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The Model Home

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1.

Daniel peered over the edge of a deep pit, wondering when they would return. A Pepsi bottle half-full of reddish-brownish water. Rusted rebars jutting from a deep, clay-red puddle. They would not be back today.

The sky oppressed the horizon with its grayness, and the autumn drizzle that had followed the thunderstorms of the night before continued to descend on the development where Daniel lived. Yet high up in the air a bright red sun-like ball hung in the sky, bound by a long plastic guy to the second-story window of a soon-to-be model home. Daniel kept his eyes on the balloon as he approached the corner unit at the end of a row of incomplete townhouses.

Entering through the empty doorway, he saw that some of the frames on the first floor had been drywalled since last he had

poked around inside. But there was still a lot of work to be done. In the kitchen, an open doorframe dropped off to a dark basement. Holding on to the jamb, Daniel leaned over the cool emptiness and breathed in the dank must of cement and cinder blocks and dirt. The rest of the house smelled overwhelmingly of damp sawdust.

In the foyer, a large square hole gaped over a half-built flight of stairs. Daniel climbed a makeshift ladder to the second story to hunt for nails and wood scraps. The plywood floor creaked as he walked on it, and when he ran his footsteps echoed against the sheets of drywall propped against the frame of the unfinished hallway.

He recognized the bathroom as much by its position as by the holes cut in the floor for the toilet and sink. Just as in his house, there was a bedroom next to this bathroom. Sometimes at night he would wake up and have to cross the little bit of darkness between his door and the bathroom to sit on the cold toilet. Sometimes, though, he would wake to find it was too late. Dawn's room was across the hall in his house, and here as well a second bedroom faced the bathroom.

Daniel walked to the end of the hall and found a room that was just like his mother's. Only there were no walls, just naked two-by-fours. He and Dawn weren't supposed to go into this room unless they knocked and their mother said, "Come in!" But one

time they decided to wake up early and make her breakfast in bed, which was a nice thing for them to do on Mother's Day, Dawn said, and they came into surprise her and she laughed. Drapes hung in his mother's windows--long orange ones that went from the tops of the windows down to the floor and that totally blocked out the sunlight when she closed them. Like the time a few months ago, just after they moved in, when Daniel was sick and his mother let him stay in her room, and she closed the drapes so he could sleep all day. Here, though, the windows were unfinished, and so there were no drapes. But tied to the two-by-four at the bottom of one window was the plastic line leading up to the big red balloon. Moving to the window frame, he followed the line up. He found it strange to be standing in almost-his-mother's-bedroom while a mist fell down around him, watching the big sun-like ball wobble above him in the all-gray sky. From the line hung hundreds of colored flags that fluttered in the breeze. Tugging it barely shook the balloon, it was so high up--like how the bobber at the end of his line didn't move when he lifted his rod while fishing off the back of their old boat.

They used to tie the balloon to a post near the trailer across the street until a few of the kids on the square started grabbing onto the line and swinging off. Daniel had never tried it, but he wondered what would happen if he grabbed on to the line and jumped out of the window holding it tight. Would it

carry him up and away over the small mountains that bulged slightly on the horizon, or would he just float to the parking lot and gently land there holding the big balloon like the little man in the snow globe? Or would he fall? It gave him a chill to think about, and so he distracted himself from the thought of how high the balloon was by looking out across the development.

Only four rows of townhouses were complete. Each row formed a side of a court containing a parking lot, communal mailboxes, and several sapling dogwoods. Beyond the far side of the court stretched a drainage ground at least half the size of a football field. And straight ahead was the street Daniel walked down to get to school. From behind the last row of houses, Daniel could hear cars passing on the highway. Every night as he lay in bed, he could hear their distant hum. It sounded to him a little like the ocean, which they lived near--before moving here and before they'd lived with Grandma Dell.

Between the model home and the highway, a dirt road ran out a ways before disappearing beneath a field of tall grass and weeds. Although for now this was where the workers parked their Bobcats and their Caterpillars, Roy G. Biv said that eventually it would be the main street for the entire neighborhood, lined with court after court of hundreds of houses. On either side of the muddy stretch, the basements for a second and third block

were already dug and half the foundations poured. The site was a playground of pitfalls, rusted spikes, screws and nails, and scraps of lumber.

The thought struck Daniel again that the shell of a house he was standing in was just like his, only incomplete. Shawn's house, too, was the same, but everything was backward, the plans reversed. And Daniel wondered whether all the houses he could see from here on high were just like his--they all had the same plastic shutters and screen doors, the same cement doorsteps and fake brick fronts--and whether all the ones that Geoffrey and his dad were building would be the same. Would all those pits be filled with this?

"This is where I live now," Daniel said to himself. Because for a moment--he couldn't say why--it felt somehow wrong. Saying it aloud and hearing it reminded him that it was true.

He climbed back down the makeshift ladder and ran out of the model home. At the entrance to the finished court stood the trailer housing a temporary office. That was a nice place to spend the afternoon, and his mother let him go over almost whenever he wanted, as long as Roy didn't mind, which he almost never did. And Roy was usually around, as long as it didn't rain. Daniel checked the window of the trailer just in case, but was not surprised to find it dark inside and empty.

Fall wasn't as fun as summer. In summer, the kids played kickball in teams of two or three out in the drainage field. Or sometimes War. Since his mother didn't let him have toy guns, if Daniel took part at all, he played a hostage. What he really liked about summer, though, was how the bottom of the drainage field dried up and hardened. From the top of the small hill rising to meet the back of one row of houses, the dried-up field looked like a long strip of reddish alligator skin. The earth would crack into a million pieces that curled up at the edges to make shallow clay bowls. If it rained just a little, all of them would fill with water. But if it rained too much, they would turn to mud and an enormous pool would gather around a large drainage pipe in the middle of the field. Daniel liked it better when it was hot and dry. He liked the brownish-red dustbowl and the sun-scorched earth and the thousands of cracks and the way the clay became tiles that crunched beneath his feet as he walked across them all alone. He liked how the little potshards popped and crackled. He would walk across the cracked-up field by himself and imagine it was his Tatooine, which was a desert planet in the movie he liked with Luke Skywalker, and he would feel that before him stretched a future bright yet undetermined amongst the stars. Or he would pretend to be an archeologist, like Indiana Jones, discovering the shards left behind by a tribe the sun had burned away, standing amidst the evidence of

people gone and lost. After collecting armloads of them, he would lose himself in smashing them--smashing them as Mom had smashed the plates before they moved away.

But today the field was nothing but mud, just like the bottoms of the newly dug basements and the muddy road lined with backhoes. For most of September, in fact, it had been a big mud pit. No one went there now. Mostly they played skateboards or street hockey in the parking lot. They rarely had to yell "Car!" and stop the game, except when someone's dad came home from work.

The older kids hung out on the Green Thing, a big green electrical box next to the Gray Thing, which looked like a pill capsule that had crash landed in the grass and which Will, Shawn's older brother who liked Dawny, said had everybody's cable in it. The older kids hung out on the Green Thing not just because sitting on it interfered with countless games of Tag and Sharks and Minnows and Wiffle ball (because the Green Thing was *the* obvious choice for base or home plate), nor because it was warm and because it kind of hummed. They sat on it because it was tucked between two rows of houses and hidden from the parking lot by a hedge. When an adult approached, one of the smaller kids playing War would usually run around the hedge and shout, "Enemy forces approaching!" And if a grown-up did happen to slip past perimeter defenses, the Green Thing was big enough

to duck behind long enough to finish a cigarette or continue making out or whatever it was that they didn't want grown-ups to see.

When Daniel came around the hedge, his sister, Dawn, was perched on the Green Thing with Will, and they both acted so weird when they saw him that, since there wasn't any smoke, Daniel figured they must have been making out.

"You're not supposed to be out here, dorkus!" Dawn scowled, nervously pushing her blond hair behind her ears.

"Shut up," said Daniel. "You're the one who's grounded."

"Whatever," she said, rolling her great big blue eyes. "You gotta go in the house." Daniel ignored her and crouched to dig a hole in the neighbor's lawn with a stick. "You're gonna go get something for me."

"Get it your stupid self," Daniel muttered.

"Look!" Dawn shouted at him. "You're gonna get something for me. Right now."

Before he had a chance to stand up, Dawn lunged at Daniel and knocked him back onto the damp ground. While generally lazy, she moved fast if it meant avoiding more effort than it took to assault her brother. She sat on him and tickled him mercilessly. Resting all her weight on his chest, she wiggled back and forth to force the air from his lungs. She'd become quite expert at the technique, having used it to train him to change the channel

for her, to go upstairs to fetch her hairbrush, or to run to the Seven-Eleven to buy her a Coke (which they weren't allowed to drink without their mother's permission).

Daniel had laughed out all his air, and Dawn continued tickling him so relentlessly that he couldn't draw another breath. She restated her request. "I need something, Daniel. Are you gonna get it?"

"Uhhh," Daniel grunted, unable to push out the accompanying "huh" to express complete submission.

"You gonna get it for me?"

Daniel wheezed helplessly. Hoping to use the last of his air to escape, he wriggled madly beneath her, but the attempt was in vain. Hot tears spilled down his cheeks, and he nodded urgently. Dawn leaned close to his face, gritting her teeth as she bore down on him. Will's laughter rang out from atop the Green Thing.

"Okay," Dawn said. She rose just enough to let Daniel take a life-saving breath then pushed down again to crush it out of him.

"Tsst!" Will scoffed, picking his teeth with the corner of a matchbook. "Just punch him till he does it."

"No bruises," Dawn replied. "He can tell Marion whatever he wants and there's no proof." She punctuated her point with a sharp jab in Daniel's side.

"Oh, shit," Will said, laughing again. "You're like a kung fu torture master!"

"Shut up, William," Dawn snapped over her shoulder. She turned her angry eyes back on Daniel. "Now, run up to Mom's room and go in the second drawer in her dresser--"

"We're not..." Daniel sputtered. "...when Mom's--"

"Shut up and just take a cigarette from the pack she's got in there."

"But... she'll know that... she'll--"

"No. She won't. Nobody counts 'em, stupid. Just take and bring me one." Dawn drove the demand home by lifting her legs and grinding her bony butt into his side. "Gonna do it?"

"Uhh.... ehh... uhhh..." Daniel sounded like an accordion being run over repeatedly. Taking one of his breathless grunts for an implied yes, Dawn let him up. Without another word or a backward glance, Daniel ran to the back door of their house to do his sister's bidding.

2.

Dawny was evil. She was a B-I-T-C--he didn't want to spell out the whole word, but that's what she was to him. She didn't used to be this mean to him, but now almost every day she sat on him or pushed him or made him do things she could just as easily

have done herself. And complaining about it to Mom only made things worse. Dawny might get in trouble and not be able to go outside for an afternoon or not be allowed to watch Love Boat and Fantasy Island, but the next day she would just act even meaner to punish him for squealing.

He threw all his weight into opening the sliding glass door. His entire left side was damp from the wet grass Dawn had pressed him down on, and the knees of his jeans were soaked through. The tears still drying on his face, he burned with humiliated rage. He slammed the door shut, screwed up his face, and kicked the corner of the couch several times as hard as he could, imagining it was Dawn. Puddles, their poodle, jumped and ran away upstairs. Daniel kicked the couch so hard that he hurt his foot and, howling, had to drop down on the uncarpeted cement floor. Like a little animal, he sat crying and screaming to himself in anger and in pain. He twisted his thumb till it hurt enough to distract him from the moment.

He hated being angry. And he hated letting them see how enraged he got, even when he knew his anger to be justified. Mom and Dawn called him Donald Duck; they called his tantrums conniption fits. "Poor baby!" they would taunt, smiling to each other with rare camaraderie. They laughed because he was little and because his small fists quivered at his sides and because his face got so red. He hated that they were allowed to laugh at

him because he knew he wouldn't be allowed to laugh when they were angry.

Daniel stopped twisting his thumb and tried to press his anger back down inside. He got on his feet again and, limping a little, ran up to the two flights of stairs to the second floor. Opening his mother's bedroom door, he moved with extreme care, as though he were worried someone was inside or might be watching from the stairs. Creeping stealthily past the long orange drapes to his mother's dresser, he opened the second drawer, just as Dawn had ordered. Inside, next to an ashtray with some butts and ashes in it, he found the cigarettes, a pack of More 100 Lights. Both the ashtray and the cigarettes rested atop a large shoebox with the yellow, orange, and brown Caldor department store rainbow on it. Daniel picked up the pack of cigarettes, his hands shaking a little as he drew one out. Just to be safe, he counted the rest. He hoped the remaining fourteen would be enough that one would not be missed. He closed the pack and set the cigarette on top of the dresser.

That was it. That was all he had come for. But as he went to replace the pack, it slipped from his fingers and landed in the ashtray, spraying ashes onto the lid of the shoebox. Picking up the pack again gingerly between his thumb and two fingers, he set it aside. Then he moved the ashtray. Finally, he drew the box out slowly, trying not to spill any of the ashes into the

drawer. He removed the lid and tilted it to blow the ashes off, making sure not to leave behind a smudge. Then he stood up and ground the ashes into the carpet with his shoe.

As he went to put the lid back on the box, something inside it caught his eye. Written in a graceful cursive hand in dark blue ink--

Daniel Dorn

--and beneath that, his address. He found a short stack of envelopes similarly addressed and, beneath those, three with Grandma Dell's address below his name. But all of them had only his name on them. The tops of the envelopes had all been cleanly cut open, but Daniel did not remove the cards or letters. Instead, he set the entire stack aside and continued rifling through the box.

It also contained a set of keys on a leather keychain depicting a boat with CAPE COD in bold letters underneath, a small black Bible with gilt-edge pages, a balled-up grayish terrycloth sash, and a brown pocketknife with A N D inscribed on the handle. Daniel picked up the knife and felt the cold of the metal against his palm. An errant memory flashed through his mind: a bronze oak leaf on a stiff collar, the smell of aftershave. He held the knife until it grew warm in his hand and the feeling of the cold metal faded. He suddenly felt confused--upset and angry at once. He stared again at the stack of

letters, wondering why he'd never seen them. What were they doing in a box of junk in his mother's drawer? His hand shook as he reached down and began to pull one of the letters from its envelope.

Downstairs, Puddles started barking, and the front door opened. Daniel stopped. At first he thought that it must be Dawn, and he wondered whether she knew anything about the Caldor shoebox or whether she'd been allowed to have her letters. But then his mother shouted, "Anybody home?" as she always did when she got back from work.

Marion's evening ritual began with her going to the kitchen and setting her purse on the chair by the window. As Puddles danced eagerly around her legs, she would crouch and give the little poodle a pat to settle him down. Then she would take off her jacket and hang it in the hall closet. Returning to the kitchen, she would take two pieces of ice from the freezer, drop them in a wine glass, and tap some White Zinfandel from the box of she kept on a high shelf in the cupboard. Leaving the glass on the counter to get cold, she would check whether the kids had filled Puddles's food bowl--and invariably have to fill it. Finally, while removing her earrings and necklace, she would walk up to her bedroom to change out of her gray skirt, white blouse, and black heels.

Daniel's heart raced. Frantically, he replaced the knife, the letters, and the other things, set the lid back on the shoebox, and dropped it all in the drawer. Then he returned the ashtray and the pack of cigarettes to their places and slid the drawer shut. He was halfway out of the room before he remembered the cigarette still lying on the dresser. He dashed back and grabbed it, then moved as quickly as he could across the room without making a sound. His mother's footsteps started up the stairs just as he was pulling her bedroom door closed behind him. He bounded across the hallway to his room and, safe at home base, slammed his door shut.

"Daniel?" his mother called from the landing.

"Yeah, Mom!" he called back after a moment's hesitation.

"Start putting on your nice clothes, okay, honey? Geoffrey'll be here soon."

"Yeah!" he yelled back. Then he remembered why she was home early. He glanced at a small, poorly wrapped present on his bookshelf.

His face still burned, and he felt again like he might start to cry, but he wasn't sure why. What were they doing there? Why had his mother never mentioned them? He suddenly became aware again of the cigarette in his hand. It was damp from his sweaty palm and broken in the middle where he had

squeezed it too tightly. He hid it under his pillow and sat down on his bed to catch his breath.

Then he opened his closet, pulled out his nice slacks, and started to take off his shoes and remove his damp jeans.

3.

For weeks, Marion had been planning a special dinner for Geoffrey and the kids. It was her thirty-second birthday and her fifth monthiversary with Geoffrey, and so it was worthy of something fancy.

That evening, the kids put on the outfits they'd worn at their Aunt Allison and Uncle Oscar's wedding. Marion wore her new skirt and blouse, the ones she'd bought practically the moment her last check had cleared. The blouse was of bright red satin, low-cut with a frilled front and shiny gold buttons, and the shoulder pads were neither too large nor too small. The skirt was black, velvety, scalloped at the bottom where it swooped up from below the knee almost to mid thigh, flattering her well-turned ankles and her tasteful red heels. With her cornhusk hair pulled back over large gold hoop earrings, her bangs curled and Aquanetted into an impressive bouffant, her eyes revived with deft feminine strokes of L'Oreal and Maybelline, Marion looked stunning even as she stood in her

mostly pale green, fluorescent-lit kitchen brandishing a wooden spoon and sucking her finger, unable to remember what she'd done with the new shaker of garlic powder.

Dawn and Daniel loved special dinners. They sat at opposite ends of the small kitchen table, begging their mother to tell them what they were going to eat and cheering for their favorites.

"Pork chops!" shouted Dawn.

"Nope," said Marion, setting a saucepan on the electric range.

"Chicken casserole," yelled Daniel. "The one without green beans!"

"Thought about that one..." Marion began opening a large can of tomato sauce. "But no."

"Macaroni and cheese?" asked Dawn hopefully. Marion raised an eyebrow and guided Dawn's gaze to the can she'd just emptied into the saucepan.

"Can we have spinach with vinegar on it?" Daniel asked.

Dawn winced and pinched his arm. "Who likes spinach, weirdo?"

"I do," Daniel muttered.

As she started pulling out the rest of the ingredients from the cupboard, Marion finally told them. "'Kay, you ready?" A big

smile crept across her face. "Spaghetti and clam sauce!" The children stared at her, straight-faced and silent.

"Oh," said Dawn. Daniel crinkled up his nose.

Well, that went over like a lead balloon, Marion thought as she grabbed the box of spaghetti from the top shelf. Anyway, Geoffrey would like it, she was sure. Undeterred, she opened a can of chopped clam meat and emptied it into the saucepan of simmering tomato sauce, dashed in a bit of basil and pepper, then turned her attention to cutting the loaf of French bread on the counter. She buttered it and applied a liberal dusting of garlic powder (the shaker had been in the back of the cupboard, she'd discovered with a spin of the lazy Susan). She'd bought a special bottle of red wine, too, even though she secretly preferred her cheap White Zinfandel.

Marion slipped past the table and pushed aside the curtain to look out onto the parking lot. "I thought Geoffrey'd be here by now."

"He's not staying over, is he?" Dawn asked.

Marion retreated to the stove, blushing deeply. "What kind of question is that, Dawny? You know he never does. He's never once stayed over." She tasted her sauce with the wooden spoon. "You know that."

And it was true. Every night he came to the house, Geoffrey would leave before Marion went to bed. Of course, this was not

to say that they didn't spent some time alone after the children had gone to bed. Several times he'd stayed until three or four in the morning in her bedroom, watching television and fooling around. But he had never once spent the night with her in her bed. She had told Dawn this, but she could never be sure whether her daughter believed her.

As long as she'd been dating Geoffrey, she'd had very few close girlfriends to share things with, and since Dawn was on her way to becoming a young woman--she'd already had her first period--Marion told her much more about her private life than most daughters get to hear. The reason Marion blushed so deeply at the question, though, was because she felt as though Dawn had seen right through her. She had been asking herself the same thing about that night. It was, after all, a special occasion, hers and Geoffrey's first kind-of-holiday together and a kind-of-momentous relationship marker (five months seemed a pretty big deal to Marion, at least). And Geoffrey always spent so much time at the end of the night sighing about how he was so sad to go, and he was always making such a big deal out of it. And he always refused to sleep on the couch if they'd had some wine or if it was late, and he would insist on driving home--almost as though he wanted to make Marion feel guilty for not letting him sleep in her bed. And each time she would re-explain why she'd made this rule of hers, how as a mother and a woman who was

still relatively unused to being single again she just felt it inappropriate to have a man in her room while her children were asleep in the same house. But tonight, because it was special occasion, maybe they would bend the rules a little--if he agreed to get up early and to be off before the kids woke up.

Marion finished the last of her White Zin and tried to shake the feeling that Dawny was reading her mind. She tried to look as though her daughter's question hadn't rattled her one bit, and before turning back to her simmering sauce she tapped just a touch more wine into her glass, not even enough to cover the mostly melted ice.

The front door squeaked open.

"Wow!" Geoffrey shouted from the foyer. "It smells great in here!" The kids watched him stumble in with a large box wrapped in birthday paper and topped with a bright red bow. He set it down next to the rolltop desk in the fancy living room (the one they never used), and came back to the kitchen.

"Spaghetti, huh?"

"Spaghetti and clam sauce," Marion corrected.

He smiled. "You didn't go and make a cake, too, did you?"

"Oh," said Marion as though she had forgotten something.

"No."

"Well, that's okay." Geoffrey stepped past the kids and held Marion's arm as he gave her a peck on the cheek. He looked

her up and down, and grinned appreciatively. "Wow! When you said 'Dress up' you meant 'Dress up!'" He pulled her close and gave her another kiss on the naked nape of her neck. "Happy birthday, Mare."

"Thank you," she said. "Look, and I got some good wine."

"Good wine, eh?" he replied. He took the bottle of red from Marion and went to a nearby drawer for a corkscrew. "Well, then I guess we'd better open her up and let her breathe a bit. That's what you do with a good wine, right?" He winked at the kids, neither of whom had any idea what he was talking about.

"It's not that good," Marion said with a chuckle. "Now just sit. I've got everything going. It'll just be a couple minutes."

Geoffrey put the bottle between his legs to hold it as he yanked the cork out. Daniel giggled watching him, and Dawn winced in mild embarrassment. He set the corkscrew and the bottle on the table then tiptoed up behind Marion to hug her and nuzzle her neck. Dawn made the obligatory "gag me" sign to her brother.

"Want your birthday present?" Geoffrey whispered boyishly.

"After dinner," said Marion. He moaned impatiently. "Oh, poor thing!" She laughed. "It's not even his present and he can't wait an hour!"

"I just can't wait to see you open it," he said. He took some wine glasses down and set them on the table.

"What are those two for?" said Marion, counting four wine glasses.

"Well, for Dawn and Daniel, of course."

"Oh, no..." Marion yelled.

"Come on, they'll just have a touch, with some water in it. That's how they do it in France." He grinned wickedly at the kids and wiggled his eyebrows.

Dawn leaned over to Daniel and whispered, "I hate it when he tries to be fun."

"Well, this isn't France," said Marion. "So they get a choice of water or milk."

"Tres bien!" Geoffrey said dramatically, with an accent that was anything but French. "Hmm... What's the word for milk in French?" He looked at Dawn and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. She stared back at him blankly. "Aren't you taking French?"

"Spanish," she said. The corner of her mouth twisted wryly. "Milk, por favor," she said.

"Milk, too!" shouted Daniel.

Geoffrey filled their wine glasses with milk and then poured two glasses of red wine for him and Marion.

Marion dumped the spaghetti into a colander, tilting her head away for fear the steam would flatten her bangs. The sink was shallow, with a low stationary faucet that always managed to get in the way. She sighed in frustration as hot water spilled

onto the mottled green counter. "Ugh! Who designs this shit!" she shouted, resting the pot on the counter's edge. She giggled and covered her mouth with her hand, glancing back at Geoffrey. "Oops."

"Aw, c'mon, that's the best sink unit you can get in an economy townhouse," said Geoffrey. "Besides, I don't design the stuff."

"You just run the company that puts it in here," Dawn interjected.

"By the way," Marion continued, "the bottom of that banister is really loose. Maybe this weekend you could tighten it up for me, huh?"

"To be absolutely accurate, Dawn," Geoffrey explained patiently, rubbing his hands together, "Dad owns and runs the company. I'm the Business Manager, so I'm responsible for all the--"

"It's been like that for months," said Marion, "and I'm afraid it'll just break off one day, the way the kids swing off it when they fly down the stairs."

"Hey, we should all play Yatzee later, huh?" Dawn said. "We haven't played Yatzee in forever."

"Yatzee!" Daniel shouted enthusiastically.

"Yeah, we can play," said Geoffrey, smiling.

"Mom?" Dawn asked, walking over to her mother and poking at the puffy shoulder of Marion's blouse. "Can we play Yatzee after dinner? You know, for your birthday."

"Honey, Geoffrey just said yes," Marion told her. "Set the table, would you, Daniel?"

"Just thought I'd ask," Dawn returned sarcastically. "I mean, just because he built the place doesn't mean he owns it."

"Dawn, don't," Marion snapped. Geoffrey's face turned pink.

"Mom said to set the table, Daniel," Dawn ordered. As her brother passed to get the silverware, she gave his ear a quick twist. He squealed like a piglet and slapped at her hand.

"Stop it right now, you two!" Marion shouted. "Dawn, knock it off and help him."

Turning from her mother, Dawn made a mocking expression that Daniel had dubbed the myuh-myuh-myuh face. Geoffrey shot her a disapproving glare, and she stopped.

Marion pulled the garlic bread from the oven and put it in a basket lined with a tea towel. She set the basket on the table and announced, "I think we're all set." She flicked off the overhead fluorescent lights and dimmed the imitation stained-glass chandelier that hung by a chain over the small dinner table. To make it all the more romantic, she lit two tall, red candles. In the low light, the kitchen looked suddenly warmer and less shabby. The poorly seamed, pale green wallpaper, with

its pattern of sickly yellow flowers, deepened just enough to seem a pleasant shade. The checkered towel in the breadbasket, the red candles, and the bottle of wine added splashes of color to the beech tabletop. The white plates gleamed in the candlelight. As Marion set the large bowl of spaghetti and clam sauce in the center of the table, she was pleased to find that her special dinner had turned out to be such a pretty scene.

She set her glass of blush wine next to her glass of red and started serving the spaghetti.

"So, we're supposed to have this thing--" Daniel announced, gasping for air between big gulps of milk as he talked. "Um, at school-- With-- And so we're gonna all get a balloon." He caught his breath.

"Uh huh?" said Geoffrey, a little too encouragingly for Dawn's taste. Marion ladled out more sauce onto his spaghetti.

"Yeah," said Daniel. "Can I have more milk, Mom? And we'll tie a thing to it, and then we'll let them go. And everybody's balloons'll fly off. And then, later, somebody finds your thing, and they call you on the telephone. Or they'll write you a letter if they don't like to use the telephone. And--"

"Kind of a Balloon Day, huh?" Geoffrey nodded. "Sounds neat."

"That reminds me," Marion interrupted, touching Geoffrey's arm. "Oh, Geoffrey, that reminds me of the helium tank. On--"

What was that? Our second or third date, I think?" As she took her seat, she started giggling so much that she made a little snort. The ice in her White Zin clinked against the glass as she raised it to her lips and drank the last sip. She usually only had one glass of wine before dinner, and she could feel that the little extra was already making her a little goofy.

"What?" asked Dawn, squinting her eyes at her mother.

"Oh, my!" Marion squealed, catching her breath. "Well, you know the big balloon they always put up? Well, Geoffrey--"

"I have to put it up every morning to advertise the neighborhood," Geoffrey interrupted. "We keep a helium tank in the trailer. Me and Roy,"--Daniel's face lit up when he heard the foreman's name--"we fill it up every morning and--"

"Oh, but Geoffrey took me over there one night so we could play with the helium tank. It must have been our second date, don't you think?"

"Play with it?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah. Like how, when you breathe it in, your voice gets all funny," Marion said. "You know, you sound like what's-his-name. The little squirrel thing, at Christmas. You know the one I mean. The 'hoola-hoop' one..."

"Alvin?" said Dawn, rolling her eyes. "Duh, Mom! He's only a chipmunk."

Geoffrey jumped back into the story. "Your mom thought it was the funniest thing when I sucked in a little helium and--"

"Oh, my God!" Marion squealed. "He sounded just like Alvin, and he started singing 'We represent the lollipop kids...' I thought I'd die laughing. He was so funny and so, so cute..." She patted Geoffrey's cheek.

Dawn banged her glass of milk on the table. "Jesus, it's not that funny, Marion," she sniped. "And when you laugh like that you really sound stupid."

Marion recoiled as though Dawn had slapped her face. She wiped her nose with her hand and looked away.

Geoffrey's chair screeched as he pushed it back and stood abruptly. He wagged a long forefinger in Dawn's face. "Don't you speak to your mother that way, young lady, and don't you call her Marion! Show some respect!"

Dawn scoffed. Audibly. Although only on the cusp of becoming a teenager, already she'd perfected the adolescent's dismissive tsssssst. "It's hard to respect someone that dates an overgrown boy who thinks he's hot stuff just 'cause his daddy's got a little money."

Geoffrey's face went from red to white. "Watch your mouth!" he snapped, with such cold sternness that Dawn's disaffectedness deflated and her eyes filled with tears. She looked to her mother for an appeal.

Marion had turned away. Her eyes watery and her knuckles white, she clutched her knife and fork as though steadying herself the way a skier does with her poles at a dangerous precipice.

Dawn looked at her plate then again at the man before her. She sneered an ugly sneer, dropped her fork on her plate, and stormed out of the kitchen. The sound of her feet beating up the stairs ended with the loud bang of her bedroom door slamming.

No one at the table spoke. Marion took her daughter's plate then reached for Daniel's.

"I'm not done," Daniel whined innocently. She took it anyway.

"Go to your room, Daniel," she said.

"But I--"

"Just go upstairs..."

Geoffrey shared with Daniel an understanding frown and gave a little nod toward the staircase. And with that, Daniel was sent to bed as part of a kind of unexplained residual punishment that a child sometimes receives on his sibling's behalf. Or maybe it was just because Dawn had already stormed off, and so he was the only one still there to be punished. He hopped down from his chair and walked quickly and quietly upstairs.

4.

About an hour after dinner, Marion came up to apologize to Daniel for sending him to his room.

"You never opened my birthday present," said Daniel softly. "Can I give it to you now?" he asked.

His mother's expression melted into one of tenderness. "Of course," she said, stroking his cheek.

Daniel jumped up to grab the present from his bookshelf. He had wrapped it himself. He handed his mother the heap of crumpled paper, and she began to pull it open. It was a fist-sized globe containing a small snowman holding a balloon. Marion shook it. The snowman stood steadfast while clumps of plastic snow swirled dizzily around his top-hatted head and the balloon bobbed on its string.

Daniel pointed to the tiny MADE IN GERMANY sticker on the top of the globe.

"Just like me," he said and laughed.

"I love it, Daniel!" Marion exclaimed. "Oh, it's beautiful. Thank you, sweetie!" She hugged him and gave him three quick pecks on his little blond head. Then she pulled back and gave the globe another shake. Daniel instantly became absorbed in the miniature winter scene.

She smiled, watching how Daniel beamed at the little snowman. He loved snow globes and models, little self-contained worlds and miniature lifelike scenes. If she asked him about his grandfather's train set, which had spanned the better part of a large basement, Marion was surprised by all the details he could recall or reinvent. The small park filled with tiny people--the group of kids running down a path, the elderly couple sharing a bench--and lined with plastic trees; the business man near the overpass, his arm raised to hail a cab; the engineer at the central station, forever looking down the lines and waiting patiently at the switch; the rows of perfect little houses, each with its own yard, its own trees and bushes; the little dog standing on its hind legs near a girl on a tiny swing set; the little house that Daniel said looked just like home and that he loved the best.

His eyes glowed with fascination as the snowstorm subsided. Marion nearly let out a laugh thinking how funny he could be, knowing that for her birthday he had bought her simply what he himself had wanted. But it touched her all the same.

"Daniel," she said, "I know just where I'm going to put this... Down on the shelf in the living room, right by the window. Won't that be nice?" He agreed it would be. "But I was just thinking," she continued, "instead of me going all the way down there right now, maybe I could just wait till morning. And

for tonight--if you wouldn't mind--maybe you could watch over it for me, make sure nothing happens to it."

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah. Maybe I could just leave it there on top of your shelf for a night."

"Okay," said Daniel, trying in vain to hide his joy.

"But I'm gonna put it all the way at the top, okay? And you have to promise you won't take it down."

"Okay," said Daniel. "I'll watch over it for you. Just with my eyes and not with my hands."

She winked at him and set the snow globe on top of the shelf, which was half again as tall as Daniel.

"Happy birthday, Mommy." Daniel gave his mother a big hug and a kiss. "What did Geoffrey get you?" he asked.

Marion blushed lightly. "You'll see tomorrow," she said. "Now let's get you tucked in."

Daniel pulled out his pajamas as his mother turned down the covers. Grabbing his pillow to fluff it for him, she found a broken cigarette lying on the mattress. She stopped and stared at it as though trying to figure out what it could possibly be, how it could be there. Then she leaned over slowly and picked it up between two fingers. A few bits of tobacco spilled out on the bed.

She turned to Daniel and held the cigarette out in front of her, wordlessly demanding how it had gotten there. Her jaw was tight and her lips pursed, and she narrowed her eyes to punctuate her interrogatory glare. Daniel remained silent.

"Where'd you get it?" she asked.

The words stuck in his throat, but he managed to push them out. "I... I don't know," he said lamely.

"Dawn put you up to this?"

Daniel hated having to choose between the anger of his mother and that of his sister, hated having to decide which punishment he should receive. No matter what he did, he knew he would suffer for it. And so he chose simply to say nothing at all.

Marion closed her hand around the broken cigarette and stormed out of the room. As Daniel put on his pajamas, he heard his mother knocking on Dawn's door. He knew there would be an argument. He swept the bits of tobacco off his mattress, crawled into bed with his pillow over his ears, and tried to sleep.

Not three hours later, Daniel woke up. His eyes went at once to the snow globe high on the shelf. The glass collected the distant flashes of headlights from the highway, and they played around the little snowman like a carousel. Daniel felt suddenly quite awake. He remembered his mother telling him to leave the snow globe where it was, but he wondered what it could

hurt to pull the chair over from his desk and take it down, to hold it for just a few minutes before going back to sleep.

He felt the overwhelming, excruciating need to reach out and touch the beloved object on high. Reaching, reaching--climbing onto the chair and straining on his tippy-toes--and failing, falling, the fingertips touching just enough to knock the precious object down, down--and seeing the bauble burst on the floor with a loud shattering pop.

Little did Daniel know that this was a feeling he would have again and again and again. He was young, and he would later know many more such moments. For now, he merely cried inconsolably. The next day he would feel angry with himself.

5.

The hallway was mostly dark, but a dim white light flickered at the bottom of Marion's closed bedroom door. The TV was turned down low, and the occasional clink of an ice cube punctuated a half-whispered conversation.

"Jesus, Mare, I thought we were going to give this a try."

"I can't yet. I'm sorry... I can't. I'm just not ready."

"Not ready? It's been months."

"But the kids--"

"They must be asleep by now."

"I know. I just--"

"Look, I'm trying to be understanding here... I think I've been pretty understanding, right?"

"Yeah."

"So give me a break here, Mare. I mean, come on. This is getting ridiculous. There's gotta be... You have to at some point do this. And not keep holding back just because... I don't know just because of what."

"I'm just afraid, okay?"

"Well, haven't I been, you know, reassuring or whatever?"

There was a pause. And a sigh.

"I just can't help feeling that this whole thing is some kind of excuse--"

"It's not..."

"Some sort of--"

"It isn't, Geoffrey, it's--"

"I mean, I came over tonight. I thought, 'It's your birthday, something nice,' and... I had some pretty damn high hopes, you know?"

"I know."

"But here we are again, the same thing. And, I mean, I bought you a... a goddamn microwave, Mare!"

There was a long silence.

"I hope you didn't get me that just--"

"No. No, of course not."

"--just because you thought a microwave would--"

"Of course not. Don't be stupid. That's obviously not what I meant."

Silence.

"Listen. I should just go. I'm going. I'm just... I gotta go."

Geoffrey opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway wearing only a pair of tight fuchsia bikini briefs. His shirt and pants were draped over his arm. Standing in the bathroom doorframe, Dawn lifted her head and glared at him. From the room across the hall, they heard a glass globe shatter and Daniel start to cry.

6.

On Saturday morning, Marion was working at her rolltop desk when Daniel came downstairs to remind her he was supposed to go to Balloon Day that afternoon.

"Oh, crap," Marion muttered. She flipped a switch on the beast of an IBM typewriter she was working on, and its electric purr faded to a whisper. Since they had moved into the townhouse, she'd been taking weekend work as a medical transcriber. It made for a dull Saturday, but the extra money

had put a bit more padding between them and financial ruin.

"What time are you supposed to be there?"

"I don't know," said Daniel. "It's on my thing."

"Where's your thing?" Marion asked.

"In my book bag," he answered. Marion told him to go find out the time and let her know.

She started flipping through a large stack of work to see how long it would take her to finish. Daniel came back and said he had to be there at two. "I'm sorry, honey." Marion sighed. "I don't think I'm gonna be able to go. I just have-- Look at this, I have a whole stack of stuff to type up."

Daniel looked disappointed. "But I told you--"

"I know, sweetie. I know," she said, stroking his head.

"But if I don't get this done today, I won't have any time tomorrow. We gotta go to Grandma's and help her in the afternoon, and--" Now Daniel was beginning to look very disappointed, and it broke Marion's heart. "Listen," she said, "maybe Dawn'll walk over there with you. Would that be okay? If I stayed and Dawny went?"

"Dawny's grounded," Daniel said.

"I know Dawny's grounded, silly." Marion laughed. "I'm the one who grounded her, remember?"

She had grounded Dawn for three weeks. And since this grounding had come on the heels of a prior two-week punishment,

Dawn technically should not have seen the light of day the rest of October and most of November. Of course, these groundings were more a matter of principle since they were unenforceable between the hours of three and six. Daniel had also been punished for the cigarette incident, but more or less for reasons of familial diplomacy, so Dawn wouldn't feel her mother was being completely unjust about his having been an accomplice, however unwilling.

Marion walked to the foot of the stairs and hollered for Dawn to come down. She heard the music in Dawn's room grow a little louder, and she hollered a second time to make it clear she meant now. Dawn appeared at the top of the steps in a pair of ratty pajamas, looking unwashed and already quite annoyed.

"Come down here, please," Marion said. Dawn galumphed down the stairs, dropping with attitude at every step. She glared at her mother then at her little brother, letting them both know just how much they were annoying her.

"Daniel has his thing this afternoon," Marion began. "Over at school. I've got too much work. So I want you to take him."

"Me?" Dawn moaned. "I can't go, Mom. I'm grounded!" She practically sang the last part, so rich was her sarcasm.

"Well, then consider yourself lucky that I'm letting you out of this house, young lady!" Marion said sternly. "He has to be there at two, and you are taking him."

"Fine!" Dawn yelled. She turned on her heel and pounded her way back up to her room without further argument.

"Well," said Marion, "that's settled."

Daniel smiled. He was happy just to be able to go.

Marion returned to her desk, flipped the switch on her typewriter, and continued her work. Over the clacking keys, she told Daniel to grab some breakfast and then run out and play. "Now, you can go see Mr. Bower," she added, "but don't bother him if he's busy, okay?"

Daniel called the foreman of the construction site "Roy G. Biv." Those were the colors of the rainbow, and when he'd first met Roy Bower over the summer he'd thought how Roy's name was like ROYGBIV. He told Roy what his name sounded like, and Roy smiled out of the corner of his mouth and nodded. "Yeah, I guess it does kinda sound like that."

Roy G. Biv often let Daniel sit with him in the trailer at the edge of the court, looking at artists' renditions of finished townhouses and schematic drawings of their layout. Roy would sit behind a big desk with a big cup of coffee, and talk on his phone and on his walkie-talkie, which he sometimes let Daniel talk on, too. Roy wore a white T-shirt and faded blue jeans and a brown belt and tan boots, and over his regular belt he had another belt, a tan one that was even bigger and had a hammer and a tape measure and other tool and a place to put his

walkie-talkie when he wasn't walkie-talkying. And he had a big black mustache and thick black hair that was turning whitish, and leathery skin that was almost the same color as the big tan belt he wore. And his voice was low and rumbling, but still somehow nice and comforting.

Roy also let Daniel watch the Smurfs in the trailer since Dawn would never let her brother watch what he wanted on the TV in their basement. He'd even strung a wire out the window to a set of rabbit ears on a post outside. Daniel liked the old TV Roy had strung up for him even though it was only black-and-white, and he loved how the whole trailer smelled like coffee and sawdust and whatever aftershave it was Roy smelled like. Daniel would spend hours in the trailer, penciling in his own rooms on the drawings of the houses. Sometimes he would give Roy advice for what would make a really great house. Roy usually agreed.

That morning, Daniel saw Roy across the field. He was out on the site shouting orders at his men down in one of the pits. Daniel walked a little ways up the dirt road to where the men were pouring cement for the basement walls. He approached and stood near to Roy, who was smoking a cigarette and watching his men intently. For most of a minute, neither of them said anything. The big red balloon hung high in the air above them.

Then Roy, his cigarette still dangling from his mouth, looked down at Daniel and snarled, "You're late!"

Daniel's eyes widened in surprise. "Huh?"

"Whaddya mean, 'Huh'? I'm two guys short this mornin', and there you are lollygaggin' back at your mom's place. Now get in there an pour some concrete, boy!" He grinned broadly and slapped his big red hardhat over Daniel's ears. Daniel doubled over with laughter and the hat fell on the ground. "Gimme my hat back!" Roy roared. Daniel picked it up and ran away down the road with it. It was a short chase. Roy grabbed him and turned him upside down, stole the hat back, and shook him a little. "I'll take whatever change you got, too," Roy said, and Daniel giggled all the more.

Finally, Roy flipped him upright again and set him on his feet. "What kind of trouble you gettin' into today, kid?" He put his hand on Daniel's head and held him back at arm's length. Daniel took wild swings under Roy's arm. "C'mon, Donald Duck, my grandma throws punches better'n that!"

"Don't call me that!" Daniel yelled. He'd told Roy about how his mom and sister called him that, and how he didn't like it.

"All right, Daniel," Roy said more softly. "I'm just givin' you a hard time, huh?"

Daniel stopped swinging, and the two of them stood facing each other for a moment. It was late on a bright morning, and the sun was almost at its zenith. Daniel turned and looked up at the red balloon. From where they were standing, it briefly eclipsed the sun. Then a gentle breeze pushed it aside, and Daniel squinted in the daylight.

"Can we go in one of the houses?" asked Daniel.

"Sure we can go in a house," said Roy. "Which one you wanna go in? The Houcks' place there? Or maybe the Millers' house down on the corner?"

"Nooooo," Daniel moaned. "One of the ones you're building!"

"One of them! Oh, I see... Sure, okay. How 'bout I show you what we done on the model?"

Daniel nodded eagerly. Roy shouted across to one of the workers that he would be back in five, and he took Daniel's hand in his leathery mitt and started back toward the model home. When they reached the edge of the dirt road, he stopped and did an exaggerated look-both-ways.

"Nobody's coming!" Daniel shrieked, finding Roy extremely silly.

"You never know, man," said Roy. "Sometimes a backhoe come shootin' through here like a bolt out of the blue!" He laughed along with Daniel as hand in hand they crossed.

Walking around inside the unfinished houses was Daniel's favorite activity, mostly because he liked hanging out with Roy. Outside, they'd put up pink sheets of Styrofoam insulation, and in the foyer Daniel discovered a newly completed staircase. "Upstairs is just like in my house!" he shouted to Roy, who had gone to check whether the downstairs bathroom toilet and sink had been installed.

"Oh, yeah?" said Roy as he returned. He crouched and gave Daniel a quizzical look. "But I didn't ever take you up there, did I?"

Daniel blushed. Roy hadn't taken him up. Announcing his observation had been a foolish way of taking pride in his exploration, but he realized at once it had been a mistake to reveal himself. "Well," he said carefully, "on the... those drawings... On them, they're the same."

"Bullroar," Roy grunted. "Those stairs only got put in yesterday. I hope you ain't been playing around in here when I'm not around. Your mom'd be mad as hell with me if you got hurt."

"I know," said Daniel.

"Well, okay," Roy said, winking and letting him off the hook. "Just think about that before you go gettin' me in trouble, a'right?"

Daniel nodded. Roy opened the door and waved him out. Across the blacktop, they saw Geoffrey and his father standing

by the door to the trailer. Roy hocked a loogey off the doorstep. "Guess I better go talk to 'em," Roy mumbled. "C'mon there, sidekick."

He walked ahead of Daniel, his thumbs hooked over his big tan belt and his work boots kicking out sidewise at every step. He looked just like a cowboy in his faded workman's jeans, Daniel thought. All he needed was a cowboy hat on his head and a six-shooter instead of a walkie-talkie hanging at his side.

"Morning, Mr. Motter," Roy said, shaking Geoffrey's father's hand firmly. "Mr. Motter," he repeated off-handedly, nodding slightly at Geoffrey, who stood next to his father squinting a grin and shading his eyes with his hand against high noon. Geoffrey had on his typical khakis, button-down shirt with a knit tie knotted under his wide collar, and penny loafers. His blazer--the one with patches on the elbows that Dawn made fun of when he wasn't around--was slung over his arm. The old man wore a plaid flannel shirt and a pair of dark blue jeans.

"How you doing, Roy?" Mr. Motter asked. "We just stopped by to discuss this new idea on the table of splitting sections H and I to make room for two more rows of single families..." Roy and Mr. Motter began discussing the specifics of the new plan. Daniel couldn't follow what they were saying without seeing the map Mr. Motter was pointing to.

Geoffrey added nothing to the conversation. He looked oddly small between the two men and seemed to shy from them, from the gruff manner they shared. Although Roy and Mr. Motter were forever sizing each other up, they got along more naturally, more easily, than the old man did with his son. Between them there was a mutual respect that excluded Geoffrey. The foreman and Mr. Motter both had low, rumbling voices, and they spoke like the rest of the people in town. Geoffrey's voice was higher, lighter, and he always spoke a bit too well for the situation. He hardly bore a resemblance to his father. His tight black curls hung about his face in clumps, his mouth was a weak red dash above his chin, and his frame was long and slender. His father had straight white hair, full lips, and broad shoulders. The only traits the son shared with his father were their thick black brows and clear gray eyes. Indeed, Roy seemed more Mr. Motter's true son--his straight hair was even turning white like the old man's. Looking at all three together, Daniel wished Roy really were Mr. Motter's son.

"And who's this young man?" Mr. Motter asked, noticing Daniel for the first time.

"Daniel here's another satisfied customer of Deer Park Estates," Roy joked. He winked, and Daniel smiled and nodded, even though he was not sure what Roy meant.

"Dad," Geoffrey interrupted, a little frustrated. "This is Marion's son, Danny. I've told you about him, remember?" He reached across awkwardly to present the boy to his father.

"Of course, I do. Of course..." Mr. Motter said. "So you live right here in section A, huh?" His gray eyes flashed at Daniel.

"Um, 341 Motter Court," said Daniel.

"You like the neighborhood?"

"Um, I guess so," said Daniel. "But it's a little... empty."

"Empty!" Mr. Motter laughed. "Not enough kids around yet, eh? Well, just wait. In less than a year, that whole field there, right up to the highway, is gonna be packed."

"It'll be a wonderful place for a family," Geoffrey added.

Daniel kicked a rock across the blacktop and watched it fly. It made it almost to the dirt road. Roy's walkie-talkie barked something unintelligible.

"Well, we'd better go take a look at those lots, eh?" said Roy.

"Sure, yeah," said Mr. Motter. Then he leaned down to shake Daniel's hand. His hand was rough like Roy's, not soft like Geoffrey's, and his grip was strong. "Nice to meet you, Danny," he said.

"Daniel," he replied.

Mr. Motter smiled weakly and glanced at Geoffrey. "I guess we'll be seeing a whole lot more of each other." He and Roy headed off toward the field together, looking like a couple of cowboys.

"Do you want to come in, Daniel?" Geoffrey asked as he opened the trailer door. "Watch cartoons or something?" Daniel gazed after Roy and Mr. Motter as they crossed the dirt road. Roy waved at him one last time, and Daniel waved back. "Coming in?" Geoffrey asked.

Daniel looked up at him. "No," he said, "that's okay. I have to... I gotta leave soon. We're... I have--"

"Balloon Day's today, right?"

"Yeah."

"Your mom going with you?"

"She's gotta work."

"Well, if you need a ride over there or something--"

"Dawny's gonna walk with me," said Daniel.

"Oh," said Geoffrey. "I see."

"Yeah."

"Well. Have fun."

Daniel started to walk away. He glanced back at Geoffrey over his shoulder and smiled--more because he felt bad not smiling than because he wanted to smile. He ran the rest of the way to his front door and went inside.

7.

"She's such a child! I mean, she thinks I'm, like, her confidant or her best friend or something, you know? Like that stupid thing her and Geoffrey do--that dumb thing with the helium. And the stupid way she talks about that stuff at the freaking dinner table. Like, can't I just eat in peace? It's so retarded! Even my friends are more mature than she is sometimes."

Dawn stormed down the street and rounded the corner as Daniel rushed to keep up with her long, angry strides. All afternoon, she had gone up and down, waxing angry with her mother for forcing her to walk Daniel to his stupid Balloon Day at school then settling down again. But it wasn't long before she started fuming once more about another ridiculous aspect of the situation. This was the sort of thing that mothers are supposed to do for their children, Dawn had said. She complained with the improvisational genius of a jazz master--she was a veritable Charlie Parker of bellyaching. Now that they were on their way to the event, she was giving her frustration free rein and letting her anger spill out in bluesy arpeggios into all areas of the "crappy situation," as she put it, that Marion had gotten them in.

"At least at home I had friends I actually liked. And if things were going bad, I could, like, go over to Sam's place. Here everybody sucks. They're all so stupid. I mean, what am I gonna do, go over to Will's? So he can paw all over me or whatever? And anyway, Marion's all like 'You're not allowed to be alone with those boys. Play with Amanda down at the end of the street,' she says. What am I, eight? Amanda still plays with freakin' dolls. And everyone else here is so gay, you know? And how they talk! I hate it... I mean, God, if Marion could just, like, keep it together. She runs away from everything!" Dawn drew what must have been her first breath in blocks.

"She runs away?" Daniel asked.

"You have no idea! You're lucky, you little shit." Dawn had lately discovered the coolness of cursing at her brother. "She doesn't tell you anything. Be thankful!" She gave him a half-hearted shove and giggled absently when he stumbled off the curb. Daniel came right back to her side without so much as a remark. "I mean," Dawn continued, "it's not like things were that bad with Daddy. With Alan... I don't know--maybe they were. But maybe Marion was just pussing out, too, you know?" She looked to Daniel as though expecting an answer. He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't care," she concluded. "I don't want to even think about it anymore. It's so boring... But at least there we were just like everybody else."

Daniel thought she might be done for the moment. He was wrong.

"And I can't believe that she lets Geoffrey yell at us like that!" Dawn railed on. Daniel could not recall Geoffrey having yelled at him like that. "I mean, who does he think he is? And she just lets this guy, this random guy, yell at her children?" She sighed exasperatedly. "And I hate how he practically talks with those stupid bushy eyebrows!" Now she was done.

"Are Mom and Geoffrey gonna get married?" Daniel asked innocently.

Dawn stopped and glared at him in revulsion. "Oh, God!" she shrieked. Her eyes grew big. "Eww, ugh! Gawd!"

"What?" Daniel asked, knitting his brow. "What's gonna happen then?"

"I would totally puke and die if they got married. God, I can't even imagine it. What a disgusting thought! I'd totally have to kill myself or something. Marion Motter--gag me!"

As though he had just solved a puzzle, Daniel asked, "That's why your last name is different from mine?"

"Ask Marion!" Dawn scoffed, starting off again at a fast pace.

They walked an entire block in silence.

"You know," said Dawn, "I don't care how rich Geoffrey is. I don't give a crap how much money he has or how many houses he

builds and all that. I still don't want him for a dad. He'll never be my dad. No one will." This she said staring straight ahead, as though she were talking more to herself than to her brother.

When they arrived at Daniel's elementary school, they found a large crowd gathered on the grass beyond the foursquare and basketball courts. Daniel joined the line to get a balloon. It was a sunny day, and warm for October. Looking at all the happy faces calmed Dawn down a bit. She felt the heat leave her face, and she relaxed her shoulders, which she suddenly realized had been tense. She stood watching Daniel from a short distance.

He really was a cute kid, she thought. Those blond curls and that dumb little toothy grin. The boys and girls around him all seemed to know each other, and they chattered amongst themselves. But Daniel just waited quietly to get his balloon, looking down at the funny brown shoes that Dawn made fun of almost daily. Of course she never told Daniel, but she had begged Marion not to buy him those shoes, saying that he would be made fun of. And here he was, her "little bother," talking to no one. In a way she couldn't quite explain, it made her sad.

She was mean to him. Every day she was mean to him. Half the time, she didn't even want to be--half the time, she didn't know why she was being mean. She would push him away, hurt him, and for a moment enjoy it, enjoy seeing his face twist up in

pain or his eyes fill up with tears. But then as soon as she saw what she had done, she would feel an overwhelming need to draw him close again, to comfort him. Some part of her resented him deeply and uncontrollably, and some other part reacted to each expression of that resentment with horror. She pulled him back to her, clutched him to her, sometimes so that she wouldn't have to see the evidence of what she'd done and sometimes so he wouldn't see that she was on the verge of crying, too.

Maybe Daniel did talk to the other kids usually and today he was just waiting for a balloon. But seeing him there, alone somehow despite the crowd, made her sad. She just wanted to give him a hug. But she kept her distance. She watched and waited.

Daniel had gotten to the front of the line, and a frizzy-haired woman who seemed to know him gave him a piece of paper and an envelope, and pointed to a small table crowded with first-graders. Daniel walked over and wrote on the paper in pencil, licked the envelope, and then struggled to slip his paper into it without getting it stuck to the part he had just licked. Finally, when he had everything in order, he advanced to a second line. A fat old lady took his envelope and punched a hole in it, then directed him to a fatter, older lady who tied a long strip of pink ribbon through the hole. Finally, a man who appeared to be missing a good number of his teeth tied the end

of the ribbon to a large red balloon he had just filled with helium and handed it to Daniel.

Daniel walked back to his sister and stood next to her while they waited for the others to go through the line. After a few minutes, one of the fat old ladies wobbled to the front of the crowd of kids and parents, and shouted at them all to listen. "Now, everyone!" she yelled. "Everyone, we're going to try to release all--"

"We can't hear you over here!" one of the parents yelled from the back of the crowd.

"--try to release the balloons..." the lady continued a little louder. And before she could say "all at once," several kids let fly their balloons. Seeing that some of their friends had already done it, several more children released theirs. And by the time the fat lady announced that she was going to count to three, all but the last few balloons were aloft.

Daniel waited until almost everyone had released their balloons. Dawny looked down at him and asked, in a gentle voice, "You gonna let go?"

Daniel smiled and opened his hand. The ribbon tickled his palm as it slipped quickly through his fingers. His balloon trailed behind the others as the wind scattered them across the sky like handfuls of rose petals tossed into the air. They floated high up over the redbrick schoolhouse, across the

street, up over the treetops and far off over the tombstone-dotted hillside of the cemetery on the far side of the fence. They faded to little red specks, and then they were gone.

Dawn and Daniel turned to leave. At the corner, Dawn took her little bother's hand and looked both ways before guiding him across.

8.

Daniel's mother had a theory that redheaded boys were trouble, and so she never trusted nine-year-old Shawn Jules. But Daniel doubted it was because Shawn was redheaded that he was so often getting into trouble. Shawn just liked trouble. And anyway all the other Jules boys had brown hair, and they committed just as many wicked acts as their little brother. Which was why Marion had warned both Daniel and Dawn against hanging out with the group she referred to collectively as "those boys at the end of the square."

Shawn was, however, a little more daring than the others. He was the only kid in the neighborhood who, rather than just talking about it, had actually squeezed into the cement box over the big pipe in the drainage field to crawl down. And it wasn't just because he was one of the few who could fit. Even Will had told him it was a stupid idea. (Mrs. Jules must have driven it

into his brain, as Daniel's mother had into his, that any drainpipe a boy crawled into would collapse at once or flood or swarm with flesh-hungry, diseased rats.) But Shawn had shrugged off all worry and squeezed in anyway.

Shawn also had a cruel streak to rival his brothers'. One summer evening, he had spent hours in the field between the houses and the highway collecting fireflies, which he then crushed into a glowing paste and used to write his name on the sidewalk in front of his house.

One Friday after school, Daniel found Shawn arranging an entire box of kitchen matches in a domino-like formation leading up to a cherry bomb planted in an anthill.

"Where'd you get those?" Daniel asked.

"I'm busy here," said Shawn, concentrating on making sure all the matches were touching.

"You're gonna blow it up?"

"Duh!" Shawn moaned.

Daniel waited as his friend lit the first match. It burned just enough to catch the chemical tip of the next match on fire, which burned just enough to catch the next, and so on, all the way to the fuse of the cherry bomb. Daniel stuck his fingers in his ears while Shawn leaned in, his green eyes aglow, to watch a few slow ants run from their impending doom. The fuse hissed and sparked, and when it had burned all the way down-- Nothing

happened. The sparks sputtered out, and Shawn found himself with no fuse to relight.

"Stupid S.O.B.!" Shawn shouted at the cherry bomb. "Piece of junk dud!" He kicked the anthill, sending the cherry bomb skittering beneath a nearby bush. Just as it rolled out of sight, the firecracker exploded with a loud bang. A woman in a house robe parted the blinds and glared at the boys. Shawn took off running across the parking lot. Not knowing what else to do, Daniel followed him.

Once they had reached a safe distance, Shawn slowed down. "C'mon," he said, looking up the street. "I got something to show you." He started off again and led Daniel toward the model home. Reaching the end of the court, Daniel saw that the model home had been covered in aluminum siding. Roy had told him that siding protected the house like a suit of armor. It looked like a real home now. They had even put in real windows, and the plastic guy holding the balloon was tied to a newly installed metal railing on the doorstep. As he and Shawn ran around back, Daniel's eyes followed the multicolored fluttering flags up to the big balloon. It seemed an even brighter shade of red that afternoon.

"Check it out!" said Shawn. He went over to a shed and pulled out two long tubes with plastic cones on their ends.

Daniel had seen the tubes around the site, loaded into guns some of the workers used.

"It's caulk," he said matter-of-factly.

"Okay, but look! There's tons of it. They didn't even lock 'em up!"

"So?"

"We should take 'em."

"Why?"

"'Cause they just left 'em here!" Shawn shouted.

"But what are we gonna do with them?"

Shawn shot Daniel his patented What are you, stupid? look. But then this expression relaxed into one of mild puzzlement as Shawn tried to think of a good use for several tubes of the stuff. "Well," he said, "have you ever seen what's inside?"

"In the tubes?"

"No, in my butt," Shawn scoffed. "Yeah, in the tubes..."

"Hmm," said Daniel, "not really."

"See, we should bust 'em open and see what it looks like. We can make something maybe."

"Well..." Daniel hesitated. "Let's just take one."

"Aw, c'mon. We need a whole bunch if we're gonna make anything good."

"Let's just open one of them and see what it looks like."

Shawn grinned in agreement. He had a crazy glint in his eye as he tried to twist open the can of caulk with his bare hands. When that didn't work, he tried smacking it against his leg. He howled in pain and, as though *it* were at fault, threw the tube on the ground and jumped on it. "We need to cut it," Shawn concluded, panting.

Daniel thought of the knife he had found in his mother's drawer, but he didn't say anything. He searched for another idea.

"I got it!" shouted Shawn. He walked to the corner of the model home and smacked the tube against the sharp edge of the aluminum siding. After a few blows, the paper tubing had a few gouges in it, but it was not enough to break it open. "Here, I'll hold it like that," Shawn proposed, already backing up and leaning over to hold the tube low against the sharp corner, "then you kick it and bust it open, 'kay?"

Daniel concentrated on how to kick the tube hard enough to pop it without hitting Shawn's hand. He took a step and swung his foot up. The tube burst open like the oven-ready buns his mother made at Thanksgiving, and a whitish goo oozed out. They twisted the tube open and examined the stuff more closely. They agreed it looked cool, but it was not as impressive as they'd hoped. When they turned back to the corner they had used to open

it, they found that caulk had exploded across two strips of the siding.

Shawn tore off a piece of the paper tube, stuck it into caulk, and swiped an even larger streak of white across one of the strips. Pleased with his work, he laughed stupidly. "C'mon, do it," he said to Daniel. Daniel shook his head. "Come on! Don't be a baby," Shawn taunted.

Hunching over with a frown, Daniel examined the gooey contents of the split tube. He looked up the identical, even rows of siding, and as the wind changed direction he saw the red balloon shift into view above the model home. And then, by some inexplicable urge, he scooped out a handful of caulk and spread it sloppily across three panels of siding. His heart beat harder with a vengeful thrill, and the urge took over. With no idea of what he was doing or why, he let the urge carry him away, and he smeared two more handfuls of the caulk across the pristine strips of siding before stepping back and being overtaken instantaneously by a wave of regret and fear.

Piqued by bearing witness to such wanton destruction, Shawn's eyes widened with sinister delight and an evil grin spread across his face. Daniel stood stock still in shocked recognition that it was he--not Shawn--who had made the frightful mess. Then suddenly he noticed that Shawn had turned

away from him and was running around the corner. Shawn was shouting for all to hear:

“Daniel messed up the model home! Daniel messed up the model home!”

Daniel's heart sank with fear and rage. He sprinted to the back of his house and escaped inside to wash his hands before anyone could see them.

9.

Early the next morning, a knock came at the door. Still in her pajamas, Dawn opened it to find Geoffrey standing on the doorstep wearing a Motter Construction jacket and a bright red hardhat that hadn't a spot of dirt on it. She was rolling her eyes before the door was even halfway open. “Mom!” she shouted in no particular direction. Then, without so much as a hello to Geoffrey, Dawn ran down to the basement to watch cartoons.

Marion came downstairs in the pair of jeans and the red paisley bandana she always wore when she did housework on Saturday mornings. “Hey there!” she said. “Just decided to pop by?”

“Mare, I'm afraid there's a problem...” Geoffrey began. “Your son-- God, what the hell he was thinking?” He stopped and

collected himself, trying to control the anger rising in his voice. "Your son--"

"Well, just come in, will you?" Marion interrupted, examining his face with concern. She pulled him by the arm into the living room. "Just come in here and tell me what it is... What did he do?"

Standing on the staircase, Daniel listened to Geoffrey tell his mother he, Daniel, had done. "And, you know," Geoffrey concluded, "replacing those pieces costs, literally, hundreds of dollars in supplies and labor. You listening, Mare? Hundreds!"

"Jesus," Marion snapped between clenched teeth. "Daniel! Get your butt down here this instant!"

Daniel hesitated on the stairs. He felt numb and helpless. There was nothing he could do to change this, to fix it. He knew he wouldn't be able to explain what he had done--he didn't know himself. He couldn't even blame Shawn for it. He knew he was guilty, and that he deserved to be punished.

When Daniel entered, his mother launched into him at once. "Daniel, I can't believe you--" But before she had even gotten out a full sentence, Geoffrey pulled her back. He stepped forward slowly and leaned down to address the boy.

Daniel was surprised by how evenly and softly Geoffrey said the words: "You'd better go over to that trailer out there. Roy Bower wants to have a word with you."

Daniel felt his knees weaken. His head started to spin a little. He never thought there could be a time when he would be afraid to talk to Roy G. Biv. He feared their conversation even more than the spanking he knew he would get from his mother. He stood stock still until Geoffrey rose, twisted him around by the shoulders, and gave him a rough shove toward the door.

Daniel felt as though he were being carried out of the house by inertia, pulled along by a force he could not fight that led him right up to the trailer door. His fist trembled as he raised it to knock. "Come in," a gravelly voice said. Daniel entered to find Roy behind his desk filling out paperwork. Roy ignored the boy for two full minutes. Daniel stared straight ahead the entire time without making a sound.

Roy's pen stopped. "You got somethin' to say?" he asked, still looking down at his paperwork. But Daniel could not speak. His voice, he knew, would sound small and squeaky. He would sound guilty--because he was. "I don't know what you were thinking, boy," Roy said after a long while. "I can't imagine what was going through your head to do something that stupid. But I know kids do stupid stuff, and I could forgive that much. But I can't forgive it when you betray my friendship."

Daniel blinked his eyes to see his friend more clearly. He shook his head but still couldn't speak. As badly as he wanted to tell Roy that he didn't mean to ruin their friendship, the

words wouldn't come. He was in the nightmare where the air had been sucked out of him and he couldn't cry for help.

"You call me an S.O.B.?" Roy asked angrily. Daniel still kept quiet. He had not called Roy anything. "That's not very nice, is it, calling somebody an S.O.B.?" A vein in Roy's temple stood out and his face was red. "I don't like bein' called names, boy. Now did you call me that or didn't you?" Tears spilled down Daniel's face. He could not draw a breath. The lump in his throat choked off all answers. "I thought we were friends," said Roy.

"I..." Daniel gasped. He stopped. At last he took a breath. "We are friends. I--"

"Well, you're not my friend." Roy said. He stared hard at the boy. "My friends don't steal and destroy property. My friends don't lie to me and call me names."

"Roy--"

"You'll call me Mr. Bower from now on." Roy picked up some plans and pretended to examine them. His eyes were watery. He rubbed them briefly before turning his back on the boy.

Daniel left the trailer and walked home. There was a knot of pain in his stomach. He felt like he'd been stabbed. A void raged in his head. He felt lost. He hated Shawn and all his stupid older brothers. He hated everything, everyone-- Geoffrey and Dawn and Mom. He hated Roy. He felt completely hollow,

empty. Empty and lost. And he wished the sun would rise up and bake everything and everyone in the development to a crisp, just burn it all up. He bit his cheek and twisted his thumb until he almost couldn't stand it.

10.

Daniel stepped inside his house and closed the front door. He walked numbly into the living room to find his mother sitting alone on the couch staring at the rug. She looked up at him and pursed her lips. "Come here," she said, motioning for him to sit next to her. He did as he was told. "Did you do it?" she asked. She seemed suddenly, without explanation, to be giving him a way out, as though she'd told Geoffrey she didn't believe Daniel would do such a thing. She asked him again, "Did you do it?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

"And did you call Roy a bad name?"

"Yes," said Daniel sharply, suddenly--forgetting himself. "Yes!" he shouted, even though it was not true. His anger returned with uncontrolled ferocity. He stood up and screamed it--"Yes!"--so full of anger that he wanted nothing more than to dig himself in deeper. So angry that he wanted to bring it all down around him, to earn the worst punishment he could. He would be punished horribly and painfully, and he did not care. He did

not cry. But he twisted his thumb harder than he ever had. He bit his cheek and dug his nails into his palm as he stared into his mother's eyes, begging for the extreme. "Yes."

"That's it, mister!" shouted Marion. She yanked his arm and pulled him face down onto the couch, telling him to stay there while she went to get the wooden spoon. He did not resist, he hung limp over the edge of the couch awaiting his release.

In a moment, she returned, mad as hell and clutching the spoon. "Get those pants down," she yelled. He did as he was told. He lowered his pants for the spanking. She stood next to him. She bent down and took the first swing. The wood slapped loud against his bare backside. He did not shout. He did not cry. Marion screamed at him, screamed louder than she ever had at either of her children. Didn't he know how much damage he'd done to the model home? Didn't he understand how stupid he'd made her look in front of Geoffrey? Didn't he know that they didn't have money to pay for his childish, destructive acts? Didn't he know...?

Drawn by her mother's screams, Dawn ran up from the basement. Marion stopped for a moment, her arm held high in the air: "Goddammit, Dawn, go to your room. Right now!" Dawn burst into a flood of tears and fled up the stairs at once. Her bedroom door shook the house when she slammed it.

And Marion continued to hit her son. She lost herself in the act of hitting him. It was as though her arm were beating of its own volition, without her attending to it. She came back to what she was doing only when she realized that it was she who was crying--not her son. She stopped. She looked at her hand gripping the wooden spoon. For a moment she forgot what was happening, why she was punishing him. She looked down at his bare bottom, she saw how painfully red it had become, she knew there would be bruises, and she could hardly bear the fact her hand had caused them. Marion dropped the wooden spoon and covered her face and cried more fiercely than before. She pulled Daniel up to her and held him, hugged him close to her chest, telling him that she was sorry, that she hadn't meant to, she hadn't meant to strike so hard. And she was relieved, so relieved to find that he was hugging her back. She stroked his hair and examined him all over the way a mother does after pulling her child back from some violent accident. She made sure he was all right and kissed his cheeks and said again that she was sorry. Her son said nothing.

She helped him pull up his pants and carried him to his room, and asked, "Do you want to lie down for a little while?" He lay down on his stomach and turned his head toward the wall. She left his room quietly, closing the door behind her but not quite all the way.

The phone rang. Marion had only just caught her breath. Her cheeks were flushed, and she wiped the mess of tears and makeup from them. She ran down to the kitchen, let out a shuddering sigh, and composed herself to answer the phone.

"Yes?" A man's voice asked for Daniel Dorn. Marion felt a rush of fear. "He's... he's not here," she stammered. Then: "Who is this?" The man had found a note in the plum tree in his backyard. "A note?" she asked. It was attached to a balloon that had drifted down and gotten caught in its branches. "A note on a balloon," Marion repeated blankly. According to the man, it must have flown almost ten miles. Marion felt oddly light as she hung up the phone.

After a few seconds, she picked up the receiver again and dialed. "I can't do this anymore," she said softly.

"This. Us. I can't."

"No. I don't want to."

"Please, don't call me that. I hate when you call me that. My name is Marion."

She hung up the phone and walked to the front door to lock it. Tired as a child who has just weathered a storm of tears, she drifted back into the living room and sat down. Lifting her legs up onto the couch, she lay back, heaved another sigh, and soon fell fast asleep.

11.

Daniel waited in his room. He could hear his mother's muffled voice talking on the telephone downstairs. He could vaguely make out the first conversation, and the second. When he realized that it had been silent for quite some time, he opened his door and walked into the empty hallway. He ventured halfway down the stairs, stepping softly so as not to make a sound. Through the doorway, he saw his mother napping on the couch in the living room, Puddles asleep at her feet on the shag carpet. Even in sleep she looked utterly exhausted, her eyes and cheeks puffy and distorted by the teary streaks of her destroyed makeup.

Daniel returned to his room to get a piece of paper and a pencil. He wrote a short message on it with his name and address at the bottom then folded it in half twice. On the outside, he wrote a name. He used his pencil point to jab a hole near the corner of the fold. Then he got some string from his desk drawer, tied it through the hole he'd made, and slipped the paper in his back pocket.

He walked out of his room and crossed the hallway to his mother's bedroom door. Quiet but fearless, he entered. He went to the drawer and opened it. The cigarettes and ashtray were gone, but the Caldor shoebox was there. He lifted the lid, stole

the knife and slipped it into his front pocket, and then closed both the box and the drawer.

He crept silently down both flights of stairs and out through the basement, not bothering to close the sliding glass door behind him. He ran down the row of houses and around to the front of the model home. The red balloon wobbled high up in the sky.

At the railing, he pulled out his pocketknife, drew its blade, and ran his thumb along its edge. It wouldn't cut through neatly, but it was sharp enough. He pulled the plastic line tight around the blade, fretting it as hard as he could against the edge. As the plastic tore open, revealing the network of tiny white threads inside, Daniel's anger and impatience swelled inside him. He yanked on the line, sawing at it savagely. Little by little, he broke through the tough material until just a few threads remained. With a great surge of rage, he tore the last of them apart. The line nearly slipped from his shaking fists, but he managed to tighten his grip and pull it back. The balloon did not lift him up, it did not carry him away. But it was so light, so much the opposite of heavy, that he had to throw all his weight against its ascent. He struggled to pull the line under the railing to gain enough leverage to hold it while tying his note to its chopped-off, ragged end. His heart raced-- excited as much by anxiety and anger as by the difficulty of his

task--but he tried to calm himself, to keep control just long enough. Once the note was securely fastened, he opened both his hands and let the guy slip between them.

He let it go. The big sun-like balloon flew high into the air, its long, dragon tail whipping wickedly behind it, the little note barely able to hold on. The wind caught hold of it and would carry it to its distant destination. The bright ball grew smaller and smaller, diminishing to a pinpoint like a remote red star. Standing on the doorstep, his eyes streaming, his fists quivering at his sides, and his face as red as the envoy he had sent soaring, Daniel watched it disappear.

<end>