinted down the stairs and into the snow.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“I know. You’re just nice.”

Jim walked over to the edge of the porch. I could see his shadow through the slats of the porch. He leaned on the railing and looked out over the street. Mary sat on the bench and didn’t say anything for a while. I could see the steam from Smoochie rising off of the snow near the corner of the fence.

“It’s not right,” she said at last. “Making me choose. Someone always gets hurt when you choose. And if one of you gets hurt, your whole family gets hurt.”

Jim looked out over the street some more. Johnny grabbed one of his sticks and scratched his leg. Smoochie ran over to the bottom of the porch and sniffed around the base, about five feet from where we were.

“And I’m not worth it, breaking up a family like that. They’ll be plenty of other girls for you and Henry, but I’m not going to be the one who ruins it for the two of you. You’re brothers. It isn’t right.”

“It ain’t right that Henry can’t find a girl of his own. No, he’s got to go around flashing his Hopperton’s badge at people, hide in the hedges, and ruin everyone else’s happiness because he ain’t happy himself.”

“I’ll tell you what, Jim. There isn’t a man in this world who can make me happy. Only add to my misery. Even you, the way you show up on my porch with dirt under your nails because you’ve been trying to get those roses to grow. Even with the poems
you write for me, or the way you brush the hair from my eyes behind my ear when we’re just sitting there looking at the stars. Even that makes me unhappy, Jim. Cause I’m not worth it. Not a bit of it.”

“That’s not a lick of what you’re worth. I’d give you more if I could.”

“I don’t want anything else.”

“I don’t mean like that.”

Smoochie sniffed around until he was right next to my arm. He scratched at the dirt at the bottom of the porch and started whining. Johnny poked me with the stick and mouthed:

“We should get out of here.”

He pointed back towards the other side of the house where we came in. The moon shone through the hole. I nodded, and he held his fingers to his lips. The two of us crawled away right as Smoochie began to bark. I would’ve liked to have stuck around and seen what happened with Jim and Mary, but with Smoochie barking, we would’ve gotten in trouble.

“I hear those rats again,” Dad said as we passed under the kitchen. “I’m going to give the exterminator a call tomorrow.”

Johnny and I went in through the back door, and Mom said she’d been getting worried about us. She’d made spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, and she called out to Jim that dinner was ready and Mary could eat over if she wanted. While we were washing up, Dad told us that Henry called and said he’d be home late because he was
helping Mr. Hopperton again, and wanted to earn some overtime. The meatballs were good and the whole kitchen smelled like garlic bread and tomato sauce.

Jim came in about ten minutes later with three inches of cold stuck to him. Smoochie scuttled in behind him and ran up and started licking my legs.

"I'm not hungry," Jim said. He walked down the hall.

"What about Mary?" Mom asked.

"She went home."
Black Leaves

Johnny couldn’t sleep a lick. That meant I couldn’t sleep either, on account of he knocked the lamp on the bedside table onto my shoulder in the middle of a dream I was having about bats. Johnny didn’t slept right through it. Not sound sleep at any rate, because even though his eyes were closed, he rolled from one side of his bed to the other, and moaned, and punched his pillow three times, and in a frenzy he took off one of his socks and wrapped it around his forearm.

“Come and get me,” he mumbled. “I ain’t afraid of you no more.”

I’d had some bad dreams before, but I wouldn’t of traded places with Johnny for ten packs of Chocolate Reindeer. Not on a night like this. Not when the black leaves gathered moisture in the air and stuck to our window. Not with so much uncertainty. Right before bed, Dad came in to tuck Johnny and me in.

“Batten down the hatches, men,” he said. “It’s storm weather tonight. Keep yourselves below deck. Hopefully it will pass by morning.”

“Aye, aye, Admiral,” Johnny said. But his heart wasn’t into it.

I watched Johnny for a bit. Then I watched out the window a bit. The streetlights flickered on and off, and then off completely, and only the silver light of the moon poking through the leaves on the window gave Johnny’s face any shape. Sweat covered his forehead. Big line lines of sweat that started in the creases above his eyebrows, and ran off to his ears, down his nose, and out the corner of his mouth. I pulled out one of my T-shirts, and dabbed at him, and wondered if he’d caught a fever because of the lake. I drew his covers up around his shoulders because Mom once told me that you have to
sweat out a fever, but every time I got the covers halfway up, Johnny kicked them off and onto the floor. After getting kicked in the arm three times, I gave up and let him sweat some more.

Round about two in the morning, I heard a frantic pounding on the door. It froze me. Like deja vu. Like a premonition. I remembered slowly the details of my dream from earlier in the night. It was dark and leaves coated the window entirely. Not just dark, but blackness. The kind your eyes never adjust to. In the dream I woke up and Johnny’s bed was empty. Downstairs the house shook with the pounding of the front door. Literally swayed from side to side on its foundations. So much that I looked through the cracks in the floor, and one minute I saw the garden, the next I saw the kitchen. I crawled out of bed and out to the landing at the top of the stairs, and looked down. Johnny stood in front of the door with his wings on and a cardboard beak. He had a calm look on his face, and just stood there and watched the heave of the door. “Get back,” I wanted to yell, but the blackness swallowed even that. Johnny took three steps and put his hand to the door. The pounding stopped. The house stopped swaying. Silence filled everything. He turned the handle, and a thousand bats flew in through the door and swooped all over the house. A bat had just landed on my shoulder when the lamp nailed me and woke me up.

Now the pounding again. I looked over at Johnny and he fussed and turned some more, but he didn’t have his wings or a beak. Good thing. More pounding. I heard Dad get out of bed, and Mom whisper something about calling the police, but Dad said he wasn’t going to open the door.

I was half frozen. My legs couldn’t bend because I had the feeling that something awful was behind that door. Something terrible, that’d change my life forever. Worse yet
I got the feeling that whatever was behind that door was after Johnny. But curiosity got the better of me, and I got down on my belly, looked back at Johnny one more time, and crawled out onto the landing.

Dad had a rifle at his shoulder. I'd never seen Dad with a rifle before. He didn't hunt or talk about guns. He'd never been in the army. But this was a rifle sure enough. With a scope on the stock and everything. Just like in the sniper books at the school library. Dad reached into his bathrobe pocket and pulled out two bullets. His hands shook as he loaded them into the chamber, and I guessed he'd probably never fired a rifle either.

"Who's there?"

The pounding stopped. Dad took a crouch behind the table where we put the mail. The pounding stopped. Dad flicked his arm and hissed.

"Go back in the room!" I thought he was talking to me, and I started to scoot back, but I saw Mom shivering in the hallway below.

"I'm waking up Jim. Don't be a damned fool and get yourself killed."

Mom slipped into Jim's room and the hall was dark again. The fisherman picture was completely covered in shadows, but I saw a trickle of water running down the wall.

"Please let me in. My child! My only child!" A female voice. A high pitched wail of a voice, like a ghost. Like a ghost wrapped in misery. Like what I heard in my dream the night I saw Johnny's mom beating on him.

"We've called the police," Dad said. "They'll be here any minute."

Jim appeared in the hallway. He looked tired, and his hair was mussed, and he carried a baseball bat in one hand, and a fishing pole in the other. I didn't know what he intended to do with a fishing pole, unless the voice on the other side of the side of the
door was overly fond of red rubber worms with sparkles, but I think it gave him some
comfort. He inched his way down the hall, and crouched next to my Dad. He put a hand
on Dad’s shoulder, and both of them steadied a bit. Mom peeked her head out from Jim’s
room, with her knuckles white against the frame of the door.

“My Mary!” called the voice. “My sweet little Mary!”

Jim dropped the bat and the fishing pole, Dad clicked the safety on the rifle and
shoved it into the umbrella rack, and Mom ran out to open the door. The door swung
open, and Mrs. Garcia collapsed in the foyer on top of Mom’s feet. Black leaves gushed
into the house.

“Get her into the kitchen,” Mom said. “And shut that door before we’re buried in
here.”

Jim closed the door, and Dad scooped up Mrs. Garcia and an armful of leaves in
his arms and took both into the kitchen.

“Let me get you some coffee,” Mom said. “It’s instant, so it won’t take that long.
I’ll just throw it in the microwave.”

Jim rushed up with a towel and brushed the leaves of Mrs. Garcia’s coat and face,
and she wheezed and wheezed and couldn’t find her voice.

“Just take it easy,” Dad said. “Catch your breath and tell us what happened.”

I looked back at Johnny, and he looked like he’d settled down a little. The black
leaves plastered all but the top inch or so of the window, and the only light in the room
now was leftovers from the kitchen. It gave Johnny’s forehead a yellow glow, and with
the sweat it looked a bit like butter, but he was still and I figured he’d be better off
sleeping than dealing with even more excitement. So I tip toed back in and covered him up with blankets, and then slipped downstairs.

There was so much commotion going on in the kitchen, with Dad making coffee, Mom trying to make sure Mrs. Garcia was comfortable, and Jim trying to sweep up the black leaves into a pile, that no one much noticed when I strolled in and took a seat at the table. I’d never seen Mrs. Garcia before, as I told you she worked three jobs, but I could see right away where Mary had gotten so pretty from. Even with black leaves in her hair, and red puffy eyes, and tufts of gray snow gathered in patches behind her ears and in the creases of her knuckles, Mrs. Garcia was a beauty. She had smooth cheeks and deep, dark eyes, and big dimples even when she frowned. But like Mary, she had a touch of sadness too. At the corners of her lips. Turned down slightly. Like someone who’d spent a lot of time looking out a window and waiting.

At last Mom got her to settle down, Dad put some coffee in her hand, and Jim gave up trying to sweep the leaves into a pile because there were just too many of them, and they were still coming in through the cracks at the bottom of the door.

“What happened?” Mom asked.

“Is she okay?” Jim asked.

“Are you okay?” Dad asked.

I just sat there.

Mrs. Garcia pulled a yellow handkerchief with frayed corners out of her pocket and dabbed at the corner of her eyes.

“I already lost her father. I can’t bear to lose her. She’s all I have left. She’s the reason for these...”
Mrs. Garcia held up her hands. She couldn’t have been more than forty-five, but she had the hands of a ninety-year old woman. Her fingers were gnarled and looked like tree branches, and there were thick calluses and deep creases on her palms. The snow in her knuckles melted, and it looked like her hands themselves were crying when the water ran through the grooves and dripped onto the table.

“Is she okay?” Jim asked. “Oh, God, let her be okay.”

“All she left was this.”

Mrs. Garcia pulled a piece of yellow lined notebook paper. The top was jagged and crinkled, and there were twenty-seven spots where water had blurred the message and the lines. I figured it was either snow or tears, or some combination of both.

_I’ve caused too much pain here_, said the note. _And I’m going to someplace where there isn’t anymore pain._

“What’s it mean?” Jim asked. “Where’d she go?”

“You don’t think she meant...” Mom started.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.” Mrs. Garcia fell over onto the table and buried her head in her arms.

“Does she have a car? Or a bike?”

Mrs. Garcia shook her head.

“Well then, we’ll go out and look for her right now,” Dad said. “Jim, put some clothes on. Wake up Henry. I’ll call Detective Peterson, so we can get another set of eyes out there. Maybe the Catalinos too. So they can keep an eye out on the highway. She couldn’t have gotten very far. Not on foot, and not with this wind and snow and all the leaves.”
Dad grabbed his jacket from the hall closet, and picked up the phone.

"I’ll help look too.” I said. “Me and Johnny.”

“No,” Mom said. “You two are not to leave this house.”

“But what if she didn’t take a road? What if she wandered off somewhere into the woods?”

Mrs. Garcia wailed.

“What if nothing. You’re not going. There’s too much going on for the two of you to be out in the woods alone.”

Jim got back a minute later. He’d thrown on his boots, his jacket, and a pair of jeans. In each hand he held a flashlight.

“Did you check the batteries?” Dad asked.

“Replaced them.” He handed one to Dad. Henry appeared in the doorway. He too wore a jacket and boots.

“Don’t worry,” he said to Mrs. Garcia. “We’ll find her.”

“Let’s go,” Dad said. He pulled the keys to the Dodge out of his pocket, and took three steps towards the door.

“I’m going on foot,” Jim said. “Through the woods and over by the lake. I think you and Detective Peterson and the Catalinos will have the road covered.”

“If you think it’s best,” Dad said.

“I do.”

So Dad and Henry ran out the door. A fresh gust of black leaves rushed the hallway and into the kitchen, before they pulled it shut. Outside there was a rumble in the driveway, then a pair of headlights through the window, and in a minute they were gone.
Mom rubbed Mrs. Garcia’s back and kept telling her that everything was going to be alright, but Mrs. Garcia sobbed and puddles of sorrow dripped from the table. I followed Jim out into the hallway.

“Why don’t you take your bike?” I asked him. I dropped my voice to a whisper so Mom couldn’t hear. “You can cover a lot more ground, and still go through the woods. The snow isn’t thick enough yet to stop a bike.”

“You know perfectly well that my bike has a flat tire. And by the time we got to Hopperton’s, and got Mr. Hopperton up, and all that, we’d have lost too much time.”

“I’m not saying we go to Hopperton’s,” I said. “I know a way where we can cut through the woods, look for Mary, and still get a tire. Plus, you’ll have two more sets of eyes.”

Five minutes later, Johnny was up and dressed. He wrapped himself in a sweater, a jacket, a scarf, and a cap, on account of the fever, and we grabbed two more flashlights. I told Mom I was going back to bed, and to just tell me what happened in the morning. Jim helped Johnny and I fill our beds with clothes and pull the covers up so that if Mom checked up on us, it would look like we were fast asleep. We didn’t spend too much time because the leaves had blocked out all the light, and just the general form would be enough.

We snuck out the back door as Jim said good bye to Mom and Mrs. Garcia, and swore that he’d bring Mary back safe. He met us around the side of the house, and lifted the bike up on his shoulders.

“You two lead the way.”
Johnny had thrown on my backpack. He said he needed it for when we got to the
tire fields.

"Shears," he said, "to cut through the vines. I don’t want to get too close to the
house. You know what I mean."

The backpack looked like it had more than shears, but I didn’t want to press. I
figured Johnny knew what he was doing, especially when it came to tires.

After that, none of us talked much. The wind swirled, and every time we opened
our mouths to take a breath or say something, leaves would get blown in. The air was
thick with black leaves, so thick that it felt like we were up to our ears in mud and it was
a struggle just to move an arm or a leg forward. They didn’t taste too good either, like
black licorice dipped in fish, and I figured they probably swooped down into the water by
the trout farm before spreading outward into town.

Johnny led the way. He leaned into the wind and took short deliberate steps. He
had a flashlight in one hand and shined it from side to side, and every twenty seconds or
so he’d cover his mouth with one of his hands and yell out for Mary. I couldn’t hear him,
on account of the howl of the wind, and I doubted that Mary, if she was out there, could
hear either.

Jim was behind him. He took big steps and adjusted the bike so that it stayed high
on his shoulders. He blocked the wind and left deep ruts in the snow, and it made it easier
for me to follow behind him when I stepped in his tracks. Jim shined his flashlight from
side to side as well, but I figured we couldn’t have seen Mary anyway, not with all the
leaves and the wind, and the darkness of night. We couldn’t have seen Mary if she was
three feet away from us.
I kept my eyes and my flashlight mostly on the ground, looking for tracks in the snow, to see if maybe Mary had come out this way. But mostly I saw snow and leaves and the fog of my breath. And occasionally the trunk of a tree.

It only took us about ten minutes to get within eyesight of the Appleseed place, which is pretty good time considering the conditions, and that usually it takes at least twenty minutes to get over there. We walked along the edge of the lake for a while, and Jim shined his flashlight out on the lake. The lake was pure black, black as tar and looked twice as thick, and you couldn’t see anything on it except for the reflection of the full moon when there was a space in the clouds and the leaves. I don’t think Mary would’ve thrown herself into the lake, not on a night like this and not in the winter. It was too wet for her. I figured if she was going to off herself, she’d involve the wind over the water, and we didn’t have any buildings in town high enough to do that sort of thing. I figured Jim probably thought this too, but he kept looking out there anyway.

The wind died down as we got closer to the Appleseed place, and Jim looked back at me.

“It’d be a beautiful night if it weren’t so damned terrible.” And I nodded, and figured that was true of a lot of things.

We got about ten feet from where the cat tails and the high grasses broke and gave way to the bare front yard of the Appleseed place. Johnny stopped suddenly, and Jim, who’d been looking out at the lake bumped into him.

“Sorry,” he said. But Johnny just stood there and looked up at the house.

All of the lights were off, but we were clear of the leaf storm, and the edges of the house looked sharp in the moonlight. As well as I could see, nothing was moving in or
around the house except for the open passenger door on Johnny’s dad’s truck. It creaked in the wind, and two aluminum cans with the middle crushed in rattled around in a clunky circle by the foot of the porch.

“We can stay in the cat tails if you want,” Jim said. “They give us more cover, and we can go the long way around.”

“No, we can go straight through,” Johnny replied. “I think it’s safe.”

He took a step forward.

“You’re not even supposed to be out here,” Jim said. “We’ll go through the cat tails. Mary will be fine. We’ll move quickly.”

Jim’s shoulders shook a little as he said it, and I could tell that part of him wanted Johnny to run out through the high grasses and straight to the tire fields, but he wouldn’t force him to do it.

Johnny took another step towards the yard, but then turned north and began to jog through the grasses, swinging his arms like a reaper to keep them out of his face. Jim followed him, and I followed the moonlight gleam of the bicycle spokes bouncing up and down in the grass.

When we got to the tire fields, Johnny pulled out his shears and snipped right through the barbed wire so we wouldn’t have to lay a jacket and hop over. Jim had never seen a tire field before, and he stopped to look around and take it all in. For the most part, the snow hadn’t gotten into the field too much. Little tufts gathered at the bottom of the bikes and shopping carts, and every fifty yards or so a small patch eased its way into the
tire field, but mostly if was dust. The dust had hardened in the rain, and when we stepped into the tire field we made squishing sounds with our boots against the mud.

"Isn’t that Henry’s old bike?" Jim said. He pointed to the yellow Springmaster. Rust lined the frame and the handlebars, but the seat looked good as new.

Johnny nodded.

"Follow me,” he said. “The bike tires are out towards the middle. We’re lucky. Bike tires are a winter bloom.”

On account of Johnny’s dad disappearing, and his mom running away, the tire fields had been neglected in the five months since I’d last seen them. I’d never seen an overripe tire before, but they were in abundance as we cut through the fields towards the bike section.

"Try not to step on any of these,” Johnny motioned towards the rotting tires.

“They squirt something awful and will blind you for a few minutes. Rubber’s toxic when it’s overripe.”

We cut through a patch of tractor tires and some steel belted radials. The tractor tires were overgrown with weeds and had lost all of their form. Rather than tall, firm tires, these drooped at the sides, and the treads had disappeared entirely. With the weeds poking up through the middle of the tire, it looked like a giant rotten tomato. Even mold grew along the rims and near the ground.

The steel belted weren’t nearly so bad, except they grew tighter together, and where there was five or six of them growing in relatively close proximity, they had all oozed together in a large rubber puddle.
“Rubber goes aqueous when it spoils. The insides first, and it swells up like the ones you see here.” Johnny pointed. “If we come back in a couple of weeks, the outsides give and the whole field gets covered with a black paste. It’s good for next year’s crops. Regeneration and all that stuff. Helps fertilize the soil. But you have to make sure it doesn’t spill out of the field. That’s why dad and I dug a six inch rim along the edge, underneath the barbed wire.”

We arrived at the bike tires and Johnny dropped to a knee. Bike tires were different than car or tractor or even barrow tires. They grew on vines that ran along posts that were cemented into the ground about three yards apart.

“Because they’re a winter crop, you have to make sure they grow at least a foot off the ground. Otherwise they get caught in the sludge and are ruined. Let me see your bike, Jim.”

Jim put the bike on the ground. It was a ten speed mountain bike, even though we didn’t have any mountains anywhere, but Jim liked to switch gears and hear the click.

“You’re in luck, the Bermuda hybrid bloomed particularly well this year.”

There were about twenty bike tires of various size and tread growing on the vines. And Johnny ran back and forth between the posts, holding this tire, and squeezing that tire, and lifting them to his nose, and holding them up to the moonlight to check the roundness. At one of the posts he stopped and sighed.

“These ones are no good,” he clipped one off and tossed it to Jim and me. There were holes all along the tread of the tire. “Rubber locusts,” he said. “Dad wanted to try an organic crop of bike tires, to see if we could boost our sales in Oregon, but it didn’t work so well.”
Finally Johnny found a tire to his liking, and with a flourish of the shears it was in Jim’s hand.

“It’s not quite ripe, and if circumstances were better, I’d advise you to wait a day or two, and leave it out on the porch or in a bowl on the counter, but time is short tonight. It’ll be fine. And the good thing about these ones...” Johnny reached into the tire and pulled out an inner tube, “is they come inflated fresh off the vine. None of this compressed air garbage either. That’ll last you a year and you won’t have to pump.”

In no time Jim had the new tire fixed onto his bike.

“Now, let’s get the two of you home,” he said.

I looked over at Johnny to see what he wanted to do. He knew as well as I did that Jim didn’t have a whole lot of time to get out on the road and find Mary, especially if she was as despondent as her note made it sound.

“We can get home fine by ourselves,” he said. “We’ll just stick to the cat tails and grasses, and stay away from the house.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You go, we’ll be fine. We’ll be back in bed before Mom even knows we’re gone.”

Jim looked back over the lake towards our house, then down at us, then out towards the highway. The leaf storm was still blowing back in the woods, but it let up heading north on the highway. The clouds had cleared mostly and the full moon was almost as bright as the sun, and cast a shadow across half of Jim’s face.

“Promise me you’ll stay down and out of the sight lines of the house.”

“We will,” Johnny said.

“And run straight home. Don’t stop to say hi to Joe or skip rocks in the lake.”
"We won’t," I said. "We’ll be home before you hit the highway."

"All right," Jim hopped up on top of his bike. "Johnny," he said, "I can’t thank you properly right now. But tomorrow, once we find Mary and this whole mess is sorted out, I’m taking you down to Hopperton’s for the biggest ice cream sundae you’ve ever seen."

Before we could say anything else, Jim took five quick pedals to the edge of the tire field, jumped the six inch rim of the field, and disappeared into the darkness heading towards the highway, pedaling so hard we could hear him grunt for another minute before he was gone completely.

"Come on, Johnny, let’s get out of here." I took three steps towards the edge of the field, but I didn’t hear Johnny following me, so I turned around.

He stood so still I wondered for a second if time had stopped, and I had missed it, but the clouds blew southward and the trees surrounding the field swayed in the breeze. His arms shook and his knees were stiff as an iron rod. I followed his gaze up towards the second floor of the Appleseed house. The light was on.
"It’s not the light so much that you have to worry about," a voice came from behind us. "It’s me."

Johnny and I turned around. His mom was standing there. A long red coat covered her shoulder, and she stood between us and the moon, so her face was entirely covered in shadows. I could only see the faintest hint of white in her eyes.

"Your little friend is here this time," she said. "Which means there’s no one around to save you."

I’d never been in a life threatening situation before, and I’d always wondered how I’d react when put into one. I’d like to say that I grabbed Johnny around the waist, knocked his Mom over, and rushed us to safety, but the truth is I froze completely. Like a nightmare. The one you have where the witch or the dragon or the grizzly bear is chasing you, and you can’t move your feet because someone dipped them in lead, and you’re just standing there watching death come towards you because you figure death can’t be nearly so bad as the fear. Because death would be nice and at least you could move again, or at least you wouldn’t know that you weren’t moving anymore. I was so scared I couldn’t even look over at Johnny to see if he was frozen too.

Johnny’s mom held her hand menacingly behind her back, like she was holding a knife or a gun or some other instrument that made me long for the rolling pin. She stood twenty feet away from us, next to a tractor tire. She must have been watching us the whole time Jim was around. She took a step towards us.
“Paul,” Johnny whispered. “Close your eyes!” But before I had time to close them, Johnny ran and jumped on one of the tires, and the juice came spurting out and nailed me right in the eyes.

It hurt something fierce, like I’d been stabbed in the eyes with fire and hot sauce, and I could feel the pain of it from my nostrils to the back of my legs, and as far as seeing goes, I couldn’t see anything. It was like the rubber coated my eyes, and then through me into a pit of darkness, and turned off the lights of the world and covered the sun. But I guess he must have gotten his mom too, because I heard her wailing and flopping around about ten feet away.

“You little bastard,” she screamed. “You’ll pay for this!”

Johnny grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” he whispered. “But it was the only way. Are you okay?”

“I can’t see.”

“Are your legs working? Because we’ve got about four minutes to get the hell out of here.”

“Let’s go,” I said. “Just let me hold your arm.”

The first couple of steps were rough. I staggered and tripped, and knocked the both of us down and we landed in the damp muck of the fields, I could feel the thick dough like give of the mud, and I thought this was it for us because I could hear heavy footsteps gaining.

“Leave me behind,” I said to Johnny.

“Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “This ain’t a TV show.”
So he pulled me up by the shoulder again, and we were off. After a few more steps I got the hang of it, and my senses picked up. I don't know how they did it, or why, or where they came from, but all of a sudden I could smell the rotting tires. Not just *smell* them, but smell them where they were on the ground. I could smell the difference between weeds and dust, and a dip or a rut in the field, and it was like I could see again even though everything was dark. I wondered if I had picked up some of Smoochie's super smelling ability the day I pretended to be a blind dog. And though there were times in the past where I was glad I didn't have it, it certainly was coming in handy now.

"We must be getting close to the barbed wire," I said. "I can smell the rust."

"Ten more steps," Johnny said. "Then we jump. She's still coming after us, but we're pulling away a little."

I felt Johnny pull away from me and then the side of his leg as he went up and over the barbed wire, then I jumped too. I guess my lack of sight didn't give me super jumping powers, because I ripped my jacket and jeans up pretty bad going over the wire, and I could feel a sting along the back of my leg.

"You're bleeding," Johnny said.

I heard a yell and a jangle as Mrs. Appleseed ran straight into the barbed wire. She took about three steps and dragged the shopping cart before she fell down.

"She's pretty angry," Johnny said. "And I think her sight is coming back."

Sure enough, I could make out the blurry outlines of things. The moon, the Appleseed house, Mrs. Appleseed tangled in barbed wire on the ground, kicking and screaming, and little drops of blood from the back of my leg, steaming in the snow.
I had a bit of a limp now, but I still was moving faster than I ever did in PE class when we had to run laps and put our times on the board. We ran straight down towards the lake and then along the shore for a while. Johnny looked back over his shoulder every once in a while, and his backpack jangled with the shears and bounced up and down and slammed him in the lower back with every step.

"Why don’t you drop the backpack?"

"We’re still going to need it."

We kept to the thin trail between the cat tails and lake weeds on one side, and the high gray grass on the other side, and the full moon made it easy to see. Gradually my sight came back to me, but tears still dripped from the corners, and the sting had not yet subsided.

Up ahead, in the woods, the leaf storm was still blowing.

"Once we get into the woods, we should be okay. She’ll never see us in there," I said.

"And we’ll never see her."

"What are you saying?"

"If she didn’t take the path, if she cut straight through, she could beat us into the woods."

"So should we go back?"

"She might be back there too."

Johnny and I stopped running. He stood there breathing hard and put his hands on his knees, and looked back down the path, and then up towards the woods. Blood ran in a
thick stream from my leg now, and I figured that running around wasn’t going to help it get any better. We listened hard both ways. Nothing. Wind, snow flurries, and breathing.

“So where do we go?”

“I’ve got an idea,” a voice came from the lake side of the cat tails and Johnny and I jumped. “Why don’t you come with me?”

We pulled a flashlight from the backpack and shined it through the brush. Sitting there in a canoe, with two paddles and a huge smile, was Lia Catalino.

“I figured the two of you might be up to no good,” she whispered as we hopped into the boat and pushed away from the shore. “Don’t use the paddles too much until we get out there a bit. Too much noise.”

“How’d you figure?” I asked.

“And what are you doing out here by yourself?”

“When your dad called our place at two-thirty in the morning, and said there was trouble, I figured the two of you would be involved somehow. I didn’t know that you’d be coming here. But I had a feeling. I convinced my Dad to drop me off at the lake so I could sit in the canoe and watch the moon.”

“And he said yes?” I asked.

“I think it’s pretty obvious that he said yes.”

“Oh yeah.”

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“Johnny jumped on a tire and squirted me in the eye, then I tried to leap some barbed wire.”
“Of course.”

“Shh,” said Johnny. “There’s someone in the bushes.”

“Get down,” said Lia. The three of us dropped to the bottom of the canoe. We were about sixty feet from shore when Johnny heard the noise, and the two of us heard it too. Sixty feet isn’t that far, but the lake dropped off pretty steep after about twenty feet, and the water was too cold for swimming. There were splashes by the edge of the shore.

“Johnny, are you out there?”

I looked over at Johnny and even though he was a good six inches under the edge of the canoe, he tried to sink in even farther, tried to push himself through the bottom of the boat. There were a few more splashes, then some rustling. Lia winked at me, and I thought I should peek to see if she had walked away yet. I started to move my head up, and Lia kicked me in the leg. “Not yet,” she mouthed. I dropped again. After what seemed like ten minutes, when my legs were cramped and my arms were cramped, and my neck was cramped, and I felt like my whole body was going to explode in a seizure, there was another splash, and then the pounding of footsteps along the dirt.

“Now it’s okay,” Lia said.

I poked my head up and the cat tails were still moving.

“I think we’ll be fine now,” Johnny said. The canoe had drifted towards the center of the lake. We sat up straight and stretched out, and Lia asked Johnny to pull three bandages and an alcohol wipe from a plastic bag tied to the middle spoke of the canoe.

“Let’s get that cleaned up. The last thing you need on a night like this is an infection.”
So I rolled up the bottom of my jeans up to my knee and Johnny dabbed at the cut, and cleaned it up. There was a lot of blood, but the cut itself wasn’t so deep. Just a long scratch really. But I still winced when Johnny rubbed it with the wipe.

"The more it hurts the better it’ll heal," Lia said. "That’s what my mom always says."

"That’s not always true," said Johnny. "Sometimes the hurt never heals and you just have to find a way to cope with the pain."

All three of us sat in silence. Johnny squeezed some ointment onto the bandages, and covered up my scratch. The ointment felt pretty good, and after a bit I couldn’t feel the sting anymore.

"Powerful stuff," Lia said. "It might just be best to wait till morning. They’ll send someone out for us. That way we don’t have to chance heading back to shore."

So we laid there for a while and looked at the moon. There was no wind on the lake, and everything was still. The leaf storm was dying down over in the woods, and the clouds were disappearing over the horizon, and the stars were coming out, and there was a restive glow to the world. Everything looked like it was outlined in silver on account of the full moon, and with the stillness and the three of us sitting there in the boat, it felt like the whole world was reaching the end of sleepy exhale. The up and down of the canoe was comforting, after the night we’d had, and looking up at the sky I felt like a baby again, being rocked to sleep and staring at his interstellar mobile. Lia had already fallen asleep. She’d taken one of the canoe cushions, leaned it against my good leg, and passed
right out. Johnny chewed on some chocolate reindeer and stared off at the reflection of
the moon in the middle of the lake, and pretty soon I fell asleep too.

I don’t know how much later it was, but I was awakened by the quiet splash of a
paddle. Johnny had the backpack across his lap and had his eyes fixed on the middle of
the lake. We weren’t moving all that fast, but we were getting closer.

“What’re you doing Johnny?” I asked.

“I’ve always wanted to see the moon up close.”

“Me too,” I said. “But I don’t think we can get there from here. We need a rocket
or something.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. He kept paddling. “I figure the reflection is a relational
thing. Because we aren’t getting any closer. I figure this is about as close as we are going
to get.”

“Probably.” I said, but I picked up a paddle and took a few strokes. We didn’t get
any closer to the moon reflection. It just moved a little to the left.

“I figure this will work,” I said. “It looks pretty big from here.”

“It’ll have to.”

I’d never seen the moon this big before. The water made the reflection bigger than
the moon in the sky, and it bobbed up and down a little, but we could see the bigger
craters, and the big gray spots, and the smile of the man on the moon. Even though we
couldn’t get closer, the canoe was at the edge of the silvery aura.

“Sure is pretty,” Lia said. “I wonder if the fish appreciate it.”
Johnny dropped the backpack from his knees onto the bottom of the boat with a clunk. He reached in and pulled out his wings.

"I thought those were under my mattress," I said.

"They’re not."

Lia and I watched as Johnny pulled the wings on. He’d improved them since I’d last seen them. No longer were they just cardboard and duct tape. He’d added some leather straps to hold his arms, and coated the cardboard in plastic bags. And on top of these he’d glued and taped and sewn in six hundred and fifty three bright blue feathers. If it hadn’t been Johnny’s face sticking out at the top, you would’ve thought he was a real bird.

He stood up and stretched his arms out. The wings went halfway down his back.

"If I’d had more time, I could’ve made a tail too," he said.

"We’re probably not going to see you again, are we?" Lia asked.

"Not for a while."

"Well, it’s been nice knowing you, Johnny Appleseed. You’re a good kid." Lia stood up and Johnny wrapped his wings around her.

"Mom’s gonna be mad," I said. "You weren’t supposed to leave the house."

And I walked over, and gave Johnny a hug. I didn’t let go for a minute because I didn’t have another best friend, and I wanted to make sure I could remember him when I told my kids about him. Wanted to make sure I got everything right. His thin arms and long fingers. His scabby knees. The quiet way he got sometimes, when the mood was right. I wanted to make sure I could remember it all.
"I’ve got a bunch of sour apple candies back at my old house," he said. "That’s how dad used to pay me for my work in the fields. You can have it if you want, and if you don’t, you can have it too."

Johnny turned around and gave his wings a few practice flaps, and one of the feathers fell off into the boat, but I don’t think he noticed because he took a deep crouch and leapt out towards the moon. A gust of wind darted across the lake from the trout farm, and he must have caught that because he went up up up and was flapping his wings, and I thought he was going to head straight for the real moon before he circled around and swooped over Lia and me. The boat was still rocking when he waved at us and plunged deep into the surface of the moon. He caused hardly a ripple at all on the surface of the lake.
Epilogue

I awoke to a symphony of splashing and shouting. The sun was up already, and even with my eyes closed and turned to the side I could see the orange glow. Lia woke up and there was a line running from her eye down to the bottom of her jaw from leaning on my jeans all night.

“Looks like your brother is swimming out to us,” she said.

“I don’t know why he didn’t just unhitch one of the canoes.”

Henry wasn’t all that great a swimmer, and by the time he got to us he was huffing and puffing. I had to help him into the boat, and he sat there for three minutes and caught his breath.

“Where’s Johnny?” he asked between breaths.

“He went to the moon,” I said.

“What?”

When we got back to the shore, no one believed us there either.

“That poor boy drowned,” Mom said.

“That was highly irresponsible of you to let him jump in the lake,” Dad said, “you know Johnny can’t swim.”

Mr. and Mrs. Catalino wrapped Lia up in a blanket, and gave each of us a muffin they’d brought from home, but they didn’t say anything until they said good-bye and took Lia home.
“What were they thinking?” Mom asked. “Leaving their little girl in the canoe, with that Appleseed woman running around.”

“She saved us,” I said. But Mom told me that it was in my best interest not to speak for the next few days.

When we got home, there was a two foot moat of black leaves clumped around the house and Detective Peterson and three other policemen sat at the kitchen table. They were drinking Dad’s coffee and had spilled sugar on the table. There had been no word from Jim or Mary, and no one had seen Mrs. Appleseed since the cat tails.

Mom told Detective Peterson about Johnny, and he called in a boat and a team of divers from the state capitol. The policemen went down to the lake to look for clues, and after Dad scraped the bottom of the coffee can and Mom sponged off the table, we headed down too. The divers arrived by helicopter about an hour later, and Mr. Hopperton let them use the motor boat he rented to summer people.

Detective Peterson must have called more than just the state capitol, because by noon most of the town had gathered around the edge of the lake to watch the divers. Trevor Lindman and his dad were there, as were Morty, Oakley, Hollerin’ Holly, Bad Brad, and all of their parents. Mrs. Anderson was rubbing Ms. L’s back down by the Appleseed dock, and Doc Anderson was rubbing Mrs. Anderson’s back. Mr. Hopperton walked around with Henry and offered hot chocolate from a thermos, but mostly people said no thanks. There were others too. Almost everyone was there except for Jim, Mary, Grandma, and the Catalinos.

No one said anything. I’d never seen this many people gathered around and not talking before. The silence made my nose bleed, and Mom handed me her handkerchief.
“We’ve got a body,” called one of the divers. “It’s stuck in some tires.”

He yelled loud enough for the boat to hear, but everyone on the shore heard it too, and a lot of people gasped. The other diver swam over and the two of them grabbed a rope from the boat and disappeared under the surface. One of them came up and signaled to the boat to start the winch, and for five minutes the only sound on the lake was the mechanical whir of the winch generator. A tire appeared at the surface and a lot of people leaned in. No one in town had ever seen a dead person before, not a drowned one at any rate. Not with big bulging eyes and blue skin.

I don’t know where a curiosity like that comes from, I don’t understand what it is in people that makes them want to see death. Maybe it’s because they’re still alive and they’re hoping for some words of advice or a symbol or a sign or something to help them stay away from the grave as long as they can. Maybe, but I don’t know, because as soon as I saw the tire, I turned around and faced the woods. I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing my friend dead.

“My God,” Detective Peterson said, “it’s Mr. Appleseed.”

People gasped some more, like they were surprised, but I bet they would’ve gasped just as loud had it been Johnny, or even some stranger who fell from the sky, and all the gasping made me sick to think that people gasp the same no matter what and haven’t got any feelings at all, and when Dad let go of my shoulder to get a better look, I took off running for the house. I slammed the door and sat down on Johnny’s bed and heaved for a bit.
It was dark when I woke up and Dad was sitting in the corner and watching me sleep.

"They didn’t find Johnny," he said. "They’re going to dive more tomorrow. It got too dark out."

"They aren’t going to find him. I told you he went to the moon."

"Son, it’s tough to believe that."

"It’s not a matter of belief. It’s a matter of fact."

I turned over in Johnny’s bed so that my shoulder faced Dad. Then I pulled the covers up so I wouldn’t have to look at him. I heard him stand up and the hollow creak of his boots as he walked over to me. I felt the warmth of his hand on my shoulder. He didn’t rub my shoulders or my back or tell me everything was going to be okay. He just let his hand sit there for a few minutes, like a man trying to keep his hat on in the wind.

"Jim called."

"What?"

"While you were asleep."

"Yeah."

"He caught up to Mary. She’d walked halfway to New York. Said she wants to be a dancer."

"She’s a good dancer."

"They called her mom first. Mrs. Garcia tried to convince her to come home, but she says she’s not coming home. Not anytime soon anyway."

"What’s that mean?"
“It means Jim ain’t coming back for a while either. He sold his bike so the two of them could ride the bus.”

“Oh,” I said, “did you tell Henry?”

“Not yet.”

“Did they find Johnny’s mom?”

“Nope,” he said. “Detective Peterson followed her footsteps along the edge of the lake and into the woods. Then they just disappeared. But Mom says Detective Peterson couldn’t find his butt with a map and a flashlight so who knows.”

We were quiet for a minute, and then Dad took his hand off my shoulder and walked to the door.

“If you feel like it, Mom’s got dinner ready. And if you don’t that’s okay too.”

He walked out the door and closed it most of the way, so that only a sliver of light snuck in at the edges of the door and gave a rectangular edge to the darkness of the room. I had a sick feeling in my gut that I’d never had before. Like I’d run and jumped and it wasn’t until I was in the air that I looked down and realized I wasn’t as close to the ground as I thought. It was a turning sickness, the kind you get when excitement suddenly turns to fear or the other way around and your body tries to catch up with your mind. The kind of feeling you get in your gut when you, for the first time in your life, actually feel yourself growing older. I imagine Joe must have felt it when his Mom planted him in the forest, and Jim must have felt it in a rush right before he kissed Mary for the first time, and Johnny must have felt it when he was making his wings. It was a feeling I both liked and hated. A feeling that made me pleasantly sick. At any rate, I couldn’t eat, so I pulled the covers up over my head, and fell asleep.