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Strings of light: stories about fathers and sons

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**STRINGS OF LIGHT:
STORIES ABOUT FATHERS AND SONS**

by

GARY DeANGELO

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior
Scholar's Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1989

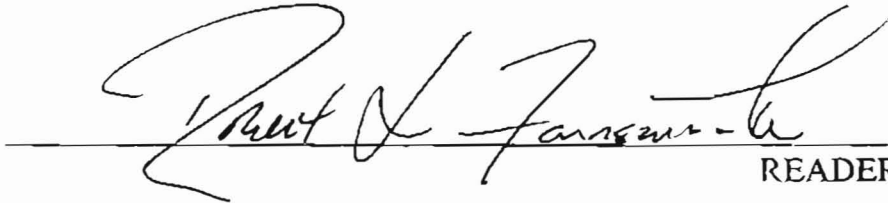
APPROVED:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be "K. Sedg", written above a horizontal line.

TUTOR

A handwritten signature in cursive script, clearly legible as "Charles Bassett", written above a horizontal line.

CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be "Paul H. Farnsworth", written above a horizontal line.

READER

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CHAIR

Strings of Light

When Dennis Gianelli sees the whirling, flashing lights of the ambulance and fire engines against the flat, grey sky of early morning as he makes the turn onto Summer Street toward home, he turns down the radio. As he cautiously winds his way down the icy road, he feels his heart sinking into his stomach; his hands are slipping with cold sweat on the steering wheel. As he gets closer and closer to his driveway, the feeling that something has gone wrong at home paints endless possibilities in his mind.

Maybe, he thinks, there's a black-out. Maybe the house is burning down, and his mother and father and his brother, Jack, are standing out on the icy lawn in their winter jackets and bed clothes, watching everything they own float in smoke and ash toward the sky. His mother is saying "save the photo albums," because that's the one thing that people always want rescued. The flames lick out at the sharp, cold air of dawn, and black and grey smoke pours out the windows where the firemen point their hoses, and his mother is still yelling "save the photo albums," and she's trying to explain to one of the firemen where to find them, but a policeman is holding her back. She is crying, and her husband tries to console her, but nothing he is saying makes her stop. Jack's hands are thrust deep in his pockets and he kicks at a chunk of ice in the driveway. When Dennis pulls up and gets out of the car, they embrace him and they all thank God that he stayed at Stacey's house last night.

The entire scene flashes through his mind in an instant, and as he turns into the long driveway he swallows hard. In front of the house, at the top of the driveway, an ambulance, a fire engine, and a police car all flash their beacons in bright, red, blue and white strobes. But the house is quiet. There is no smoke or flame in the sky. There are lights on in the kitchen, and up in his parent's bedroom. He hears the crackle of the police radio; the sound of it shoots him full of adrenaline. "Maybe it's a chimney fire," he says out loud. But as he steps out of his car, he doesn't smell any smoke.

As he walks up to the kitchen door, the policemen and the firemen leave through the door at the front of the house. The kitchen is quiet, but he can hear low voices in the front hall, and then the door closing. Christmas decorations still hang silently from every corner and window frame in the room; a miniature ceramic nativity scene and several tiny Santa Claus figurines are carefully arranged on one of the counters, though it is January. Dennis wants to go quietly up the back stairs and get in bed, but he doesn't. He looks at the clock on the oven. 5:30. When the automatic coffee maker begins to gurgle and hiss, his skin prickles.

His mother walks into the kitchen as the trucks and police cars turn off their lights and pull down the long driveway out onto the street. Her hair is matted with sleep, and her eyes are pink. Her lips are pulled thin and tight. "Are you just getting home now?"

"What's going on? What were the fire trucks for?" His eye is caught by a thin crack in the smooth, white ceiling, and he traces it in

his mind to the molding above the Dining room door. "Was it a chimney fire or something?"

"No," she says. "No it wasn't a chimney fire." She starts for the coffee maker, but stops when she sees that all the coffee hasn't finished dripping through. "Next time you stay out all night, you call home and let me know."

"Mama, what happened?"

"Go wake your brother. We have a lot to do today." She pulls the coffee pot out from the machine before it's done brewing, and the drips land on the hot burner hissing and sputtering before they evaporate. While she pours herself a cup of coffee, Dennis turns up the back stairs to his brother's room. By the time he reaches the top of the stairs, he knows that his father is dead.

The day before Grampy died, before one of their little league games, he took Dennis and Jack to the batting cages at Fun Land. The boys practiced hitting in the chain link cages, and their grandfather stood outside the fence and coached them, pumping quarters into the machines whenever they stopped. Later he drove them to the park and watched part of the game from behind the back stop. Dennis was standing on second base when the other team put in a new pitcher; he looked up past home plate. Behind the backstop his grandfather waved, then gathered up his coat and hat. Then he walked down the left field line past the stone wall that surrounded the park and drove away.

That was Saturday, he died Sunday night. When Mrs. Gianelli told Dennis and Jack before school the next morning, Dennis pictured

his grandfather walking through the gates of the stone wall at the park with his coat draped over his shoulder, and the way that he had waved before he left. For a long time after that, Dennis wondered if somehow Grampy knew he was leaving, and he just wanted to say good-bye.

Dennis' grandfather was buried in a grave alongside his father, and his brother, The Doctor. His mother, Gramma Gianelli, blubbered and babbled in Italian at the side of the grave. The large crowd was dressed in black, and silent, except for Grampy's mother, who was sobbing and moaning uncontrollably. In the middle of the ceremony Dennis watched the old woman start for the grave and try to jump in. Dennis' father and uncle grabbed her just before she fell. "I'm coming to join you Chippy!" she shouted. Then she yelled something in Italian and struggled to break free from the two big men.

Dennis' great-grandmother had lost her two sons, as well as her husband; and when they were all there, right in front of her in the same grave, it was too much for her. That was Dennis' first funeral. After that, whenever funerals were mentioned, his first thought was of his father and his uncle restraining the old woman, and the look of real terror in the old woman's face as she tried to throw herself into the hole, and how it seemed that she, too, wanted to die.

"Jack," Dennis shoves his brother, who is still asleep. "Jack, you gotta get up now."

Jack rolls onto his back and half opens his eyes. "What the fuck," he says. "Get out of here."

"Mama says you have to get up. Something happened-- I think we have to tear down the Christmas tree and the rest of that shit."

"Tell her I'll get up in a little while."

Downstairs his mother sits with her elbows on the kitchen table, holding a cup of coffee in front of her mouth. Her eyes are fixed on the wall, empty and wide. "Do you want to see him?" she asks. "He's still here, if you want to see him."

Dennis follows her through the kitchen, the dining room, and into his father's den. Mr. Gianelli is stretched out on the sofa with a sheet over his head. Even now, lifeless, his size is impressive, yet not so much as before. When she pulls the sheet back, Dennis notices that his father's skin looks waxy and grey, and tight. He imagines that touching him would feel like touching a cold statue. His mother quickly puts the sheet back over the corpse's head, then smooths out the wrinkles. The first thing Dennis thinks after what it would feel like to touch him, is *at least he's at home and not at Stephanie's.*

Once on a morning when school had been canceled because of snow, before he went to work, Dennis' father told him to shovel the steps and the walkway as soon as it stopped snowing. That afternoon, when his father came home, the boy was building a snowman on the front lawn. As he stepped out of the car, Dennis looked over at the walkway which was covered with snow, and spotted with his own footprints. The shovel was leaning against the door up on the porch. Mr. Gianelli walked up the walk and set his briefcase down by the door. Without a word he took up the shovel and returned to the lawn, raised the shovel shoulder high and

smashed the snowman to the ground. Then he stuck the shovel into the shapeless mound of snow that was once the boy's snowman, as if he were claiming territory. He turned and as the door clicked behind him Dennis began shoveling. The only sounds in the world were his sniffles, and the sound of a shovel scraping flagstones.

The next night, his father was late coming home from work.

"Get in the car," their mother said. The boys sat next to her on the front seat, and she drove out of town toward Wilmington.

"Where are we going?" Dennis asked.

"For a ride," she said. They don't usually go anywhere at night, especially before his father gets home from work. She pulled up to a house where Mr. Gianelli's car sat at the end of the driveway. She leaned on the horn for a long time, and the boys' father came out on the porch.

"Whose house is that?" Jack asked her, but she didn't hear him because her head was out the window and she was screaming at her husband. Then she sped off back toward home.

When Mr. Gianelli got home, about five minutes after his wife and kids, she was throwing his clothes out the door into the snow, and Jack and Dennis stood behind her in the kitchen, crying. Dennis could see Mr. and Mrs. Metrona from across the street looking out their window, and his father was standing in the snow up to his ankles trying to gather his things off the lawn, trying to calm her down. Last, she threw a suitcase, which would have hit him if he hadn't dodged it. When she closed the door she locked it and shut off the outside lights. From the window, Jack and Dennis watched him

out in the shadowy cold, pulling clothes out of the snow and tossing them in the back of his car. He drove off, leaving a pair of shoes half buried in the snow. Upstairs, Dennis could hear his mother smashing things.

Outside, he pulled his father's shoes out of the snow. He looked down the street to see if he could catch him, but all he could see were the red lights on the back of his car making the turn toward Wilmington. He looked down at his feet and he noticed that he was standing in a mound of snow that had once been his snowman.

"He'd never come up to bed. When I came down stairs, the television was still on, and he was here," she says. "I touched him, and he felt cold. Then he opened his eyes." Her voice is low, as if she's afraid of waking her husband. Her hands tug at the terry-cloth belt on her bathrobe.

"What did the ambulance guys say?"

"They said he'd been dead a few hours. The undertakers will be here in a little while," she says. "We're having the wake here. We have to take down all the decorations." She starts to cry and reaches for Dennis, and he holds her as if she would break to the touch, like ribbon candy.

They spend that day and the next tearing down the Christmas tree and rolling up strings of light. They pack up the ceramic nativity scene and all the Santa Claus figurines and carry them to the attic. All this, without speaking. In the attic, Dennis and Jack stack the boxes of decorations in the corner against the chimney. "What are you thinking?" Jack finally asks.

"I don't know." Dennis takes a box of red glass globes from his brother. "I don't know," he says. "You didn't get to see him before they took him out, did you?"

"No. You should have told me that's why you were trying to get me up," he says.

"I knew something was up," Dennis says, "but I didn't know what. There were fire engines outside when I got home. I had no idea."

"Did you see him?" he asks.

"Mama took me in to look at him. She found him in the den with the television still on. He must have been watching-- something." His voice trails off. He places the box of stockings on top of the pile and Jack hands him the next one, the one with the plastic candlesticks for the windowsills. "At least he didn't have his eyes open; he just looked like he was sleeping-- it was kind of weird, like at any minute he would just wake up and tell me to scrape the ice off his car, you know?" He starts a new stack of boxes with the boxful of candles below the window, and outside the attic tiny icicles hang from the bare branches that scrape against the side of the house. A deep, crusty snow covers the lawn, and Dennis wishes that the house had been burning down when he got home, and that his whole family had been out there in the snow. "Mama says that the fire department and the ambulance came, but they didn't do anything for him, except cover him with a sheet. She says that when she found him he opened his eyes and rolled them some, but the E.M.T.'s said that he had been dead for a few hours. I wonder if they just knew

that they couldn't save him or if she imagined it." Jack and Dennis are standing in the corner of the attic, and the sun has sunk below the horizon. The room is getting dark and they're standing alone surrounded by boxes of lights and ribbons and plastic holly and mistletoe. Dennis wants to say something important; He wants to tell Jack that they're all going to be all right, but he can't. He wants to know that they're all going to be all right, but he doesn't. "Then she told me that she wanted the wake here, in the house, and that was it," he says. Dennis looks at Jack in the fading light. His brother is staring at a point on the floor. Dennis imagines him on the edge of an enormous hole, staring down into black nothingness. "I felt like I should cry, but all I could think of was all the times we ate dinner without him because he was out with his fucking girlfriend."

"Come on," Jack said. "It's cold up here. Let's finish this up."

On the way down from the attic, Dennis can hear his brother holding back sobs.

Downstairs Jack covered the stuffed, four foot Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus with a green plastic trashbag and carried them upstairs. Dennis swept up the dry, brown pine needles that the tree had left behind.

The undertakers bring Mr. Gianelli back in the casket late in the afternoon, and Jack and Dennis help them carry it into the sun room where the Christmas tree had been. They open it so Mrs. Gianelli can see how they made him up. His face is colorful, and his hair perfectly placed. She runs her fingers lightly around the outline of his jaw, and she is sobbing.

Then they open the lower hinge, the part of the lid that covers below the waist. His large frame barely fits into the casket; his legs are bent at the knee and twisted to one side so that they fit in the box. The sight of him lying there with his legs all bent up makes Dennis gag; and for the first time in his life he's thankful he's not as big as his father.

The night before the wake he can't sleep. It's a disturbing comfort, knowing that his father's there, laid out in a box where the Christmas tree stood only hours before. Tomorrow the house will be full of friends and relatives. Tonight it's just Dennis and Jack, and their mother and father. From Jack's room he hears what sounds like the only sound in the house, the slow, heavy, human sound of sleep. Dennis wants his brother to wake up; he wants someone to tell him how they feel, or just know if anyone knows how they feel. Alone in his room, he struggles in and out of dreams all night long.

The last time Dennis saw his father alive was on New Years Eve. He was standing at the kitchen counter, his huge hands spread out before him on the smooth white counter-top, his thick hair, dark and greying, was slicked back, exposing his hard, square face. "You're not going out tonight," he said.

"I'm just going to Dixie's house," Dennis said, "It's not like I'm going into town or anything." He was careful about what he said; it wasn't often that he argued with his father. Usually he just accepted what he said as the way it was going to be, end of discussion. "We're all staying over too, so no one has to drive home after."

They stood there, his father on one side of the counter, Dennis on the other. Christmas decorations surrounded them, red and green and gold, and the tree sparkled in the next room, with the empty boxes and torn paper and ribbon from Christmas morning still scattered beneath it.

"Why should Jack get to go out, and not me?" The brightly colored shreds of wrapping paper remind Dennis of Christmas, and how when they were all opening their presents how warm and close he felt when they were all together, and how Christmas is the one day out of the year that people just put all the shit behind them and really try to enjoy each other's company.

The pots and pans hung on a rack behind his father's head, the whir and hum of the dishwasher and refrigerator clicked and ticked behind his deep, thick, voice. "Jack is older than you," he said. "Stay home."

The day after the memorial service, the undertaker comes back one last time. He carries him alone, in a small gold box the size of a flour canister. "Here are the ashes," he says as he hands her the box. It glints in the light and it looks like a jack-in-the-box with out a handle.

That night is like those before, sleepless and quiet; again Dennis lies awake in bed, listening to the quiet, waiting for something to break the silence; again he wishes his brother would come in and talk. He pictures his mother alone on her bed, and wonders if she'll still sleep on the same side, or if she'll move into the middle. He imagines that his father's pillows are mixed with the others, and now

they are all hers. He pictures her lying awake staring across the room at the gold box on the mantle, clutching one of his pillows against her chest, and he wonders if she wants to die, if she wants that badly to be with him that she wants to die. He wonders if now that he's gone she can only feel the pain of loss, or if she feels a sense of relief, knowing that she doesn't have to deal with that whole mess with Stephanie. Maybe she only thinks of the times before he started fooling around.

He envisions his mother at the edge of an open grave, dropping flowers into the empty hole. She is dressed in white. She stands alone in the rain, no preachers, or family, or mourners; no funeral or corpse. Her white dress is streaked and spattered with mud when she falls; or jumps.

Dennis looks at the clock. 10:30. He gets up out of bed and picks up the phone. He dials Stacey's number but hangs up before the phone rings.

Back in bed he studies the patterns of the wallpaper in the dark.

When they eat dinner the box is in the kitchen up on a shelf overlooking the table, and when they watch television it's there, like a statue, or a piece of furniture. Having the box there all the time reminds Dennis of the time He went to his grandmother's house for dinner after Grampy died. It was just him and his grandmother, but she had set three places at the dinner table. When he asked her who the third place was for she answered, "Let's just say it's for God."

His father's funeral is different from Grampy's, because it's not a funeral; at a funeral you go from the church to the cemetery in limousines. Then the casket is lowered into the grave and covered with dirt. People drop flowers in with the fresh earth, and everybody cries. An old woman tries to throw herself into the open grave, but someone stops her. People mourn, out loud; it's not like at the wake, where everyone smiles and tries to make you feel better. At the funeral people are finished saying how sorry they are, and they show it instead. And then the dirt is smoothed over, and everyone has said good-bye. Soon grass starts to grow where the earth had been turned up.

After the mass for Dennis' father, everyone files out of the church like it was just any kind of mass. Dennis isn't a pall bearer like he was at his grandfather's funeral. His grandmother doesn't get to try to throw herself in the hole, and Dennis doesn't get to stop her.

The undertaker comes by the next day, and when he hands Mr. Gianelli over to his wife in the little gold box, she smiles and thanks the serious man for all his help. He expresses his sympathies one last time, and disappears from the Gianelli family's life. For now.

Dennis was tired of spending New Years Eve with his parents; he went out despite his father's protest. He pulled into Dixie's driveway around nine o'clock. There were several cars in the driveway, and from within he recognized the thumping bass line of a Talking Heads' song.

Inside his friends were dancing and shouting. The windows were sweating and condensation dripped down in streaks, letting the

light cut through the foggy glass in splinters. Dennis was thirsty and wanted a beer, but he couldn't stop thinking about his parents at home in front of the television eating take out Chinese and watching the Guy Lombardo Orchestra. He almost felt like he should be there with them, but again, why should he do everything his father tells him to do.

Inside he drinks beer and champagne and flirts with Stacey Morrison. He had always thought that she was attractive, and she seemed to be coming on to him, but she was obviously drunk.

Five minutes before the New Year he was throwing up in Dixie's back yard. Inside he could hear the shouting. Happy New Year. He wiped vomit off his chin with his sleeve and tried to spit out the sour taste in his mouth. As he stumbled through the door back to the party someone pushed a bottle of champagne in his face; Stacey Morrison wanted a New years kiss.

By twelve-thirty he and Stacey had found their way into the laundry room. She sat on top of the dryer with her legs open, and Dennis leaned against the machine, pushing himself between them. When he shut his eyes the room spun, so he kept them open when he pulled her face to his and they kissed. She sipped three dollar champagne out of the bottle, and handed it to Dennis. He drank. "Happy New Year," he said.

"Same to you. Are you staying here tonight?"

"Well I'm a little too fucked up to drive, that's for sure. I practically had to beg my father to let me out tonight. This is the first time I've ever gone out on New Years Eve, can you fucking

believe that? A year ago tonight while all my friends were out getting fucked up and celebrating, I was at home with my parents eating Chinese and watching that fucking ball of light drop out of the sky at Times Square." He blushed as he realized what he was saying; there he was, twenty-one years old and ten minutes away from getting inside Stacey Morrison's pants, and he's telling her that he has to ask his father if he can go out at night. She probably thinks he has to ask him if he can stick his dick inside her too. He quickly added, "He told me I had to stay home, but there was no way I was going to miss this party." The back of his throat was dry, and his tongue felt swollen. It was hard to talk straight. He gulped another shot of champagne and tried to get his mind off his father and on to the matters at hand, a five foot-ten blonde with a killer body.

Who the fuck is he to tell me what to do anyway? I know he's not working late, he's out fucking that bimbo after work every night. He probably has dinner with her too, and that's why he never eats with us. Why does she stand for it? "Are you O.K.?" Stacey asked.

"Yea, I'm fine. I was just thinking," he said. "Is there anything left in that bottle?" She handed it to him and he drank the last gulp. Then he opened the dryer that she was sitting on and pulled some clean sheets out. He spread them on the floor. "We can sleep here tonight."

New Years Day he went home and showered, and he was out with Stacey before he saw his mother or father; they were already asleep when he got home that night, and the next morning his father was off to work at the usual time. Dennis spent that night at Stacey's

house, and when he came home the next morning there was a fire engine and an ambulance at the top of the driveway.

The house has grown quiet. After a few months, Dennis' mother and brother have started running Gianelli Hardware together, and soon Dennis is back taking business classes at the community college. He doesn't see Stacey much anymore. His guess is that she felt it was bad timing to start a relationship with a guy who's father just died.

At home, the gilded urn rests on a shelf in the liquor cabinet, and is now only displayed on special occasions, like birthdays and holidays, and even then, sometimes they leave it where it is.

After Thanksgiving dinner, almost a year later, Dennis mixes drinks for Jack and himself; they're watching Dallas and Detroit. When he reaches for the gin on the top shelf, his hand brushes the cold, gold colored box, and a reflection of the television screen glints off the shiny surface. It is clear enough that he can almost tell the two teams apart.

He mixes the drinks on the counter below the cabinet. As he places the bottle back on the shelf, he sees Herschel Walker pound his way through the Detroit defense, reflected on his father's ashes. Then it strikes him that the box had stayed in the cabinet during dinner, instead of resting above the fireplace in the dining room.

Christmas, two years after his father died. Red and green ornaments, and angels hang from the walls. A small Santa Claus doll in a sleigh hangs from the kitchen ceiling, suspended with fishing

line, and in every window there are plastic candles and small white strings of light.

Dennis' mother has a boyfriend, Stan; he's a man that she met through the business, after she'd taken control of Gianelli Hardware. He's sixty-three years old, almost ten years older than his mother, and it's obvious that he loves her very much.

It's almost irritating to Dennis how much Stan compliments his mother. "Your Mama," he says, "is one talented and beautiful lady."

"Yes," Dennis says, "she is."

"She works six days a week, she looks fifteen years younger than she is, and she's the greatest cook I've ever known."

"Yes," he says, "I know. She's great." He glances over at Jack, who is holding back a smile. They both like Stan, though they think he talks too much.

"Just look at what she does. I bet there isn't a square foot in this house that doesn't have some kind of decoration on it; and that has got to be the most beautiful Christmas tree I've ever seen." Stan points to the tree that is standing where the casket used to be.

"She does a good job," Dennis says. "There used to be even more, before she started working, you know? There are probably five or six boxes of decorations up in the attic that she hasn't brought down in the last couple of years." Dennis thinks of him and Jack standing up in the attic surrounded by all the decorations the day his father died.

He notices that Stan is uncomfortable about this vague reference to the time before his father died, and quickly adds "This is

your first Christmas here. You'll get used to it." It's been six months since Stan first started dating his mother, but Dennis still hasn't gotten used to it.

And so where there was once a father, and then a gold tin, there was Stan. Stan at the head of the table, Stan saying grace and driving the family car, Stan lying in front of the television on Sunday afternoons, and Stan asking Dennis to shovel the walk or wash the car. But it was also Stan who came home from work on time every night, with Dennis' mother right at his side, and that, he thought, was what was most important.

Last Christmas the box was on the mantle piece in the room where Dennis and Jack and their mother opened their presents. But this morning, Stan sat among them, and they all exchanged gifts.

After dinner, Jack and Stan are watching a football game in the den. Dennis wanders into the kitchen where his mother is rinsing the dishes and setting them in the dishwasher.

He doesn't say anything at first. His eyes are on the dishes in the sink. "Do you still miss Dad?"

"Of course I do. That's a stupid question."

"Well then why do you want to get married again?" He pulled out the spray nozzle from the sink and sprayed the dishes.

"Dennis, why are you asking me this?"

"I guess I just want to know, that's all."

She lets out a breath of air, but doesn't say anything.

For the first time since his father died, Dennis thinks about that New Years Eve, and how his parents wanted him to stay home but he

didn't, and that nothing they could have said would have made him, except that his father might have said that he was going to die in three days and it would be nice to have the whole family home, together on New Years Eve, and the remaining, waning hours of his life; but he didn't, because he didn't know, and by the time he found out it was just too fucking late.

Dennis can tell that this is hard for her. "Do you remember that night when he didn't come home and then you took me and Jack out in the car and you found him at Stephanie's house, and then you came home and busted everything up and threw his clothes out in the snow? Well you went upstairs and you were carrying on up there, and me and Jack, we just stood in the doorway crying our eyes out, watching him bending over out in the cold pulling his clothes out of the snow and throwing them into his car. I know, now, that we were crying because we were afraid, not because we knew what was going on. But then, then I was so mad at you. My God! I didn't know what he had done, you know? And there you were, smashing everything you could find, and screaming and crying. I thought you had flipped. And when he drove away I thought we were never going to see him again, and I hated you, not him. If I could have him back for a minute, I would tell him that. I would tell him that I know that, and I'd ask him what he has to say about it." He looks up at his mother for the first time since he started talking, and she is close to tears. "But you have to tell me," he said. "You have to tell me it wasn't all bad like that. Can you tell me that?" He is

embarrassed because his voice is wavering. "Was it all bad like that?"

She wipes her eyes and reaches for his shoulder. "No," she says, "it wasn't all that bad."

"Do you ever wish he was still here? Aren't there things that you wish you had said to him that you never got a chance to say? Sometimes I wish I could have him back for an hour, just so I could tell him what I think about what he did and who he was, and give him a chance to defend himself, if he could. Just an hour, just so I can talk to him. I never got to talk to him."

"I know," she says, "none of us did."

Part of the Game

Once a week my brother Jack and I have lunch at my grandmother's apartment. We work in the hardware store that our grandfather first opened in the fifties; Jack has been working full time in the warehouse ever since daddy died. I'm just working in the office for the summer until I move back to Boston to finish school in September.

Gramma lives above Gianelli Hardware in a four room apartment Grampy had built before he died. It's hot outside; it has been all summer. I'm tired from work and I don't feel like eating. I just want a lemonade and a place to lie down for a little while before we have to go back downstairs. Jack is already sitting at the table when I walk through the door.

"Last one in to work, first one to take lunch," I say.

Jack turns around. "What did you say?" He isn't very tall, but he pumps iron, and he's big. His chest bulges out like my daddy's did, and his arms are like tree trunks.

"Nothing."

Gramma puts the food on the table. Spaghetti, a salad, and some cold-cuts and fresh rolls.

Jack and I each fill our glasses with lemonade. I take a bit of salad on my plate.

"Eat the spaghetti," Gramma says. "Eat it or you's will both be wearing it." She fills our plates with pasta and pushes them in front of us.

"Gramma," Jack says, "It's too hot for spaghetti."

"Too hot? I got a fan in the window, It's nice." She points to the kitchen window where the fan is blowing the curtains around and pulling in hot air from outside.

"A fan don't do nothin' when it's a hundred degrees outside," Jack says.

"Doesn't do anything," I say.

"Not when it's this hot it don't."

"No," I say, "A fan doesn't do anything, not a fan don't do nothin'." I make my voice deep and dopey when I quote him. Mama wants me to come to work full time after I finish college, but all I can keep thinking is that it'll make me end up like Jack. I'll forget all I've learned and have come to appreciate, and soon I'll know nothing

but the business. I guess I would do it for her sake, but I know I won't stay there forever.

"Fuck you," he says.

"No fighting," Gramma says. "Not in my house."

"Yeah, no fighting," I say. Then to Gramma, "It's too hot to eat a big lunch."

"Shut up and eat, both of you's." She makes us each a sandwich and puts them next to our plates of spaghetti.

I pick at my salad a little, and wipe sweat off my forehead with my tee-shirt. "What time did you get in this morning?" I ask him.

"Shut the fuck up," he says.

When daddy died, Jack quit his job as a computer salesman to come run the business with mama. When they first started working together, I spent a lot of time alone. I'd come home from school and wait around for them to get out of work; maybe I would make dinner for us. Then they'd come home and we'd all sit around the table, and mama and Jack would talk about work, and I wouldn't know what they were talking about. Once I asked mama if she thought I should quit school and come work for her, but she said that a college education is what she had always dreamed of for me no matter how hard she had to work for it, and besides, Jack and her did fine by themselves. In a way I was glad that she didn't take me up on it. The last thing in the world I want to do would be to spend my life in a hardware store.

When Jack and I were kids, we fought all the time; even though he is two years older than me, I've always been a few inches taller,

and before he started lifting weights, I could kick his ass. We fought whenever we played together, no matter what we were playing. One of us would always try to coax the other into a brawl; we'd run around the house and take turns pounding the shit out of each other. We'd punch and shove and kick; maybe one of us would bleed, but in the end, I'd always win. A few hours later, we'd be playing something else until the next bout broke out.

Mama would always say that we couldn't play together anymore: she never understood that the fight was the most important part of the game.

"What time did you get in this morning?" I ask him.

"Quarter to ten."

I stick my fork into a mound of spaghetti and twirl it around to catch it all, but I rest it on the side of the plate instead of eating it.

"Why so late?"

"I was at Maria's last night and when I got up this morning, my car had a flat."

"Oh, a flat. It took you until ten o'clock to fix a flat?"

"Fuck you, college boy."

"No, you fuck you, ignorant piece of shit."

"You's both watch your language in my house," Gramma says. "And eat your spaghetti before I dump it over your heads." Eat it or wear it; that's always been Gramma's favorite threat.

"Last one in to work, first one to take lunch," I say.

He stands up at the table and lunges at me, faking a punch. His fist stops just inches from my nose.

I don't flinch because I know he won't hit me here, not in front of Gramma.

"No fighting!" she yells, as she reaches her boney hand across the table.

Jack was always a natural athlete, but he excelled at basketball. He started lifting weights after I made the wrestling team in high school. Once, before he really bulked up, we got into a shoving match in the driveway while playing a game of one-on-one.

Despite my height advantage, he was beating me handily. I fouled him and he cracked me hard in the jaw with a forearm. I could taste blood trickling through my teeth. I grabbed him by the wrist with one hand, and shot my other arm up through his crotch. It was a perfect fireman's carry; I dumped him on the pavement and we rolled around in the dust and gravel. When he was on his back I cradled him so hard his knee was right in his face. He tried to get up but I wouldn't let him. Every time he struggled, I pulled him in tighter. I didn't let him up until he was completely still.

I stood over him and looked down at my knees, scraped and bleeding. When he staggered to his feet, I could see gravel imbedded in his back and shoulders. I spit blood down at his shoes. We were both out of breath.

"You want to go again," I panted, "just let me know."

He picked up the ball; "Fuck you," he said, and threw it hard at my head, but I blocked it.

Then daddy came home. He kicked us both in the ass and said that if he ever caught us fighting again he'd knock us silly, Jack first, then me.

Jack sits down but he won't stop staring at me. He takes a bite of his sandwich, and with his mouth full he says, "I do more before lunch than you do in a whole day."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I say.

"What the fuck do you do all day?" he asks.

"I just do what I'm told."

"Well instead of reading the newspaper you should be helping out in the warehouse."

I stood up from the table and started toward the door. I had barely touched my lunch. "I don't work for you, I work for mama," I say. "You're not my boss, and you're not my father. I just watch the store like I'm supposed to."

As I'm walking out he says "It wouldn't kill you to do some work once in a while."

Without looking back I say, "I don't get paid to do your job."

Before I get to the door he is on me. My feet are in the air and my arms are bound to my sides. Like a sleeping puppy dog I am helplessly passive. I can hear my grandmother shouting but her voice is far away, like she's talking through a cardboard tube. I hear a hollow thumping sound when my head hits the floor, and everything goes black.

Jack and I hadn't fought since that day in the driveway when we played one-on-one and I beat the shit out of him. When I wake

up on my grandmother's floor, that's the first thing that I think of. I feel the side of my face and a hard lump is forming next to my eye. My head hurts so much that I can hear the blood rushing through my brain.

Gramma is sitting on the floor next to me, and she presses a cold pack to my forehead and tells me to lie back. I look up into her face; I can tell that she's been crying. I wonder how long I've been out.

"Where's Jack?" I ask.

"He's downstairs already."

"That fucking asshole."

"Why do you's always have to swear?" she asks. "You, at least, ought to know better."

I try to sit up but my head spins, and Gramma pushes me back down on the floor. "I can't believe he did that," I say.

"You's two have been fighting since you were old enough to talk to each other," she says. "I don't know that anything will ever change that."

"Mama wants me to come work here after I finish school," I say. "I don't think I could work that close to Jack all the time. He'd drive me crazy."

"What else could you do?" Gramma asks.

"I don't know. Maybe I could be a teacher somewhere, or even go back to school."

"You know, your father never wanted to work here. Grampy made him do it." She lifts my head up off the floor and puts it in her lap. "When he was your age he wanted to be a pharmacist," she says.

I try to picture daddy as a pharmacist, but it doesn't look right. My father had always belonged behind the counter at Gianelli Hardware. "No way," I say, "I don't believe it. He loved this place."

"Maybe he loved it because he had no choice," she says. "There was no one else to run it then." She runs her twisted, boney fingers through my hair. "I think the business is what killed him."

"Business and cigarettes," I say.

"No," she says. "I know. It's the business. It got Grampy, it got your father, and someday it'll get the rest of us. It's too much work, running a place. Look what it does to you and your brother."

I looked up at her. My head was pounding. I could read her face like a book, like each line and crease was a story. She cradled my head and pulled it in to her bosom. "I told your grandfather to sell this place a hundred times. It's too much work," she says again.

"What do you think I should do?" I ask.

She pulls the cold pack off my forehead and traces the bump with her arthritic index finger. "Finish school," she says. "Finish school and be a teacher, or a lawyer. Be anything. But don't let what happened to your father happen to you and your mother and Jack."

Grandma is a superstitious old woman. But when I look into her eyes and see how sad and serious she is, I have to think she really believes what she's telling me. "We'll see, Grandma. We'll see what happens."

All The King's Horses

After dinner Douglas Warren ran out the door and across the backyard to the tall fence that separated his house from Mystic Stables. He climbed up and looked over into the barnyard; from where he was standing he could see the door to the tack room was open. He hopped the fence and walked over to the small building next to the barn where he could see Johnny through the yellowing glass.

Strips of fly paper hung in the doorway stuck with the day's catch, and they quivered slightly in the warm breeze of the evening. Johnny was inspecting the gear, checking to see which saddles needed repairing or replacing. He was drinking beer from a can, and he didn't notice Doug standing in the doorway. Next to him was a box with two brand new saddles in it.

"Those things are gonna chafe someone's butt before they get broken in," Doug said.

"Holy shit, Squirt," he said, "don't ever sneak up on me like that." He drags on his cigarette and flicks the butt at the concrete floor, then crushes it with a worn boot. "Jesus Christ, I nearly shit myself."

Doug laughed. He liked the way Johnny talked, the way he didn't watch what he said in front of him. "Well, that's one way to break in a saddle, I guess, but I'd try saddle soap before I went and did anything like that."

Johnny laughed, drained his beer can and threw the empty can in the trash. With a crack and a hiss he opened another, and he let Doug have a couple of sips while they hung up the gear and rubbed down the new saddles with tannery cream. By the time they had finished, the sun had dipped to the horizon, and the newest of moons rose in the steel blue sky.

Johnny didn't need a clock to know when Doug had to go home; over the past three years, they had been together until dark, then Doug's mother would call him home from the other side of the fence. "Time for the night feed," Johnny said. "Do you have time to help out, or what?"

"You bet." Douglas walked across the small alley between the tack room and the barn, and waited for Johnny to unlock the stable door. "Why so late with the night feed?" Doug asked. He knew by now that Johnny usually fed the horses around four o'clock in the afternoon, and it was already past seven. "Those guys are going to be hungry."

"I got hung up in town." He unlocked the door, and Doug walked in behind him. "I don't know what I'd do without you here, Squirt. I'd probably have to pay someone a fortune."

Doug couldn't imagine getting paid; all he did was care for the horses. He had nothing else to worry about, just the horses. It just didn't seem like work: he got to ride whenever he wanted to, and he got to hang around with Johnny. Doug wanted so badly to be just like him.

Doug used to want to be just like his father, Bobby Warren, who once was a utility infielder for the Pawtucket Red Sox. One spring he came up to the majors, and then he was dealt to the Angels along with Butch Hobson and Rick Burleson. He said that as soon as he made the team and got settled they would all live in California.

Before the All-Star break, Bobby Warren was divorced and remarried to a twenty-year old California girl. All that summer Doug checked the box scores in *The Globe* to see if his father was getting any playing time; once he caught an Angel's game on television and saw him strike out twice. He was dropped down to Triple-A by the end of the season, and had remained there since.

The animals fidgeted some when the lights came on, and Doug and Johnny got to work filling the grain buckets and giving the horses fresh hay. When they had finished feeding half the horses and the sun had set, Doug pretended not to hear his mother calling him in. But after the third shout, he knew he had to leave.

"Go on home before she get's mad at you," Johnny said. "I can finish this up myself."

"Tomorrow's the last day of school," he said. "When I get out I can come over and clean out the stalls." He dumped the pail of grain he was holding in Jessie's trough, then carefully slid beside the animal and out of the stall.

"All right, you do that. You know where to find me." Johnny finished his beer and lit a cigarette as Doug rinsed his hands in the sink. "There's another auction this weekend. Are you coming?"

"She'll probably let me."

Ever since the divorce, Doug's mother worked in the tax collector's office at Town Hall. Selectman Bruce Barrett, whom she had been seeing for about a year, would sometimes come home after work and have dinner with her and Doug. Mr. Barrett was short and thin, and balding on top; he wore thick glasses that magnified his eyes, and he loved to talk about politics and news. He didn't seem to care for baseball or horses or any other sport. Once Doug asked him his favorite television show. He told him that he preferred reading, but if he were to watch television, it would only be to watch the news.

When Doug came back through the kitchen door, Barrett was still there, drinking coffee with Doug's mom at the kitchen table.

"The next time I have to call you home more than once, you won't be hanging around that dirty stable anymore," she said.

"It's not dirty," Doug said, "we keep it clean."

"Well," the Selectman said, "if your friend Mr. Murphy doesn't pay his taxes soon, he won't be hanging around that stable anymore either."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind Doug," his mother said. "Go up and take a bath. Tomorrow's a busy day."

"All right," he said. "It won't happen again. I promise." On his way out the kitchen door he stopped and faced them again. "Mom, there's another auction this weekend and Johnny asked me if I wanted to go. Can I?"

"I suppose so. Now get on upstairs."

"What kind of auction is it?" Mr. Barrett asked.

"A horse auction. They're really cool, there are always tons of horses and other neat stuff."

"There are other kind's of auctions too, you know," Mr. Barrett said.

Doug's mother held her boyfriends shoulder. "Bruce, that's enough," she said. "The town has auctions once in a while, when it repossesses somebody's land."

"Mom, what is he talking about."

"It's nothing. Johnny was at Town Hall today. He owes some property tax that his father didn't pay before he died. It's not even a lot of money, just a few hundred dollars." She gave Bruce a quick glance as if to tell him not to interrupt. "It's nothing to worry about. Now get on upstairs and I'll come up in a little while."

He said good night and was off to take a bath and go to bed. He thought for a while about Johnny losing the stable, but he quickly put it out of his mind. Tomorrow was the last day of Junior High of his life, and he wanted to be good and rested; the long months of summer lay directly on the other side of sleep.

But like the night before Christmas, the night before the last day of school was a night when sleep was scarce. Soon Doug would be in high school, and as much as he hated school so far, he thought as he lay beneath the cool sheets in his bed that high school might be different; he would learn things, important things, and he would be on the baseball team and he'd start seeing girls.

Doug had a girlfriend, Jodie Belanger, but she was a junior high girlfriend, and they don't count. He had only kissed her once, at a dance for kids from both junior high schools, and, when he tried to slide his hand under her soft sweater, she gave him a swift, smart slap on the cheek. High school girls were different; he knew that because Johnny had two girls from Jackson High that worked for him, leading riders out on the trails, and once, through a chink in the walls of the hay loft, he watched one of them kiss her boyfriend and let him take off her bra.

Doug knew, or hoped, as he shifted around under the covers that high school was going to be more interesting. In his mind he made a list of things that he had learned at school.

- 1) There is snow on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, even in the summer time.
- 2) All living things are made of cells.
- 3) If a person could travel at the speed of light, time would stop.

He turned these things over in his mind, and hoped to learn something more useful in high school. Then he started to think of things that he had learned from Johnny, and he made a list of those.

- 1) How to tell a horses age by looking at its teeth.
- 2) How to whistle loud, using his fingers.
- 3) When Carl Yastrzemski was a kid, he lived in New York and was a Yankees fan.

Tomorrow was the last day of school, but more than that, it was the first day of summer, the first of long, hot days at the stable, of

riding and brushing and feeding horses, and spending time with Johnny. Maybe, he thought, Johnny would let him lead riders on the trails.

One Saturday, when school was still in session, one of the girls couldn't make it to work and Johnny was short for someone to lead a group of riders. Doug volunteered, and Johnny decided to let him try. Doug felt proud leading the parade of horses across the parkway to the trails, and he was glad that Johnny trusted him to do a good job. They both knew that he was a good enough rider, but he was young, and Johnny felt that an older person should take the customers out, which was why he hired the two girls.

Doug led the group along the trails without incident, but on the way back, a passing car spooked one of the horses. The animal began to rear and buck wildly, and the girl who was riding it fell off instantly, and she began to cry. The horse ran off unattended.

When he led the group back into the barnyard, with the girl who had lost her horse riding double with him, he felt as if he had failed, and he held his head down while Johnny and Tammy, the girl who Doug had seen in the hayloft with her boyfriend, teased him about it. Later, after the group had left and they had put the other animals back in their stalls, Johnny and Doug went out to retrieve the runaway horse.

"Which one was it?" Johnny asked.

"Champ," Doug said. He felt smaller, and younger now, sitting next to Johnny in the truck. "That girl didn't know how to handle him."

"I'm not blaming you," Johnny said. "She probably didn't. Most people don't." He flicked his cigarette but out the window of the pick-up. "Most people don't know shit about horses. That's what you have to remember when you're out on the trails. These people don't ride everyday like you and me. That's why you're there, in case something like that happens."

"Well what was I supposed to do?" Doug blushed. "She was crying. I didn't know what to do!"

"You should have gone after the horse and got her back up on it. Either way she has to pay for riding it; she should at least get her money's worth."

They found Champ about a mile beyond the stable, grazing on the river bank. Johnny got out of the truck and walked up behind it. The horse stood completely still and let him lead it back to the truck. This left a lasting impression on Doug, the way Johnny just walked up to that horse in the middle of an open field, and it just stood there like a statue until he tugged on the reins. The open grassy field, and the sun shining brightly, the horse's shiny chestnut-red coat, and the trees across the river swaying slightly in the spring breeze, and Johnny, moving steadily and confidently through the tall grass, then leading the horse back to the truck without incident. Right there, that instant, Doug wished that Johnny was his father, and that he lived with him and his mother and that he had never known Bobby Warren, the minor league infielder, or even better, had never had to have known Selectman Bruce Barrett, never had to look at his bald head or his thick glasses. The way Johnny brought that horse back

like that, so easily, that's the kind of control Doug wanted to have in his life; he wanted to be able to walk up to a horse in an open field and just take hold of the reins like it was nothing. That's the kind of control Doug wanted to have with the horses, just like Johnny.

"Think you can handle him all the way back?" Johnny asked.

Doug said, "Probably beat you there."

"Yeah, just don't let him get away from you again," he said, and half smiled.

Doug slid out of the truck and climbed into the saddle. "Kiss my ass," he said, and they both laughed.

After that day, Johnny never asked Doug if to lead a group out on the trails. And Doug never asked if he could.

When Doug dressed for school the next mornign he wore a tee-shirt, blue jeans and sneakers, the traditional last day of school outfit; he met up with Ted Lucey and Paul Roscoe in the school yard, and together they walked through the doors of Kennedy Memorial Junior High School for the last time. The last day, as always, was a half day and they were let out at noon.

School being let out for the summer: the playground is packed with children, and shouts, and papers and books and balls fly through the air among the shrieks and screams of freedom and pleasure, and it is never raining, and the weight of summer is in the air which smells warm and clean and flowery, because it's June.

Along time ago, after first grade, Doug noticed that at noon, on the last day of school, when he ran out onto the playground that his shadow was as short as he had ever seen it, and that the sun was

almost directly overhead; from that day on, he always looked at his shadow when he walked out of school on the last day, and the stubby black image of himself on the pavement told him that summer had arrived.

When he walked out of Kennedy Junior that day he made note of his shadow, and at once, with great effort, hurled his papers and pencils toward the sky, in the rituals of summer and freedom. Then he and Ted and Paul took off their sneakers and walked home, and they threw their shoes at each other and shoved and wrestled all the way to Doug's house.

"Do you want to come over my house?" Ted said. "Ellen Dillon is having a pool party later."

"Are you guys going?" Doug asked.

"Yeah, we just have to stop at home and get towels and shorts. Jodie Belanger's gonna be there too," he said, and then Ted and Paul laughed and shoved at him, and he blushed. "Ellen told me that she still likes you!" and Doug's two friends danced around in the bright sunlight with their hands in the air, and they shouted and sang and clapped their hands and laughed high and loud.

"When's the wedding?" Paul shouted.

"How many kids are you gonna have?" Ted asked, now laughing so hard that he was nearly choking. Then they sang about Doug and Jodie sitting in a tree, and soon the three of them were wrestling on the front lawn. After they tired themselves out, they lay back on the lawn and tried to catch their breath.

"Are you coming?" Ted asked.

He thought about Jodie, and the kiss at the dance. And then about Johnny and how he had promised to clean the stalls. "No," he said. "I can't. I told my mother I'd do some stuff around the house after school." He knew when he said it that they didn't believe him, so he quickly added "and I have to get a haircut."

"Well, we'll tell Jodie that you send your love," Paul said, and he and Ted laughed as they spun and ran down the street, laughing and shouting.

Inside, Doug thought about Jodie, and then about Tammy, and what it would feel like to take off her bra the way he saw Joey Marshall do in the hayloft. Then of Jodie sitting on the side of the swimming pool with the sun glaring off the water and hitting her sun-burned face and shoulders.

He made himself a quick lunch, then turned on the television. He flipped through the channels then switched it off, then looked through the mail, even though he knew it was all for his mother. He opened a few windows to let the breeze in. Then he wandered upstairs, and into his mother's bedroom.

He opened a jewelry box on her dressing table and pulled out a string of pearls, then her engagement ring. He held the diamond up to the window to see the sun burst through the prisms; when he spun it around in his fingers, tiny rainbows swirled and swam around the walls and ceiling. He slipped the ring over his middle finger and held it up to the light. He thought that this would be the kind of ring he gave to Jodie Belanger when they got engaged.

In the bottom of her closet he found old board games; *Monopoly*, *Parchese*, *Sorry*, all with some piece or other missing, and nine or ten giant jigsaw puzzles, then some of his father's old shoes and a broken umbrella. Way in the back corner, underneath an old raincoat, there was a sturdy cardboard box with a cover. He pulled it out and opened it.

Doug's mother had showed him the box once before, right after his father left them. It was filled with old playbills, photographs, ticket stubs and other momentos. There were two dried up corsages. He pulled out a picture of his parents on their wedding day. His mother was young and beautiful, and her hair was hanging down to her shoulders, where now it was usually pulled up into a bun at the back of her head. Bobby Warren stood next to her smiling. He looked smooth in a black tuxedo. Then there were the deed to the house, a couple of insurance pamphlets, and some papers Doug guessed were divorce papers. As he came across each item, he took it out of the box and placed it on the floor beside it.

Then he found his father's baseball card. He was smiling that same flashy smile as in the wedding picture, only he was wearing an Angels uniform instead of a tuxedo. On the back it had his statics from Pawtucket. Doug slid the card into his pocket, then put all the things back into the box, which he covered and put back into the closet under the raincoat. Then he took off the ring and put the jewelry back into the jewelry box.

Over at the stable he shoveled and swept the stalls clean, then he trotted Maverick in the coral. Of all the horses at Mystic,

Maverick was Doug's favorite; he was a three year old gelding Mustang, with a smooth, shiny grey coat and a black mane. When Doug saw his mother's station wagon at the top of Monument Street, he walked the horse into the stable to brush him down and water him.

When he was finished, he led the animal back to its stall, then he and Johnny sat in the fading sunlight and listened to the radio that Johnny had hung up in a corner of the barn with some old wire that'd been used to bale hay. The big songs were "Bennie and the Jets" by Elton John and a thing called "Seasons in the Sun." Doug had heard these songs at least a hundred times each on that old radio that was always left on, and always on sixty-eight RKO. Even if Johnny and Doug hate a song, they don't change the station. Johnny always said that if you change the station to avoid hearing a certain song, when you switched back to the original station you could almost always hear the fading strains of your favorite.

"Do you remember my dad?" Doug asked.

Johnny flicked his cigarette at the ground and crushed it with his boot. "I don't know anybody in town that doesn't."

"Yeah, but did you know him?"

"He was a few years older than me," Johnny said, "but I remember when I was in high school and he got drafted. It was a big thing."

"Was he good?"

Johnny shifted in his chair. "Squirt," he said, "not many people get the chance that he got. I remember a few springs when I would

wish that he would make the majors, just because he was from my home town."

Doug pulled Bobby Warren's card out of his pocket and handed it to Johnny. "Look what I found," he said.

Johnny looked at the picture. "I always wanted him to make the Sox," he said, and handed the card back.

Doug went home when his mother called him for dinner. After they ate, he helped her clear the table and wash the dishes, then they watched *The Odd Couple* in the living room. When he was younger, they would play games like checkers, or gin rummy, or they would put together a jigsaw puzzle until it was time for bed. Now they would just watch a little television before Doug left for the stable until dark.

After the show Doug shoved a couple of sugar cubes in his pocket and headed for the back fence. When he got to the top of the fence, he noticed that the pick-up was gone, and figured that Johnny had gone to Gile's Pub for the evening.

The stable door was locked, but Doug knew that the loading hatch to the hayloft would be open. Johnny never locked it, because he said that if it was the only way in, it was the only way out, and nobody could coax a horse up the ladder into the hayloft. Other than the horses and what's locked up in the tack room, there's not much left to steal.

Doug propped a ladder up against the barn and climbed into the darkness of the hayloft. He had gone into the barn that way a hundred times after Johnny had locked it up, the first few times

before he had ever met Johnny. He'd feel his way through the hayloft over to the chute and then climb down the ladder into the stable. It was always quiet in there at this time of day. All he could hear were the crunching of the horses chomping their grain and swishing their tails. A fine dust that smelled like grain hung in the air, and was illuminated by the fading twilight that managed to leak through the cloudy windows or chinks in the clapboards.

The boy didn't need a light to find his way to Maverick's stall. When he got to it he slid in beside the animal and pulled two lumps of sugar out of his pocket, then held his palm out to the horse's muzzle.

"Yes, you like that, don't you," he said. He stroked Maverick's huge head and neck, then held his face against the animal's chest. "You're lucky to be here, to have such nice people taking care of you." He spoke like a young mother would speak to her infant.

The horse snorted and shook its head.

"Calm down," he said. "There, that's better. Yes. That's a good boy, yes." Touching and petting the animal made Doug want to ride; he wanted to feel the rhythm of its smooth gait, to hold the reins and feel the power of the animal, but to control it, to feel it, and know it. He pressed his palms flat to the horse's chest, and he could feel the animal's heart pumping, deep and slow. The barn had grown dark. It was the first night of summer. He thought of Tammy in the hayloft, and how she had let Joey Marshall take off her bra. Through the sweet, thick darkness, his mother's voice called him home.

The auction was in Topsfield, at the fairgrounds. Doug followed Johnny through the crowd, through the maze of trailers and horses and concession booths. The air was warm, and sweet with the smells of fried-dough and hay and manure, and filled with sounds of horses and buyers and sellers.

They had only been there twenty minutes when Doug saw the stallion. He just pointed to it and said "There it is." He grabbed Johnny by the shirt and pointed again. "There it is," he said, "that's the one."

"There what is? What are you talking about?"

Doug didn't say anything. He couldn't. It was ten feet in front of him, the most magnificent horse he had ever seen. He was big, bigger than Maverick. At least two hands taller, and bigger, more muscular. His coat was deep black with a patch or pure white just under his chin, which he held high, as if to show off his markings.

"Holy shit, Squirt, would you just look at that."

"You have to bid on that one. Are you gonna? Sweet Jesus, I've never seen anything like it." He looked up at Johnny who was studying the animal intently. "Are you gonna bid?"

"I'm gonna do better than that, kid. He's ours."

Johnny walked up to the small crowd that was forming around the horse. "Who's the owner here?" he asked. One of the men pointed to a big man in coveralls and a John Deere baseball cap.

Johnny extended his hand. "My name's Johnny Murphy. I'm from Mystic Stables in Chettfield."

"What can I do for you Mr. Murphy?"

"How much do you want for the horse?" he asked.

The man in the baseball cap scratched his chin and squinted. "That's tough to say," he said. "I expect he'd catch up to eleven hundred on the block. He's only three years old, and fully broke."

Johnny looked at the horse, then at Doug, then turned back to the owner. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "I'll give you a thousand in cash if you let me have him right now."

"I don't know that I could do that, Mr. Murphy. You see, there's been an awful lot of interest in that horse right there. You could make that much off him just for mating him four or five times a year."

Johnny dragged hard on his butt and blew smoke through his nose and teeth. "I'll give you eleven hundred," he said.

"He's got school papers too, and a breeding chart. That's a fine animal to be letting him go off at that price. I think he'd catch more on the block."

"You gotta have him," Doug said.

Johnny put his hand on Doug's shoulder. "It's my kid's birthday tomorrow. I'll give you twelve-fifty, in cash."

Doug felt his pride welling up inside his chest, and it felt like his ribs would burst. He was Johnny's kid, at least for the day. He pictured himself on top of the horse. "We gotta have him, Dad." The words were out of his mouth before he realized he was saying them.

The owner looked down at the boy, then at his father. "Twelve-fifty. Well, I hate to let him go like that, but if it's for the

boy, well, I guess I can live with it. You've got yourself a horse, Mr. Murphy."

Doug could hardly believe it. He turned away from the two businessmen and approached the horse. He ran his hands over the animal's ribs and chest and legs. He could feel its breathing and the blood rushing through its veins, and all its muscle wound up like giant rubber bands. The animal looked him straight in the eye, and pushed its muzzle into the boy's neck.

"He's beautiful," he said, to no one. "You are beautiful," he said.

They led the stallion out to the truck together. There was a slight grumbling when the owner had announced to the few men who were still inspecting the horse that it had been sold, but, what's done is done.

When they reached the truck, Johnny unlocked the trailer gate and let down the loading ramp. Doug was walking the horse up the ramp when one of the men who had been in the crowd around the stallion approached Johnny.

"Look, mister," he said, "whatever you paid for it, I'll give you a hundred dollars more."

Doug stopped and stood in the middle of the ramp with the horse. "No way," he thought. "No fucking way would Johnny give up this horse, he just wouldn't do it."

"I don't think so," Johnny said. "That's one special animal. And my boy here, he just wants it so bad, I don't think I could do that, not to my boy."

Doug loved hearing Johnny say that he was his boy.

"You know as well as me that that kid ain't your boy," the man said. "I could tell by watching you when you said it. I can't believe that guy fell for it either. And then he let you walk away with it for twelve-fifty."

Johnny turned to the trailer and looked at Doug. The two of them looked like kids who had been caught looking at a copy of *Playboy*.

"What do you want for him? I'll give it to you right now."

Johnny looked at the horse for a long time. He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and stuck it between his teeth. "Eighteen-hundred," he said. "Eighteen-hundred and it's all yours."

The man gave Johnny the money. Doug led the horse to the new owner's trailer. The sun felt hot on his back and he was sweating through his shirt. The air felt heavy. When he let go of the reins he felt like he was letting go of everything he had ever held in his life.

Johnny and Doug walked back to the auction together. "We made almost six-hundred bucks on that one, Squirt." He crushed his cigarette out in the grass.

"Now you can pay your taxes," Doug mumbled.

"What's that?" he asked. Johnny was beaming.

"That's great," Doug said.

Later, Johnny bid five-hundred dollars on a pony. The man who had sold Johnny the stallion waved to them as they walked back to the truck with the new animal. "I hope your boy enjoys that horse, Murphy."

Doug didn't enjoy being called Johnny's boy now. It was the same feeling he had when his father got traded. He knew Bobby Warren would never hit a homerun in a Red Sox uniform.

Doug had grown silent, and he led the small animal onto the trailer with a feeling of tremendous weight on his back and chest, as if all the air were being forced out of his lungs. They drove home in silence. The A.M. radio in the dash crackled out Sixty-eight RKO. They heard *Seasons in the Sun* as soon as they were pulling out of the fairgrounds. For the remaining miles of the ride, the words tumbled around and around in Doug's mind as they got closer to home. *Good-bye papa, it's hard to die, when all the birds are singing in the sky. You taught me right from wrong. Too much wine and too much song, Wonder how I got along.*

He had had the stallion all but loaded onto the trailer. Now there was a five-hundred dollar pony behind them that would be used to lead babies around the coral at fifty cents a shot. *We had joy, we had fun, We had seasons in the sun, But the wine and the song, like the seasons are all gone.*

At home, Bruce Barrett and Doug's mother were putting dinner on the table when Doug walked through the kitchen door.

"How was the auction?" the selectman asked.

"It was all right," Doug said. "I think he'll be able to pay his taxes now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," he said. "What's for dinner?"

"Hamburgers," his mother said.

After dinner, they watched the news together. When it was over, Bruce left.

"What happened today," Mrs. Warren said.

"Johnny bought a pony."

"That's nice," she said. "You like ponies, don't you?"

"They're okay." He looked at his mother, with her hair pulled tight, and greying. Then he pictured her as she was in the wedding photograph, young and beautiful. She was older now, but still pretty. "Remember all those jigsaw puzzles we used to do after dinner?"

"I still have them upstairs," she said. "Do you want to do one now?"

"Yes," he said, "I'd like that."

She went upstairs, and in a few minutes came back down with one of the boxes. The picture on the front, what the puzzle would look like when it was finished, was a Vermont farm scene with a big red barn and some cows lying in the grass in front of it. They worked on the puzzle for two hours straight on the living room floor, barely speaking to each other.

When they were finished, they were short a piece. His mother said "We must be missing a piece."

Doug reached into his back pocket and pulled out Bobby Warren's baseball card. "It's right here," he said.

The Photograph

I vaguely remember my live-in baby-sitter, my father's lover, Stephanie. I recall once, when I was five, going to a fair with her. I remember tents and game booths, brightly colored flags and banners, and kiddy rides, and a boat ride that was like a merry-go-round except that instead of sitting on a pony I sat in a boat that sailed around the carousel in a foot of yellow-green water.

Stephanie and I stood beside the boat ride. I can't remember if my brother, Jack, was there or not. In one hand I clutched my ticket. The other held her hand tightly. The ride stopped and the children were lifted out of the boats by their mothers and fathers. It was early evening. I remember I was wearing shorts and sneakers, so it must have been a summer night, just before dusk. Stephanie lifted me over the railing to set me in one of the boats.

I remember looking down into the yellow water. There was a film of dead mosquitoes and tiny flies floating on the yellow water. Maybe I got scared and struggled, or maybe she just slipped, but the next thing I knew I was sitting in the yellow water with the dead insects, and I was crying.

She pulled me out of the water. Dead mosquitoes stuck to my wet skin, and warm, sticky water squirted out of my sneakers. I was still crying. This scene is all I remember about Stephanie, about the two years she spent in our house.

She moved out. My parents fought a lot. Mostly mama screamed, and daddy just stood there, so tall, taking it all. Sometimes he'd yell back, and his voice would boom deep and loud, like the voice of the biggest man in the world.

The day after my sixth birthday was a Sunday, the only day that daddy took off from work. I was sitting on the front porch cranking a Mickey Mouse Jack-in-the-box my parents had bought for me the day before. The late August sun shone bright and hot, but the breeze carried a hint of September. I remember thinking that I would be going into the first grade in a week when I heard mama start screaming.

I turned the crank of my toy and it played "Pop Goes the Weasel," and every time it came to the part where you sing "pop!" Mickey Mouse leapt out of the box, and I would stuff him back inside and crank it again. Mama's voice rang through the house and out into the street. I heard something like glass crash when daddy's voice shouted out loud enough to shake every window in the neighborhood. She must have broken something. She was big on breaking things.

Then the front door flew open, and they spilled out onto the porch shouting at each other. I ran off the porch onto the front lawn. Mama ran into the street and jumped into her station wagon, and she screamed at me. "Dennis," she yelled, "get out of the way." She was bawling unbelievably. She started the car and tore across the lawn, right for daddy's Oldsmobile.

She smashed into it, crushing the passenger side door. She backed up onto the lawn and stopped, shifted into drive and floored it. The wheels dug into the grass and left deep tracks. She smashed into the already smashed passenger door a second time, sending glass and metal flying across the lawn and the driveway.

My father stood on the porch shouting, but he stayed on the porch, like he knew he couldn't stop her. She ripped across the grass and smashed the Oldsmobile again, crushing it into the stone wall on the other side of the driveway. She backed onto the lawn again. When she leapt out of the car she was crying so hard she was almost choking.

"The next time you want to visit that slut," she screamed, "you can walk!" Then she ran up to the porch and pounded on daddy's chest and clawed at his face.

Daddy grabbed her wrists. With her hands tied up, she began kicking at him.

"You're crazy, Rita," he yelled, "you're crazy!"

"You're a son of a bitch!" she screamed.

Mr. Matthews from next door had run out of his house, and he stood behind me holding my shoulders. I was crying so hard I couldn't make a sound and I had to gasp for breath.

"It's gonna be all right," Mr. Matthews said.

Mama broke free and ran into the house. Daddy followed her. She continued screaming and breaking every piece of glass she could find.

"Make them stop," I said.

Mr. Matthews held me. "Everything is gonna be all right," he said again, "you're gonna be all right." Broken glass and twisted metal was scattered across the lawn and driveway. Through the blur of my tears, I saw my Mickey Mouse toy crushed flat among the wreckage.

Sometimes, even after mama wrecked his car, daddy would come home from work smelling like work, like a mixture of sweat and tobacco, and everything was calm. He'd set down his briefcase. Jack and I might be playing a game like checkers or "go fish." He'd reach down and mess our hair or give us each a pat on the shoulder, then he'd shuffle into the kitchen where mama was cooking dinner, and he'd kiss her on the cheek or the forehead, wrapping his big arms around her and squeezing her against his chest.

After dinner we watched tv: a ball game or maybe a movie. We didn't really say much, but we were all there watching. Mama might make popcorn with lots of butter and salt, and daddy would smoke cigarettes and shuffle through his briefcase trying to straighten out the paper work he brought home with him every night, six nights a week.

Then Jack and I would go up to bed and the house would be quiet, and everything was all right.

And then sometimes he'd call and come home late, and mama would wrap his dinner and put it in the oven while we ate without him. These were the nights when they fought. Jack and I would go to bed without tv or popcorn, and lie silently in bed while mama shouted at daddy.

Once I tried to hear what they were saying, but all I could make out was something about Stephanie, and that she was a slut. When I heard her name I felt the warm water and the dead mosquitoes sticking to my leg, and I remembered standing there crying because she had dropped me in the water on the boat ride.

Later on, Jack and I learned more about what the fights were about. But it wasn't until a night when I was twelve that I really understood their relationship.

Daddy had come home from work with a new movie projector for mama's birthday. After dinner he set up the machine and took all our home movies out of the closet. He pointed the projector at a sheet that he had hung on the living room wall. We watched some films that daddy's mother and father had taken of him and our Uncle Henry riding ponies. I remember wishing that Jack and I had ponies to ride, and we could be in the movies riding ponies too. Then we watched one of daddy's baseball games from college. We saw him hit two home-runs before he switched to films of Jack and me as small children.

The smoke from daddy's cigarette swirled around in the light that shot out from the projector lens. Mama sat beside him drinking coffee. On the screen Jack and I were in the bathtub together, laughing and splashing each other. Then a young woman came into the frame and lifted me out of the water. I recognized her as Stephanie. She was holding me in a towel and waving to the camera.

Mama stood up behind the projector and threw her coffee cup at the screen. The cup hit Stephanie in the shoulder and splattered coffee all over the sheet. It dripped down in streaks on the wall, and it made the film look like it was raining inside.

Mama stormed upstairs, shouting. The film ran out and the projector threw a bright white square of light onto the screen, and on the splattered coffee stain. The film made a flapping noise every

time the reel turned around. Daddy sat behind the white light with his head in his hands.

I looked at Jack. He rolled his eyes then looked at the floor. I just sat on the rug "Indian style" and picked at the lint on the living room carpet.

He turned the machine off. When the electric fan turned on to cool off the projection bulb, it was the only sound in the house.

Now daddy's affair with Stephanie was in the open. And he knew that we knew. I didn't sleep well that night. My guess is that none of us did. I kept waiting for a sound or a fight, just so I would know that I wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep.

Too many years of smoking killed my father off in his sleep one night, two days after New Years Day. I was twenty one years old. He continued seeing Stephanie until the day he died. Many times at night I would walk by our den and see him quickly hang up the phone, pretending he was just watching television. Now I understood why he always came home so late.

I don't know why mama didn't divorce him. I guess she didn't for the same reason that Jack and I seemed to accept what we knew as the way it was, as if all father's had affairs. I can't really say, because as we got older we seemed to drift away from him. He had become a disciplinary figure head. If I ever really wanted something, or needed advice, I always went to mama. Only if I had done something that mama thought was truly terrible did daddy get involved. But I don't think we hated him, or even disliked him. And despite what we knew, that he was sleeping with our old baby sitter

and had given her a job doing his bookkeeping at home, we still showed him a tremendous amount of respect. Except for two occasions, I don't ever remember directly disobeying him. Once when I was ten and I neglected to shovel the snow off the walkway, and once when he wanted me to stay home on New Years Eve, a couple of days before he died.

I had accepted daddy's other life, but carried it around inside me. And even though mama and Jack and I were torn apart when he died, we also felt a sense of relief. It was the same feeling you have on your first day out of bed after a flu. We knew that Stephanie was out of our lives forever, and we knew that daddy would never again be late coming home from work.

Although he's been dead close to four years, many of my father's belongings, as well as a golden canister that holds his ashes, are still around the house.

I was picking through a box that mama had filled with letters and daddy's scrap books. In the box I found a letter addressed to Gramma Gianelli. I opened the envelope and pulled out a picture of my father with two children I had never seen before. That letter included an invitation for my grandmother to visit her other grandchildren. It said that even though it must be difficult for her to accept her son's death, she must accept that these were his children, her grandchildren, and that she was welcome to visit them whenever she pleased. The letter was signed, "Stephanie Quinn."

I read the letter over several times. Judging from how grey my father's hair was, the picture must have been taken three or four

years before he died. The two children, a girl and a little boy, looked to be about eight and four years old. I stared at the picture I held in my hands. I was shaking with sadness and rage.

I felt a flood of memories. The blank movie screen with the brown coffee stain, dead mosquitoes stuck to my legs. My parents shouting at each other while my brother and I lay in bed listening, waiting for them to stop, and mama breaking dishes or a vase.

I thought of the night she threw his clothes and a suitcase out on the snow covered lawn and Jack and I, young children, trembling as we watched him gather his clothes out of the snow and throw them in the back of his car.

Mama and I often drove by Stephanie's house after school, or on Saturdays, just to see if we could see her. I often wondered what would happen if we did see her, if we would stop or if we would just keep driving.

Mama would always notice anything new, like a fence or a garden. She would say, "Oh, look. They put up a new fence. I wonder how much that cost."

Once, the summer I was fifteen, as we approached Stephanie's house mama said "It looks like she has a new mailbox."

She pulled up in front of the house, and read the names on the sign on top of the new mailbox: "Quinn/ Gianelli."

I looked at mama. She appeared calm, but her lips were pulled thin, and I could tell she was raging. She opened the door and got out of the car, then walked around to the mailbox. Then she grabbed the sign and ripped it off the tin box. As she strode back into the car

with the sign, Stephanie came out the front door with a doberman. The dog tore across the lawn.

Mama sped off. I could hear Stephanie screaming but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Halfway down the street mama opened the window and threw the sign into the brush by the side of the road.

I remember wondering why daddy would want his name on her mailbox, but I didn't ask.

While I was putting the awful picture back into the envelope, mama came into the den. "Dennis," she asked, "what are you doing?"

I didn't say anything, but I tried to conceal the picture behind my back.

She looked down at me. I watched her eyes grab hold of the photograph. I dropped the letter and the picture into the box, and we both stood there silently, staring at the box.

"I should have told you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you?"

She looked around the room. I followed her eyes over the ceiling and walls, then to the mantle above the fireplace and daddy's ashes. "I thought that when he died it would be over. I didn't think it mattered that you didn't know."

"Does Jack know?" I asked.

"He was there when your grandmother gave me the letter."

"It's all right," I said. "I understand." I put the box back in the closet and left the room.

"Dennis, where are you going?"

I walked to the kitchen door. "I'll be home in time for dinner," I said, and walked out the door into the driveway. I got inside my car and took a ride out to Stephanie's house.

The roads to my old baby-sitter's house were lined with trees blazing all of autumn's glory in the afternoon sun. I sped my Volkswagen down the twisting roads until I reached Stephanie's house.

Two children were playing in a pile of leaves on the lawn, which was wide and green as I had remembered it. I got out of the car and walked toward my half-brother and half-sister who had stopped playing and were watching me carefully.

I still didn't know why I had come, or what I was going to do or say.

"Is your mother home?" I asked.

The girl, Barbara, as it said in the letter, shielded her eyes from the sun and looked at me. She looked to be about twelve years old. The boy, Martin, was eight or nine. He was thin and his face was red from the wind and the sun. His nose was running.

I felt a chill when I looked at him, in his face. He had all the lines of my father's face, my face; his chin, his cheekbones, his nose, all like his father's. I felt like I was looking at my father, or myself, as a child.

The boy didn't say anything. He just looked up at me blankly.

"She's not home from work yet," the girl spoke up.

"Oh," I said, "is your daddy home?"

The two children looked at each other. "He hasn't been here for a long time. Mommy says that he left to go live with another family."

"Oh, is that what she told you?"

Martin said, "He left. That's why Mommy has to work, because he's a mean man and he left us." He wiped at his nose and his eyes with his sleeve.

I kneeled down to face the boy at his own height. I brushed the colored leaves around with my hands. Then I suddenly felt what they must have been feeling, what it was like to have a father who wasn't always there, and I knew what it felt like to know that he was never coming home again. but then I thought, "he was my real father, not theirs. "If you really loved him," I said, "maybe he'd come back. If you both wish hard enough."

They said nothing. I looked across the lawn at the house, at the front door where Stephanie ran out the day mama took the sign off the mailbox. The house looked too big for just the three of them.

I couldn't think of anything else to say. I stood up and looked at the children. "When your mother gets home tell her that the man from the water company came by to check the meters."

The girl said, "Yes."

On the way back to the car I wondered why Stephanie had lied to them, why she didn't tell them that their father was dead, and then I thought she had probably lied to them all along. She probably told them that their father had two jobs, and that's why he never stayed home after dinner. And when he died, she just said that he

went away, because it was easier to lie than to have to explain that he was dead, and that he wasn't a father like a real father is.

As I slid behind the wheel of my car, I looked at the mailbox that so many years ago my mother had destroyed. There was a new sign on it that read "Quinn/ Gianelli." I walked around the front of the car and grabbed the sign with both hands. It easily broke off the box.

I heard the metal snap and come loose in my hands, and it felt as if I had grabbed a piece of my life that I could never change, that I was holding a part of me in my hands I would never share with anyone, my brother Jack, not even my brother and sister watching me from their yard. I dropped the sign on the ground at the side of the road.

I came home in time to have dinner with mama.

About Us

Most people fall in love. Others plummet.

"Fuck that," he says. "Elvis Costello is cool as shit." Dennis is lying on the sofa with his legs stretched out across Andrea's lap. She's massaging his feet and holding them close to her chest; he can feel the soft weight of her breast give beneath his foot. An Elvis Costello record is spinning on the turntable, and its scratchy surface crackles and scrapes from being played so much.

"He's okay-- he's way overrated." Andrea works in a gallery on Newbury Street, and sometimes she acts like it. She pulls his feet in

tighter to her breast. "I like music with a beat, something I can move to." She fills two glasses with wine and hands him one.

"This is a different kind of record," he says. He makes a gesture with his hand as he says it, as if to point out the sounds as they slide off the turntable and fill the room. A few drops of wine splash out of his glass onto his shirt. "A lot of his other stuff would have you shaking, I can guarantee it." He rubs the purple spot into his shirt and says, "Look at that. I'm so excited I can't drink from a glass." He picks a book of Keats' poetry off the floor and wipes the wine off it with his shirt.

Dennis works for his mother at the family hardware store, and takes literature classes at night. The rest of his spare time he spends with Andrea.

"Well, he may have a few good songs," she says, "but he's not as great as you think he is."

"That's shit. He's done for rock and roll what Picasso did for painting." He wants to massage her with his foot. He wants to push his toe into her breast and feel its firm softness. He'd like to peel off her shirt and hold her, feel her smooth back.

"How can you compare him to Picasso-- Picasso is an artist." She squeezes his foot, then gives him a playful twist of the ankle, as if they were wrestling.

Dennis thinks to himself that if it wasn't for Brian he would have her all to himself. He looks at her for an instant and doesn't say anything. He starts to say "I love you," but it comes out "I was just

trying to say it so you could understand. You obviously don't know anything about rock and roll."

Now she really twists his ankle, and he sits up and grabs her wrist. He pulls her down on top of him and bear-hugs her.

"Maybe so," she says, "but I know a hell of a lot more about rock and roll than you know about art."

When they reach the part where it usually ends, right before they should kiss, he squeezes her tighter. His balls tingle, and his dick starts to harden. He is surprised when she doesn't resist.

"Who's your favorite artist?" she asks.

He thinks for a minute. "My father," he says.

"I didn't know he was an artist."

"He wasn't. He never was, but he won a trip to Bermuda once in a paint by numbers contest. He painted The Last Supper. My grandmother still has it hanging over her bed."

They are laughing and he spins around on the sofa so that his head is in her lap. She plays with his hair, and he wants to kiss her, but he doesn't.

"How come you never talk about your father?"

"I don't know," he says. "I just don't."

"Well, maybe you should. It helps to talk about things like that."

"I don't think that'll bring him back."

"No, it won't bring him back. But it might make you understand him better." Andrea runs a finger down the length of his nose.

"I think I understand him just fine," he says.

"What was it like when he died?"

He sips his wine. The taste of it makes the corners of his mouth tighten. "He just died in his sleep one night. It was sudden, but -- well, he smoked a lot." He looks into her eyes, and he feels like he could just fall into them. "Heart attack," he says. "It could happen to anyone."

She lowers her head down to his and hangs her hair in his face. Her hair is soft and it smells sweet, like hay and pepper. He rubs it on his face with his eyes closed. He pushes it into his nose and inhales, filling himself with her. With her hair in his face, he hums along with Elvis Costello who is crooning in the background. *The poisoned rose, that you gave to me. It left me half alive and half in ecstasy.* She kisses his forehead. *But if half of your love, is all I can win,* He reaches around with one hand and holds the back of her neck, massaging gently with his fingers. She glides her tongue gently around his eyelids, then kisses his eyes. *Give me just a fraction, But no more medicine.*

Dennis wonders when she'll ask him to take her home. He pulls her closer and she lies next to him. They kiss, not passionately, but tenderly as if their lips were as fragile as moth's wings. Her breath is sweet with wine and tobacco.

The Poisoned rose, On a Valentine card, That you take straight to the heart that you call my junk yard. Dennis isn't exactly sure what the words mean, but he sings them under his breath, and they

seem to describe the way he feels; even though he holds her in his arms, she will never be his lover.

She pulls him in tight to her hips and wraps her legs around his. "This is a pretty song," she whispers.

"Elvis Costello is cool as shit, I told you that," he says, kissing her nose. He grinds his hips hard into her, and his dick feels like it's going to blast out of his fly.

I don't know how it came to grow, Into this very sad affair. Every time we do the decent thing, Somebody spikes the drink, And the single becomes a pair. Maybe it isn't even the words, but just the way Elvis' voice lulls softly and breaks with anguish that makes Dennis feel like the song was written for him. He pulls her head tight and kisses her full on the lips, pushing his crotch forward. He feels her push back, and she slides her fingers up the back of his neck and into his hair.

She turns her head, and he kisses her neck. Her breathing has softened.

Her fingers have stopped twisting his hair. "Can you drive me home soon? I have to open the gallery tomorrow."

He sits up and she is already gathering her coat and gloves. He wants to ask her to stay, but he doesn't. Sometimes he wishes he had never met her, never fallen in love; and sometimes he just wants to hold her down and tell her that he loves her.

Outside it's cold and his Volkswagen has no heat. Andrea lives within walking distance, but he always drives her home. It's as if he has discovered chivalry; he won't let her walk home, and he won't

make her go to bed with him even though he wants to. He thinks if he doesn't try to force romance, it will just occur naturally.

In front of her building she leans over the seat for a kiss. He pushes his cheek out to her and she kisses it, then pauses. "Kiss?" she says in her soft, pleading voice.

He pecks her lightly on the cheek.

"Call me in the morning," she says, and jumps out of the car, slamming the door shut.

Dennis and Andrea met through a mutual friend at a party one night, not quite six months ago. He had gone there with Stacey Morrison, but by the end of the night he had slipped out with Andrea. They drove his Volkswagen around Boston Commons, then down the strip at Revere Beach. While they drove they talked about music and art and baseball and politics. He was amazed at how much she thought like he did, that she liked the Red Sox and rock and roll and she was well read. They talked about Hemingway and Faulkner, and Raymond Carver, Dennis' favorite. Sometimes they argued playfully. She touched him a lot. Then she asked him about Stacey.

"Have you been seeing Stacey for a long time?" she asked.

"No," he said. "We're not really together. I went with her for a little while about five years ago, but it didn't really work out."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. My father died right when we started seeing each other. It just didn't work out."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"About what?"

"About everything."

"It's not your fault," he said. "You don't have to be sorry."

"Well I want to be," she said. "I like you and I want to be sorry."

After they drove down the beach strip he turned back and headed into town. He turned down Newbury Street. "Do you want to have a beer somewhere?" he asked.

"Sure." She pointed to the Winfield Art Gallery. "That's where I work," she said.

He reached over and held her hand. "Are you and Brian Owens still together?"

"How did you know about that?"

"Scott Thomas told me at the party. He said that you two have been together for a few years."

"I can't believe you know Scotty!" she said.

"Sure. He comes into our store all the time."

"What's your store?" she asked.

"Gianelli Hardware, in Somerville."

"Oh my God! I know where that is."

Dennis pulled up in front of Daisy Buchannan's. It was a Saturday night and the bar was crowded. They drank beer and held hands at the bar, and played a game of pinball together. They hugged and drank and talked until it was time to leave.

In the car she kissed him lightly on the neck. "Who loves you, Dennis?" she asked playfully.

"I don't know, who?"

"Me, silly," she said.

"I think I love you too," he said, wishing he hadn't.

Dennis could tell she was a little drunk. Her words were slow and deliberate, she had to try to get them out. Despite her pink and watery eyes, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She never told him if she were still seeing Brian. He dropped her off in front of her apartment building. Then she told him to drop by the gallery some time, and he said he would.

Later he learned from a friend that she and Brian had been on and off and on again for the last three years, and it would probably be that way forever.

At home, Dennis sits in front of the television with the sound off. The same scratched Costello record spins on the turntable. There is a book of Keats' poetry open on his lap, and he aimlessly flips the pages. Tomorrow he has to lead an undergraduate discussion about The Romantics and he is nervous because his mind isn't on poetry.

Dennis finished college a few years after his father died, and he graduated with a business degree. He discovered a new interest when he took a Romantic Poetry course to fulfill a humanities requirement in his last semester. For three years since he's worked at Gianelli hardware, the family business, and picked up graduate credits at the Harvard Extension. In a few months he will receive his Master of Arts degree.

When he finally earns his degree he plans to leave Gianelli hardware. Maybe he'll write a collection of short stories, or work for

a literary magazine. Whatever he decides, he knows that he has to leave the family business, maybe even move out of town. The money's good, but that doesn't matter. He didn't build the business, his family did. Dennis wants to do something for himself, by himself, which is why he's preparing a lecture on Keats.

He is staring at the book in his lap. The poem is Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. He is reading but not absorbing the words when the phone rings. Before he gets up to answer, he knows it's Andrea.

"Hi good looking," she says. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing a talk on Keats," he says.

"Well, you'd better get back to work. I just called to say goodnight."

"Goodnight," he says. "I'll call you tomorrow. Do you want me to pick you up after work?" Sometimes he acts like she is just another friend, and he senses that it makes her mad, even though she tells him all the time that that's all she wants from him, to be friends.

"You can pick me up if you want to," she says. "I'll talk to you then. Bye darling."

"That's it?" he says. "That's all you called for was to say goodnight darling?"

"Not really."

"What's up?" he says.

"I think we have to talk some more."

"About what."

"About us. About our-- about this whole-- situation..." her voice drops to a whisper.

He closes the book and puts it aside. Her voice paints her picture in his mind and he closes his eyes, the she is silent. They say nothing for a time, and he listens to Elvis Costello sing sweetly.

"Are you listening to Elvis Costello again?"

"How'd you guess?" he asks. He wishes she was there next to him.

"Elvis Costello is cool as shit," she says.

The wine he drank earlier has gone to his head. Between sentences the quiet hum of the telephone line rings in his ear. "So let's talk. You want to talk, let's talk," he says.

"I want to give you so much, but I just don't feel like it's right."

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"I want to give you so much."

"What do you want to give me?"

"I want to be everything to you that you are to me," she says.

The song on the record player catches his attention. *I didn't meant to say it, I just blurted it out, And you pretended not to notice, or be taken aback. And I loved you there and then, It's as simple as that.*

Then Andrea asks him to come over. She says "I really need to see you. Can you come over now?"

He thinks she sounds like she might be crying. "Are you all right?" he asks.

Dennis is standing outside her building waiting for her to buzz him in. The cold stings his face, and makes his eyes water. His hands are tucked under his arms, which he holds close and tight to his body. When the buzzer rings and he opens the door, the heat flows out and welcomes him.

Inside her apartment they stand in the middle of the living room in each other's arms. Her eyes are swollen. She looks like she's been crying for a long time. He is still a bit buzzed from the wine they had drank earlier. The phone rings but she doesn't pick it up.

"Are you going to get that?" he asks.

"They'll call back later if it's important."

He wonders when she had last talked to Brian. She's been with Dennis almost constantly for the past month, and she hardly mentions her "boyfriend" in the present tense.

She is wearing a tee-shirt that just reaches halfway between her knees and her thighs. "Do you think I'm a bitch?" she asks.

He almost wants to say yes because he thinks that may get her.

"No, not at all. What's going on?"

She is standing on her toes so that her face is near his. She squeezes him tightly around the waist. "I want to give you so much," she says.

"What do you mean?"

He feels her hand slide up his back, underneath his shirt. The other one is tucked in his pants at the small of his back. She presses her hands into his skin and pulls him close.

"I think it would be good," she says. "I just wish there wasn't so much involved."

He runs his hands down her back and kneads her ass. He shivers when she kisses his neck and pushes her nose into his curly hair which falls just short of his shoulder.

He is crazy about her. So much so that he lies awake thinking about her, about what they could have together. If nothing else, she is his best friend. Once he called her late at night and Brian was there. That night Dennis lay in bed and thought of Brian undressing her, and them pressed between the sheets like leaves in wax paper, forever. He feels like she'll never let go of Brian. And he will never have her.

"I'm moving," she says. "Brian got transferred to New York last week. He asked me to live down there with him. That's why I've been acting the way I've been acting."

"What way is that?" he asks.

"Shut up Dennis. You know what I'm talking about."

He pulls her hips in toward his and kisses her neck. He feels a great weight in his stomach, like he had eaten too much too fast.

"When are you leaving?"

"Next week."

"Don't go," he says. "Don't leave me here alone."

"I don't want to. But there are so many opportunities there. I'm going to start painting again. I think I can hook up with a gallery down there that would like my work. They're not as conservative down there."

He was staring at the wall over her shoulder. "Do you love Brian?"

"You know I do," she says. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you."

"What are you thinking about?"

She doesn't answer him. For a long time they just hold each other in the middle of the living room, and he is reminded of the figures on Keats' Grecian Urn, suspended forever in the instant before they kiss. *Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, Though winning near the goal-- yet, do not grieve; She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss. Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair.*

"Dennis," she says.

"What?"

"I love you."

"I know. I love you too," he says. "But are you in love with me?"

She stops hugging him and takes him by the hand. "Come with me," she says.

He holds her hand and lets her lead him across the room toward the stairs. He hesitates on the staircase. For an instant, when she turns around and looks at him and tugs on his hand, he wants to leave, never see her again. He knows now that she is lost to him forever, the same way he knew that he had lost Stacey Morrison after his father died. His feet feel heavy as he follows Andrea to her bedroom.

Upstairs, Dennis is as far to one side of the bed as he can get, trying not to touch her. He would like nothing more than to make love to her, but he wants her to make the first move.

They have slept in the same bed before, but he kept his clothes on all night, even his socks. He wonders why it isn't like it was with other girls, why he is afraid. She moves closer to him and kisses him lightly on the nose, and then on the mouth.

He is dying to love her. He finds himself thinking about a song, an Elvis Costello song. He kisses her full on the mouth and she runs her hand across his chest, spreading her fingers out in his chest hair.

He is hard and he presses his hips into hers. He feels her push back and he wants desperately to slide off her panties, but he doesn't. He wants her to say something, but she just kisses him. He wants her to say that she is in love with him. Not that she loves him but that she is in love with him.

His mind is going like sixty, and they are making love. Her breathing is hypnotizing. He wants her to be satisfied but he is shaking and he can't understand why he's afraid. He wants to be everything for her.

He is gentle with her, timid. They move together slowly and rhythmically.

He shoots and she's 'not ready.' he falls out of her sticky and limp. He rolls onto his back and pulls her close to him. Outside the streetlamps push bars of light through the window. Neither of them says a word. He had wanted it to be good. He wanted it to be so good that she would stay and wait for him to finish school, then they

could move to New York together. If only he had made her come, had he been a lover and not just a friend.

He looks at the ceiling and says nothing. She rolls over and he waits for her breathing to deepen and slow. When he is sure she is asleep he gets up quietly and dresses, careful not to wake her.

Outside it is cold and his car has no heat.