As rare as common sense

José L. Llerena

Iowa State University

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As rare as common sense

by

Jose Luis Llerena

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Signature redacted for privacy

In Charge of Major Work
Signature redacted for privacy

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For Amy
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Superstition

This boy’s mother collapsed in their kitchen one late summer day. She was rushed to the hospital, where the boy and his father visited her. They stood by her bed and watched the quiet rise and fall of the bedcovers. She’ll be all right, his father said. The doctors said she’d be okay. But when they boy spoke to her his mother didn’t answer. After an hour she hadn’t woken up, and they left.

That night the boy lay in the dark and cried, quietly so his father wouldn’t hear. Outside the trucks were rumbling down the freeway. Inside his room, the backlit numbers of his electric clock ticked away the minutes. At 11:58 he told himself, if I hear four trucks before midnight, it is a sign my mother will live. One. Two. Three. Four. He counted six before the two minutes were up.

His mother lived. She came home a week later, pale as the porcelain on the kitchen sink, but alive. Later she told neighbors it was exhaustion, and maybe it was. That’s not important.

What’s important is that the boy became superstitious. You can see how that could happen. His mother couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t go to sleep before midnight, even after school started. He became always alert, observing, listening, thinking, linking and relinking causes with effects. He never shut off the television before first scanning through every channel. Mondays and Wednesdays were the only days he would wear anything blue. He believed that in general his luck was better on days he stepped out of the house left foot first.

The next summer, the boy and his family moved to another city, and another house far from any highway. He hated it. The third night in his new home, he lay awake with his window open and listened for familiar sounds, but only heard dogs
and automatic lawn sprinklers. This night was foreign and cold. His clock read 11:59. He tried a test. If I hear a dog bark before midnight. . . .

His mother came in and sat on his bed.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Why are you crying?"

But he couldn't tell her. He looked at her face, smiling at him, unprotected.
The Saturday after sixth grade Martin spent the night at his friend Ben's house, and watched him take apart the cablebox in the family room. It was an old box, a plastic case and front metal plate held together by screws, with a single knob in the center. Later—because of people like Ben—the cable company would replace these with sleek, riveted units operated by remote control and lacking any moving parts.

“How do you know this will work?” Martin said, sitting on the fold-away bed. Ben knelt in front of the television, removing the last screw from the front plate of the box. The yellow sticker on the plate, threatening cable pirates with prosecution and jail terms, made Martin nervous, and he preferred observing from a distance to actively participating in a criminal activity.

“One of my brother's friends did this,” Ben said. His two brothers, much older, had moved out last winter, leaving Ben, whose birth had been an accident, alone with his mother, a tired divorcée who worked in a department store and spent little time with her youngest son. Ben had inherited his brothers' gigantic bedroom on the ground floor next to the family room. Martin envied the privacy and access to the television Ben's new quarters offered him.

Now he watched Ben fiddle with the exposed guts of the cablebox. They had left the television on and the box plugged in, so they could monitor Ben's progress, and Martin anxiously awaited the sudden great, hair-straightening spark that would fry his best friend and blow the picture tube.

“I think you're supposed to bend this back—"
Suddenly the screen, which had been filled with static, offered up an image of Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, standing on an airplane wing and punching Nazis.

"Oh man!" Ben said. Martin grinned with excitement. For a moment they sat motionless, watching the forbidden channel. Ben turned the knob once, twice. Both times, previously scrambled channels came up clear. Martin got off the folding bed and crouched next to Ben, unable to keep the grin off his face.

"Won't your mom find out?" he said.

Ben shook his head. "Just bend the pin back," he said, and did so. The image on the screen turned to snow. He fiddled inside the box again, and the picture cleared up. "What should we watch?" he said, and, adding an evil chuckle, turned the knob one more click.

Martin's heart popped like an overinflated balloon. The woman on the screen was a lovely brunette with enormous dark eyes. She stood facing the camera, the expression on her face one of exquisite serenity. She was naked. Martin was shocked by the triangle of dark hair between her legs, and thrilled by the mysterious beauty of her body as she walked slowly through a darkened room toward a bed, on which an older but handsome man waited.

Ben, giggling, changed the channel.

"Hey," Martin said.

Ben looked at him. "What?"

It is hard to pinpoint the time Martin first became interested in the dark differences between men and women, although later it would seem to him there was an exact time, that it happened almost overnight, sometime during the last few weeks of sixth grade, when the spring warmth banished the sweatshirts and
overcoats that seemed to have kept people—girls—covered up for the first twelve years of his life. One day, he was sitting at the back of Mr. Gabriel's math class, distracting himself by reflecting sunlight of his watch and onto the back of Mr. Gabriel's balding head. The next, it seems, he sat quietly near the front of the room, glancing sideways at the front of Kathy Tedesco's blouse. And Leah Anne McLafferty's thigh, outlined under her plaid skirt, mesmerized him, and filled him with a frustrating longing for something he could not yet define.

But it was the older women—those who had finished out whatever process the strange birds he went to school with were going through—that Martin found most intriguing. He was perpetually on the lookout for the female figure. The faded, swimsuit-clad model on the Kool billboard above the hobby shop on Lorain Road; the voluptuous models on magazine covers at the supermarket; Lynda Carter from the Wonder Woman reruns; and Pat Benatar in tight leather pants, singing "You Better Run" at the top of her lungs, all held his confused attention.

The night they rigged the cablebox, Martin and a triumphant Ben sat on the fold-away bed and scanned through channels they hadn't paid for. After Ben was asleep Martin turned to Escapade, the channel with the naked women. With the TV sound turned down below that of his friend's light snoring, he watched a lusty stewardess frolic with an airplane crew member in the cramped cockpit of a jumbo jet, and saw a film about a beautiful secret agent who slept with enemy spies for reasons that defied Martin's undeveloped powers of logic, though he still managed to enjoy the film.

For a long time after, these women starred in Martin's fantasies as well as their movies. They were two-dimensional, intangible spectres, which fit quite easily into his imagination, like photos in an album. Mostly they ran like replays of his
favorite scenes, slightly embellished with his presence, and became memories, fresh in his mind, of moments that had never taken place.

Martin and Ben did not appreciate their neighborhood the way someone older might. Their block was comfortable and grassy, its streets lined with trees that bore small, fragrant flowers in the summer—Japanese maples, Martin's mother once told a new neighbor. The houses were large and aluminum-sided, built close together and very similar in architecture, like a set of giant game pieces on a board game of suburbia. On summer weekends and some weekday afternoons the air was bright with the smell of cut grass and barbecued meat, and the hum of the bees and the lawnmowers.

But Martin, and Ben especially, did not think like real estate agents or newly married couples or even Martin's parents, who wouldn't think of living anywhere else. They were two twelve-year-olds—by some tragedy of demographics the only twelve-year-olds on the block—who felt unfortunate to be born into a suburban existence, as opposed to the Dark Ages or the Old West or Occupied France during World War II. In their opinion the neighborhood would be improved by a few well-placed bomb craters and an army of invading stormtroopers or mutants. But the few and shallow potholes in the streets were shamefully inadequate as craters, and the closest they had to mutants was Jay Kurtz and his high school friends, whom it was in their best interests to avoid.

Martin's father, a doctor, spent the day at his office or making rounds at the office, and his mother, an interior decorator, was also rarely home before five. Martin and Ben spent a lot of time at Martin's house, using tennis racquets to guard the back yard against evil sentient wasps, or using his father's Betamax camera to
film burning Matchbox cars plunging off the barbecue-grill precipice. (Getting them to burn was difficult; they had to use gasoline.) Sometimes they patrolled the neighborhood on their bikes, or rode down to the hobby store on Lorain to look at model rockets, discussing ways in which they might be converted into deadly missiles, perhaps by soaking them in gasoline and setting them aflame prior to launch.

Martin convinced Ben to help him with his paper route in early June, when the Sun Herald truck began dropping off the bundles Thursday mornings by three o’clock. Martin had taken over the route in February, and during the school year delivered the paper two hours before he left for school. He had not enjoyed these hours alone in the fading darkness, walking down silent, empty streets under a star-speckled sky that threatened to swallow him up into itself, suck him right off the face of the earth. The experience was unnerving, and he had done his best to get the papers out and himself back in his house as fast as possible.

When Ben accepted Martin’s request to join him on his weekly rounds he suggested they deliver the papers as soon as possible after the truck dropped them off, since that gave them more time before the sun came up. The first night they did the route together, Martin woke up and dressed, as Ben had told him, for invisibility—black sweatpants, a black Mickey Mouse T-shirt turned inside out, and an old pair of Chuck Taylors he had spray-painted black the day before. Trying not to wake his parents, he quietly made his way downstairs and out of his house, in front of which the papers waited, stacked neatly at the end of his driveway. He had never been out at this time, and as he looked up he was awed by the stars, much brighter and more numerous than he had ever seen. Instead of the momentary panic
he sometimes felt during his delivery rounds, the sight filled him with a curious excitement, a sense of endless possibility.

Ben was late, and Martin had almost finished inserting the TV guides into the week’s papers—he paused a minute to check the Escapade listings—before Ben appeared, wearing a brown crocheted ski mask.

“Did you see the stars?” Martin said as Ben yawned through his mask. A tuft of uncombed hair poked through a hole in the knit. Ben glanced up for a moment, then let out a whistle.

“I wish we had a rocket,” he said. “What’s on TV?”

Martin closed the TV guide and smiled. “*The Naughty Nurses.*”

Ben picked up one of the canvas newspaper bags. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s do this fast so we can spy.”

With two people doing the route they were done by four, which, by Ben’s calculations, left them an hour and a half before daylight during which to go Spying. They ran through the back yards of the neighborhood, hopping chain-link fences and crawling on their bellies as they peeked into windows and sliding glass doors, trying to catch glimpses of their neighbors’ secret lives.

They saw nothing but opaque windows, however. Fairview Park showed no signs of life at four in the morning. As spies they were dismal failures. Somewhere within those darkened houses, Martin imagined, were people committing acts of passion in the style of the movies he had watched on Ben’s TV. Apparently they were good at protecting themselves from amateur voyeurs, but Martin and Ben—especially Ben—reveled in exploring enemy territory as they crouched on their neighbors’ manicured lawns, hiding from imaginary foes among rolled up garden
hoses and canvas-covered gas grills, and listening to the crickets sing out of the blackness.

While Ben agreed to help him with the paper delivery, Martin was still left alone to do the collecting once every four weeks. Approximately once a month he would knock on the doors of houses he and Ben had visited in the early morning hours. Martin was shy, and it made him nervous to talk to these people and ask them for money, especially when there was the chance they might recognize him as the one who was tresspassing on their property the night before. Still, most of the people were quite nice to him for the thirty seconds a month that he dealt with them. There were a few Martin actually looked forward to calling on, like Mr. Queener, who gave him two York Peppermint Patties and a quarter tip every time. And, of course, the girl who lived on the corner of Robin Hood Drive.

She was older. Second year in high school, at least. She had green eyes, and her hair was blonde and shoulder-length. She was pretty, though if at some other time and place Martin had seen her dressed in a full-length overcoat, or baggy jeans and a sweater, he might have been unable to identify her. Perhaps this is why he didn’t notice her until that summer. She must have come to the door at least once during those first few months, but in the winter she didn’t linger at her door, smiling and wearing tiny shorts and tank tops that sometimes revealed a bit of bra. There was more behind Martin's fascination than the change in wardrobe brought on by warm weather. It was a matter of timing, a combination of her glaring sexuality and his newfound awareness.

Later he would remember the baddump of his heart jumping against his ribs when he saw her come to the door that first morning in June.
"Oh hi!" she said, looking excited to see him. She was barefoot and wearing a bathrobe. Martin supposed she had just finished her shower, because her hair was still wet. It fell straight down from her head and lay against her bronzed face in a very wonderful way.

"A dollar forty for the Sun Herald," he said, in an embarrassingly quavering voice.

"Oh," she said, smiling. "No one’s home. Can you come back later?"

He turned shuffled awkwardly down the driveway, conscious of the erection that had suddenly made his jeans uncomfortable. After he finished the rest of the neighborhood he went to Ben’s house and told him about the girl, not the erection. Ben came with him out of curiosity when Martin returned to her house. She answered the door again, and paid them with her father’s money.

"What did you think of that?" Martin said as they walked down to the next house.

"Of what?"

"I thought she was pretty nice," Martin said softly.

"Did she give you a boner or something?" Ben said, and Martin felt his face grow hot. He looked away, fearing that Ben would notice.

Martin’s card for this girl’s house read:

```
F. Frauenholtz    21620 Robin Hood
Deliver:          8 Inside front door
                   o In/Under Mailbox
                   o Milk Chute
                   o Other___________
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The "F" probably stood for her father's name, but Martin christened her Foxxe, after a certain libertine from one of his favorite movies. After that she was Foxxe Frauenholtz. The perfect and proximate Foxxe.

Besides his monthly calls, Martin didn't see her very often. Once or twice a thick balding man, the real F. Frauenholtz, answered the door and paid him, which was a cruel disappointment. As a result he got into the habit of collecting in the early afternoons, which virtually ensured that if anyone was home at the Frauenholtz house it would be Foxxe. When he and Ben patrolled the neighborhood on their bikes, Martin circled in front of her house, hoping to catch her outside, perhaps walking out to pick up the empty metal barrels on garbage pickup day, or working on the flower garden in the front yard. At such times he would hover like a bee near a daisy, and she waved and smiled, recognizing him. Ben, meanwhile, waited impatiently at a distance, unaffected.

She became queen of Martin's fantasies. In some of them she would answer the door wet-haired and in a bathrobe, smile and ask him to come in. A vague intermixing of scenes from certain movies would follow, with Foxxe's face superimposed on a variety of unclothed bodies. It was repetitive but never boring. At night in bed Martin would try to picture her exactly, but though her presence was strong in his memory her image seemed to flicker in his mind, fade and shift its shape, as if distorted by its very strength. Still, it comforted Marty to know that she existed, that she was always there, unlike the women of those movies. She was real and three-dimensional. If he dared, Martin only needed to walk down to the house on the end of Robin Hood and knock on the door to prove it.
The sun hung alone in a cloudless sky as Martin and Ben walked down Nottingham and turned onto Ellen Drive. They were on their way home from the small shopping center on Lorain, with a bag of model rocket fuse, a few sticks of hot-melt glue, and two boxes of paper matchbooks: ingredients they would combine into their first bomb. It was late July, with no breeze to stir the heat that settled thickly over the neighborhood.

"Watch out," Ben said. Up ahead was the Kurtz house, in front of which Jay and a friend sat shirtless on the hood of an old station wagon. Martin could see them smirking and murmuring to each other as he and Ben approached.

"Hey dudes," Jay said as the two small boys walked meekly by them. A few feet past his house Martin felt a sharp pain as something hard bounced against the back of his head. He heard laughter, and another object whizzed between Martin and Ben and bounced on the sidewalk ahead. It was a small crabapple.

"Ten points," Jay said, as Ben and Martin walked away without turning around. Martin's head was stinging and his face was hot with fury.

A few days later they were armed. The bomb was finished. Their original idea, involving a sealed core from a roll of toilet paper, hadn't worked well, even with a few yards of duct tape thrown in. They had experimented with various other casings—balloons, soda cans, a few of the plastic specimen bottles that were always lying around Martin's house—before finally deciding on a tennis ball with a small X-shaped hole cut into it. Through the hole they filled the ball with their choice of explosive: hundreds of tips they had cut from paper matchbooks, using Ben's mother's paper-cutter to behead a dozen matchbooks at a time. Ben's mother kept two boxes of matches next to the living-room fireplace, and with the two others they
bought from the drugstore Martin and Ben had enough for two bombs. After filling the balls, they inserted a short length of model rocket fuse—ten seconds an inch—into the hole, then sealed it with a small amount of hot-melt glue, melted with a match.

Ben and Martin finished these prototypes during a collection week. Martin was giddy because earlier that day, on the way home from their weekly trip to the supermarket, he and his mother had driven past her house, and Martin had been struck by the astonishing sight of Foxxe in a yellow bikini, watering the flowers.

"You should have seen her," he said to Ben later. They were in Ben’s bedroom, watching his gerbils run around in their plastic-tube city. Despite the gerbils, the extra bed and the huge Cleveland Browns poster on the wall, the spacious room looked almost bare. On Ben’s unmade bed were the finished tennis-ball bombs, green and fuzzy versions of the ones in the cartoons.

"Why?" Ben said.
"Why what?"
"Why should I have seen her?" Ben had a reluctant gerbil by the tail, and was trying to drop him down the tube that led to the water torture tank.

"She must have been tanning herself," Martin said. He could picture himself knocking on her door, getting no answer and then walking around to her back yard, where she would be stretched out on a lawn chair like a beautiful bronze statue, sipping a cold drink.

Ben picked up a tennis-ball bomb and rolled it in his hand, looking at it proudly. Martin knew he was hoping for an opportunity to test them, or even use them as real weapons, perhaps against burglars or rabid dogs. As yet they had run
across neither, and Ben’s desire to see them work was growing greater. Suddenly he looked up at Martin and smiled.

“Let’s sneak out tonight,” he said. “Early. I bet we see a lot more stuff at midnight.” Martin thought about it. Tonight, if all went well, no one would know they had been out. And the possibility of seeing “a lot more stuff” was unbearably tempting. After brief deliberation, Martin agreed.

As they walked down the street Martin swung his ring of collection cards around two fingers, pushing a slight and inadequate breeze against his face. He was in the habit of starting on the west end of Robin Hood and working his way east, leaving the Frauenholtz house for last. Their first stop today was old Mr. Hammond, who invited them into his house while he spent fifteen minutes searching for his change jar. Martin was scolded by Dr. Ely’s wife because he—Ben, actually—had delivered the last issue of the Herald in the mailbox instead of behind the screen door, and this had happened before and if he didn’t stop it she would cancel her subscription and call Martin’s manager. They received their Peppermint Patties from Mr. Queener along with—wow, they said—a fifty-cent tip. Perhaps Mr. Queener had won the lottery.

By this time they were almost at Foxxe’s house. They were walking towards her driveway when a beat-up green Camaro screeched around the corner and rumbled to a stop in front of her house, and in front of Martin and Ben. The driver looked out the passenger window. He was a boy who looked older than Jay Kurtz, perhaps about seventeen, with long curly hair and a gold cross hanging from his left ear. He wore horn-rimmed sunglasses that gave him a cruel look, as if any second he would sneer, rev his engine and run over Ben and Martin without a second thought.
He honked his horn twice, and a few seconds later Foxxe appeared, an amazing sight in a black tank top—were those her nipples Martin saw?—and tiny red running shorts. When she saw Martin and Ben she smiled and waved them up the driveway.

"Go right on up," she said. "My dad’s in." She reached for the passenger door, but the Camaro Kid grinned and locked it. She started tapping on the window.

"Come on," she said, laughing. "You’re so mean." Eventually Camaro Kid gave in and unlocked the door, and she bent down to adjust the seat.

And then, for a split second that lasted weeks, Martin saw it. A little slice of white, like the quarter moon glowing in the sky. He saw Foxxe’s underwear. A real woman’s underthings, no more than a few feet away.

And then she was in the car and then she was gone. They walked slowly up the driveway. Martin was stunned. He had seen Foxxe’s underwear, as clearly as if she had shown it to him. If he had dared he could have touched it. He looked at Ben, who was smiling at him. Martin’s lungs felt overly full, and, had he been able to, he would have told Ben he had an erection the size of Milwaukee. But such things were uncomfortable to talk about, even in joking, and he kept them to himself. They knocked on the door, got their money from Mr. Frauenholtz, and went back to Ben’s to discuss the wonders they would see that night.

Martin waited anxiously in his room for his parents to fall asleep. He waited much longer than he had to, but when all had been quiet for some time he tip-toed downstairs and out of the house, wearing his Spying uniform. Ben was waiting in his back yard when Martin arrived.
"About time," Ben said softly. He had the two bombs, and he held one out to Martin, who took it and put it in the pocket of his sweats. "Who should we bomb?" he said. "Jay's house?"

"Let's do some Spying first," Martin said. "Real Spying."

They took off down the backyards of Ellen Drive, hopping the identical chain-link fences and then crouching down and sprinting like mice across the lawns. For three fourths of the block it might have been a Thursday morning: black windows, quiet houses. They were beginning to wonder if this had all been worth it when they arrived at the Kurtzs' yard, dimly lit by the light coming through a sliding glass door. The two hopped into the back yard and crept silently toward the back wall of the house. Martin was breathless from trying not to giggle out loud.

It was even more difficult to keep silent when they managed to peek through the vertical blinds and spied Jay Kurtz, wide receiver for the Fairview High Warriors and a very unfriendly sort to kids like them, sitting on the couch shirtless and in his boxer shorts. He was watching TV, and on the coffee table in front of him was a beer bottle. Martin wondered if his mother knew he was drinking beer. Or did she even mind?

Suddenly Jay's hand was in his boxer shorts, and Ben and Martin had to look away, flatten themselves on the grass and bite their tongues to keep from laughing. Martin was flushed with triumph. After a minute Martin looked up. Jay's hand was still in his shorts, his beer now on the arm of the couch. Ben tapped Martin on the shoulder, held up his bomb and smiled. Martin nodded enthusiastically. They began looking for a route that would allow them quick escape. Ben pointed to the yard behind the Kurtzs'. If they ran that way, to the side instead of down the block, they
could see what happened when the bomb went off before they sprinted home through the back yards of Robin Hood.

Ben reached into a pocket and pulled out a matchbook, crouching on the balls of his feet. Martin's skin tingled, and his mind raced ahead to the explosion. He watched as Ben struck the match and put it to the fuse. And then the lights went out in the Kurtz living room. Ben, startled, lost his balance and fell back against a steel garbage can, which tipped over with a deafening crash.

Instantly they were racing for their lives, over the fence and into the yard behind the Kurtzs', then to the side of that house, where they pressed against the aluminum siding and waited, with lungs on fire and hearts pounding.

Nothing. After a minute they relaxed and looked around. They were now on Robin Hood. Martin looked at Ben, who still had his bomb. Briefly he thought about lighting it and throwing it grenade-style into the Kurtz yard, then decided against it.

"I know where we can go," Martin said.

Foxxe's house had a glass door in back like the Kurtzs', and here too there was a glow from within. Martin's heart was hammering painfully as they stood in the next-door neighbor's yard, leaning over the fence and looking at that curtained portal. It could be her dad, he thought. Then Ben tapped his shoulder and pointed out between the houses toward the street. A beat-up green Camaro was parked at the end of Foxxe's driveway.

They hopped the fence. The grass of the Frauenholtz lawn was soft and thin-bladed. Martin ran his hand through its coolness. A big lawn chair sat in the middle of the yard, as if taken right from his earlier daydream. He crawled slowly towards
it. Its presence conjured up the image, like another impossible memory, of Foxxe sunning herself happily in her yellow bikini, right in front of him.

Ben was next to the door now, and motioning frantically for Martin to join him. His eyes were wide, and his mouth was a joker's grin. Martin crept up next to him and looked through the crack between the curtain and the wall.

Camaro Kid was in the living room, shirtless like Jay Kurtz. The TV was on but he wasn’t watching it, and his hand wasn’t in his shorts. It was in Foxxe’s.

Martin felt his chest tearing open. He watched the colored lights flicker on the couple, and on the wall behind them, where a shadow-blurred family portrait hung, slightly askew. The television remote control lay on the floor by their feet, and a few kernels of popcorn littered the carpet around the couch, spilled from the bowl on the coffee table.

Camaro's head was buried in the curve of her neck, as if he was trying to hide. Martin could see a constellation of moles on his shoulder, and the white of his underarm deodorant. Foxxe’s eyes were shut and her mouth was slightly open, and moving like she was trying to say something. Around her shoulders was her tank top, clumsily bunched up to reveal the fact she wasn’t wearing a bra. Martin was shocked by the whiteness of her breasts, contrasting absurdly with her tanned shoulders and stomach. They seemed to him like two eyes, surprised wide at discovering his presence.

For a minute or two the two teens remained almost motionless on the couch, and Martin wondered if they had fallen asleep, although it seemed almost impossible considering the uncomfortable position they were in. Then Foxxe spread her legs a little wider, and he saw the ridge of Camaro’s knuckles moving around under the red fabric of her shorts. Suddenly she leaned her head back and clutched
Camaro's shoulder, digging her fingers into his arm, then relaxing and squeezing again. Her head turned slowly, so that Martin saw the tortured grimace on her face. She brought her legs together tightly, as if she was trying to trap Camaro's hand there. He brought his head up to kiss her lips, but his eyes were open as in alarm, and Martin felt sudden panic at the thought Camaro might have felt someone watching.

Foxxe brought her head up to smile at him, and Camaro said something that made her laugh, echoing the grimace that was still bright in Martin's memory, cut into it alongside the image of her underwear.

Martin turned to look at Ben, who was laughing, silently, his shoulders shaking up and down and his face buried in his knees. Suddenly Martin felt quite lost, unsure of what he really knew, about Ben, about Foxxe, about anything. It was frightening. His gaze rested on Ben for a few seconds, then moved back to the two people awkwardly entwined on the couch. He could, somewhere deep inside, see the grotesque comedy of the scene: there they sat, she with her legs spread and her tank top rolled above her pale breasts, he with his hand in her shorts and a dent in his hair from leaning his head against the couch. But Martin didn't want to try. What he wanted had disappeared forever, before he had been able to fully grasp what it was.

Ben grabbed his shoulder, and Martin jumped, startled. Looking at his grinning friend he was suddenly aware of a deep sense of shame, and—once again—loss. Numbly, he watched Ben strike another match and light the fuse, resisting the urge to stop him. They ran toward the back of the yard and over the fence, and Martin looked back just in time to see a shower or flaming match heads,
like a hundred angry fireflies or comets, shooting upwards with the disappointing pop of a paper lunch bag.

The last time Martin ever knocked on the Frauenholtz door he heard a man shout from inside the house.

"Hold your horses, Todd," the man said. "Be patient for once."

The door opened and Mr. Frauenholtz appeared, smiling. Martin looked behind the man into the house, hoping to see her, catch just a glimpse. He had the crazy notion that perhaps, if she saw him, she would somehow know. But know what?

When Mr. Frauenholtz saw Martin he laughed loudly.

"Oh, hi!" he said. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Liz's boyfriend."

And then she was Liz, who lived on the corner of Robin Hood, who watered her flowers and took in the garbage cans and did things with Todd when her father was asleep.

Martin quit the Sun Herald route at the end of that summer, a week before he started seventh grade. Ben, who got caught sneaking back into his house after the night they had tested the bomb, was grounded for three months, and didn't help Martin deliver the papers after that. Martin spent the rest of those hot Thursday mornings walking down those empty, silent streets, delivering the local news to a sleeping neighborhood. He noticed, often, that the stars weren't as bright as they used to be.
Art's older brother Franny ends the silence at the dinner table by getting up and letting his chair fall back with a clatter. His face half grin, he heads for the door to the back porch, his tall skinny body tensed, his arms spread like a clumsy bird’s wings. His mother has been emptying a frying pan into the garbage pail, and is in position to intercept him. She grabs his arm before he can get outside.

"You wait just a minute," she says.

"Shoot hoop," says Franny, his voice almost a whisper.

"Well, you be patient." Art’s mother turns to the tiny table where Art and his father are still eating. "Arthur," she says, "are you finished yet?"

Art looks at the half-eaten pork chop on his plate. His father, next to him, has been glaring at Franny, but now turns his gaze on his wife. "Janet," he says. "Does he look like he’s finished?" Tell Franny to sit and wait like anybody with manners would."

"Mike, he finished ten minutes ago."

"Because he eats too fast," Art’s father says. "Franny, come sit down. Pick up your chair and sit down."

As usual, Franny does what his father tells him to do. At the table he folds his hands in front of him and sits quietly, rocking slightly back and forth to a private rhythm. His lightly scarred face is a mask of peace, and although his stare is not vacant it reveals nothing; it seems to focus inward, as if the events in his mind were more interesting than those taking place around him. Art cannot remember his brother ever having looked at him.

Suddenly Franny lifts his head, as if realizing he has forgotten something.
“Shoot hoop,” he says. “Shoot hoop.”

“Stop it,” his father says slowly and sternly, without looking up from his plate. “Wait till we’re done and then you can play hoop.”

Franny lets his head drop, and lets out a small, sharp fart. Art tries not to laugh out loud, but even his father smiles.

“Well, he told you what he thinks of that idea,” says Art’s mother. She puts a bowl of cereal in front of Franny. “Ray’s coming pretty soon, Franny. Maybe he can watch you play and see how good you are. Would you like that?”

Franny shoves a spoon into the bowl, hard. Overflowing flakes fall to the tabletop, and Franny is careful to put them back in the bowl, one at a time, before spooning them into his mouth.

“See?” Art’s father says. “He’s still hungry.”

After dinner Art sits on the large wooden swing in the back yard and watches his brother play basketball in the fading light of the early summer day. The goal post and backboard have been planted in the back lawn, instead of the driveway in front of the house, because there is less chance of Franny running off down the street. He has tried several times to explore the woods behind the house but he is much easier to catch when there are trees and shrubs to slow him down.

Art watches his brother launch high arcing shots toward the hoop, sometimes making them, almost always hitting the rim. Franny is fifteen, five years older than his brother. He has always been athletic, and as a teenager he is as strong and fast as anyone his age.

The ball rolls away from him after dropping through the hoop, and Franny stands quietly, waiting for Art to fetch it for him. His mother has told Art
to make Franny ask for the ball before getting it, but Art rarely feels like going through the trouble of prompting a reluctant Franny to speak. These hours are silent ones for the two of them, silent except for the thunk of the ball on the rim and the swish of the ball through the net.

Last summer Art and Franny would spend entire days out here, Art lounging on the swing while his older brother frolicked under the hoop, never seeming to tire. Or, sometimes, the two would play "pitch," as Franny called it: Art would toss a large plastic ball toward Franny, who would smash it as hard as he could with a plastic bat. The game would end only when Franny grew bored or the ball was lost in the woods. Those were, as his mother called them, 'easy' days.

Now Franny lives somewhere else, and moments like this are less frequent; once or twice a week, and usually in the early evening. Art has been to Franny's group home a few times. There is no basketball hoop there, although Art's father has promised he'll have them put one in this summer.

Art's mother pokes her head through the open kitchen window. "Art and Franny," she calls. "Time to come in. Ray will be here soon."

"Come on," Art says, getting off the swing.

Franny's lips move, mouthing words—his voice, never louder than a murmur, is inaudible from a distance. He rolls the ball in his hands, as if he's trying to figure out what it is.

"Come on," Art says again, tugging on Franny's arm, trying to pull his brother towards the house. Franny's reluctance to go inside is not new.

What is new, or at least extremely rare, is Franny hurling the basketball onto the roof of the house, where it bounces a few times before rolling back
Startled, Art lets go of Franny's arm and steps back. "Mom!" he says. "Dad!"

Franny puts his hands to his face and begins clawing at it, digging red furrows over others not yet healed. Art knows better than to try stopping him; he can only watch and wait for his parents to arrive.

His father is there first, running up behind Franny and pulling his hands away from his face. Art's father is not a slight man, but his face shows strain as he struggles with his son. He wrestles Franny to the ground, and uses his body weight as leverage. For a short time he has Franny spread-eagled and immobilized beneath him. After a minute, Franny relaxes, and his father moves off him, without releasing his grip on Franny's wrists. Both of their shirts are streaked with blood. Art feels bad for his father; he has one less unstained shirt, one more he cannot wear to church or out to dinner.

Art's mother, who has been standing behind him, moves in and wipes the blood from Franny's face with an old wet towel. While she dabs at him, Franny begins thrashing and trying to pull his hands free. His father mutters "damn" and tightens his grip. Art can only stand and watch.

Later, Art stands at the entrance to the living room, where Franny had been cooling off in the Quiet Chair. He sits in the plush blue recliner, his legs crossed and his hands clasped together. Behind him, in the kitchen, his father is soaking his bloody shirt in the sink, while his mother talks on the phone. She is speaking with someone at Franny's group home. Her voice is calm and slow, and Art can tell she is working hard to keep it in control.
"I just feel we need to listen," she says. "If he's not happy there . . . maybe he's not ready for it."

Art watches Franny rock slowly to the music from the portable radio in the corner of the living room. Franny's eyes are shut tight, as if he's trying very hard to remember something. His face is streaked with dark red gouges that decorate his face like war paint.

Franny's mother comes in and kneels in front of him. "Franny," she says softly. He continues rocking, mumbling along to the music on the radio. Although he doesn't fully pronounce the words, Art can tell Franny knows the song. He has always been impressed with Franny's ability to learn a song almost instantly.

"Franny," his mother says, in the tone she adopts when addressing her older son. It's a tone she stopped using with Art long ago. "Franny, I'm sorry you hurt yourself. It makes us feel bad when you hurt yourself. Please tell us why you do that." Art watches his brother's face carefully. There is no sign his brother has heard or understood anything. "Franny, please tell us what's wrong. Do you miss home? You know you can come and play hoop anytime you want. Right, Arthur?"

Art begins to feel a twinge of annoyance at his mother. In a way, he envies Franny's privilege of being able to ignore her with impunity, and resents the tolerance his mother shows for Franny's outrageous behavior. Once, years ago, Franny had redecorated his bedsheets and the walls of his bedroom with feces during the night. (The room is now Art's, and sometimes he thinks he can still smell it). His father, furious, had threatened to move Franny's bed into the garage: "If he's going to act like an animal he can sleep like an animal." But Art's
mother had lashed out at her husband in Franny’s defense, and the hideous fight that had ensued resulted in Art’s father sleeping in the garage instead, in the back seat of the car. Art had tried to help his parents clean up while having to listen to them shout at each other, but he had finally given up, returned to his room and shut his door. All that time Franny had sat on his bed, rocking slowly, as if none of it had anything to do with him.

"Listen, Franny," Art’s mother says. "Let’s go to the bathroom and take a bath, okay? Arthur, could you start the water for him, please?"

Art walks down the hall to the bathroom, and mixes the hot and cold water in the tub until the temperature is just the way he wants it, or rather the way Franny likes it, which is a bit warm for Art personally. As he steps out of the bathroom his mother is leading Franny by the hand down the hallway. Suddenly Franny spins and trots into the kitchen and toward the refrigerator. Before his mother can stop him he has a Popsicle from the freezer.

"Franny," she says. "Give that to me. You can have one after you take your bath. Okay?"

Franny tears open the wrapper and puts the Popsicle halfway into his mouth. His mother takes his arm and pulls him to the bathroom. "Come on. Let’s go take your bath."

While his brother and mother are in the bathroom, Art hears the doorbell ring and runs to answer it. It’s Ray, Franny’s aide from the group home, who marches into the house without wiping his feet. Art likes Ray. He is tall, funny, and 22 years old, and Art is happy to see him.

"Hey guy," says Ray with a smile. He pats Art on the head. "Where’s your mom and the Fran?"
“She’s giving him a bath,” Art says.

“I hear he scratched again,” Ray says, wrinkling his forehead. “Was it a bad one?”

Art nods. “Yeah. He got himself pretty bad this time.”

“He’s been doing that at the group home,” Ray says. “What happened here?”

Art shrugs and tells him. “Mom thinks he doesn’t like it there.”

Ray nods. “Could be,” he says, settling into the blue recliner. “He just needs to get used to it, I think.”

“I think so too. She doesn’t.”

Ray lets out a breath. “Well. So how did it go for you this week?”

“I had three baseball games,” Art says excitedly. “We won two, but the third one we got clobbered. I had two hits.”

“Home runs?”

“No. Just singles.”

“Just singles!” Ray says in mock disappointment. “When I was in little league I hit homers every time.”

“I hit a lot of foul balls, too,” Art says defensively.

Art’s father, who has been watching television downstairs, enters the living room smiling. He is almost as tall as Ray, but wider.

“Hey, Mr. L.,” Ray says, standing up. They shake hands. Art’s father points to the carpet in front of the door, where Ray’s unwiped feet have left stray clumps of mud.

“Janet’s gonna kill you for that,” he says.

Art’s mother appears, dragging Franny by the hand. Franny’s red-streaked
face glistens with anti-bacterial cream, and the bottom of his neck is pale with talcum powder. His expression is relaxed now, almost sleepy, although Art can see his muscles are still tense. Franny’s arms, though slender, feel like they’re carved from oak. Not an ounce of fat on him, his father is fond of saying.

“Hey big guy! Hey Mrs. L.,” Ray says. On hearing his voice, Franny seems to perk up: he lifts his head, gently pulls free from his mother. “What happened to you guy? Your face looks sore.”


“Ray, will you be able to come to one of my games sometime?” Art says.

“Maybe,” Ray says. “Maybe I could bring Franny, too. I kind of think he’d like it.”

“It’s about time Franny saw a baseball game,” Art’s father says. His wife returns from the kitchen with Franny, who has another Popsicle in his hand. “You know, if the kid had a normal head on him he’d probably be a pretty hot ball player.”

“Michael,” Art’s mother says icily.

“I have a game on Tuesday,” Art says.

“If I go,” says Ray, “you gotta promise to hit a home run.”

Art smiles and nods.

“He can hit ’em,” his father says. “He makes good contact. Got a good eye, too.”

“How was the weekend at the group home?” Art’s mother says.

“Good,” says Ray. “Ricky’s been crying all weekend.” Art has met Ricky, an
astonishingly small eighteen-year-old who, in Art’s opinion, acts like a baby. “I think he misses the big guy here.” Ray looks at Franny, who has finished his Popsicle in two bites.

“Hear that, Franny?” Art’s mother says. “Ricky misses you.” Franny doesn’t respond. In a lower voice, Franny’s mother says, “I don’t think Franny likes Ricky.”

Ray takes Franny’s hand and heads for the door. Art’s father offers him a beer, which Ray refuses.

“Hey,” says Art’s mother sternly, as Ray and Franny reach the door. Everyone looks. Art’s mother is pointing at the clumps of mud on the carpet. “Why do you keep forgetting to wipe your feet?”

Ray smiles and says, “Sorry, Mrs. L.”

“I told you,” says Art’s father.

That night Art and his parents watch television and eat ice cream, a ritual that of late has become almost nightly. Afterwards, brushing his teeth in the bathroom, Art hears his parents murmuring in the kitchen. At first he thinks they are talking about him, but he soon realizes they are discussing Franny.

“I don’t know,” his mother is saying. “I really think he’s very angry with us.”

“For what? Putting him in the group home?” Art’s father sounds tense and impatient. “Janet, he’s getting perfect care there. He’s got great people working with him. Christ, Ray gets along great with Art, even.”

“I know,” his mother says softly.

“He gets to see us at least once a week. At least. And look how good we’ve
been doing the last four months." His father's voice begins to rise slightly. "We
can go places now. We can spend time with Art. The house looks great, no
broken glass. No shit on the walls. Art can have friends over. For nine years he
couldn't and now he can."

"He could have friends over before," his mother says.

"Come on, Janet. Would you want to bring your friends over so they could
watch your brother pee on himself and scratch up his face?"

"Mike, he only does that when something is wrong!" Her voice is suddenly
loud, and Art hears his father shush her, forgetting how loud he himself has
been speaking. Her next words are softer. "I just feel something is wrong now. I
can feel it. He's been self-abusing at the home, and now here..."

"You feel guilty," Art's father says. "It's perfectly natural. Remember they
said this would happen, and we're doing exactly what we're supposed to."

They are silent for a time. Art wishes he could see them. He suspects his
mother is crying.

"Listen," his father says. "Listen. We don't know why Franny's acting like
this now. It may be that he's unhappy there. Or, it may be that this is simply his
way of adjusting to where he is. We don't know."

Art stands in front of his reflection with his toothbrush in his mouth,
waiting for them to speak again. When his mother finally does, what she says
makes his insides cave in.

"I was thinking about this Thursday," she says. "I'd like to have Franny
come to Art's birthday party."

"For Chrissakes, Janet. What did we just—"

"I know we planned not to do it, but I think it's finally bothering him that
he doesn't see us during the week. He loves birthday parties."

"Janet," says Michael, "It's taken us a long time to find a good place for Franny. He's got to get used to it, and so do you. You have to let him be."

Art fights a tremendous urge to run out to the kitchen, shout No, don't have him come, Jake and Rob and Chris are coming and I don't want him to come. Then just as suddenly he's ashamed of what he's thinking.

"This is Art's first real birthday party," his father is saying. "And he's ten years old, for crying out loud."

"He can still have a real birthday party with Franny there," Janet says. "Michael, we can't hide Art's brother from his friends forever. They're old enough to understand."

Art can almost feel his father giving in. Perhaps he feels guilty too.

"I don't know," his father says with a sigh.

Art spits, and rinses his mouth. He turns off the bathroom light and goes to his room. He lays in bed quietly for some time, listening to the insects outside his open window, then goes to sleep.

On Tuesday Ray and Franny show up at Art's baseball game. They sit with Art's parents at the top of the tiny section of bleachers behind home plate, two rows above the next highest person. Ray smiles and waves at Art, who waits on deck wearing a helmet that's slightly too large for his head. Franny rocks on the bench with his eyes closed, listening to music from his Walkman.

Art's friend Chris, who is batting in front of him, takes a called second strike. Someone shouts from the stands, and Art glances toward the sound. A pretty woman in a bright flowered shirt—Chris's mother—sits three rows below
Art's parents, clapping and smiling. Next to her is Chris's father, recording snippets of the game with a video camera. Above them Art's father offers him a wave and a grin. His mother is leaning into Franny, whispering in his ear.

Chris strikes out and walks back to the bench with his eyes to the ground. As Art steps to the plate he can hear Ray and his parents cheering and calling his name. He stands in the box, bat cocked. The pitcher, a red-faced teenager who works for the city recreation department, lets the first ball go. It's a slow arc right down the middle, and Art swings as hard as he can, making contact and sending it high into left field. Even after the left fielder catches it Art finishes his run to first base, because the coach likes that kind of enthusiasm. He looks up into the stands, where his mother is clapping.

"Way to hit the ball," Ray shouts.

"Good contact," says the coach as Art canters past toward the bench. He sits next to Chris and Rob.

"Is that your brother in the stands?" says Chris.

"Yeah," says Art.

"He looks a lot older than you," says Rob.

Art realizes his friends are referring to Ray, not Franny, who is barely visible behind a grandfather in a black Stetson who has settled in front of Art's family.

"Are you still coming to my birthday party?" Art says.

"Sure," says Chris. "Why wouldn't we?"

After the game, which Art's team wins by one run, his parents, Ray and Franny come down to congratulate him. Art watches them approach. Franny walks with his eyes to the ground, mumbling along with his Walkman, his arms tensed and spread out behind him. His face is streaked and shiny. Art can tell he
has scratched again.

"Who's that?" says Chris.

"My brother," Art says.

"You have two brothers?" says Rob.

"Just one."

"What happened to his face?" Chris says.

"He likes to scratch it."

Art's mother waves to them. She lifts up one of Franny's earphones and whispers something. Franny momentarily puts his arms down by his sides.

Art sees Rob and Chris watching his brother.

"He's autistic," he says.

"What do you mean artistic?"

"Hey guys! Good game!" says Art's mother. "Franny, say hello to Art's friends. Guys, this is Franny."

They say hi. Art watches them, looking for signs of discomfort, or suppressed laughter. He can see none. He spots Chris's parents heading toward them.

"That was a heck of a game," says Art's father, the smile large on his face.

"Franny's coming to the birthday party Thursday," Art's mother says.

"He is?" Art tries to sound surprised, but not displeased.

"We thought he'd like to meet all your friends," says his mother. She looks at Art as if she's speaking in secret code, and once again Art feels annoyance with his mother. Franny doesn't want to meet his friends. Franny wants to play hoop, and listen to the radio, and eat Popsicles, Art wants to say, and if you let him alone he'll be happy.
Chris’s mother arrives and puts her hands on her son’s shoulders.

"You must be Art’s," she says to Art’s parents, and they introduce themselves.

"This is my son Franny," Art’s mother says taking his hand. "Franny, can you say hello to Chris’s mom?" Franny mumbles a one-syllable greeting and pulls free of his mother’s grasp, turning away. "He’s a little shy," she says, laughing. Chris’s mother smiles.

"Mrs. L, I’m gonna take him back now," Ray says. "I think he’s getting hungry." Art looks at Franny, who seems restless, pulling against the hold Ray now has on his wrist.

"We’ll go back with you," says Art’s mother, taking Franny by the hand. "Art, meet us at our car, okay?"

Art watches his friends watching his brother walk away.

Later, he hears his parents talking in the car on the way home. It seems the incident at the group home was worse than a simple face-scratching; Franny took a swing at Ricky before he started his self-abuse. Only the fact that he missed prevented a possible lawsuit.

Franny’s father seems somewhat amused, but his mother’s voice quavers with nervousness and concern.

“Something is really wrong,” she repeats.

“Come on, Janet,” Art’s father says. “The kid was probably getting on his nerves. He’d get on my nerves.”

“Exactly,” she says. “Why are you making him stay there with someone you wouldn’t stay with?”

“I’m not making him do anything,” he says forcefully. “We’re letting him
and ourselves have a better life.”

Art sinks down into the back seat of the car and tries to tune out the sound of his parents. Once again, he finds himself envying his brother.

On Thursday Art's mother wakes him up early.

“Happy Birthday!” she says, carrying a large, gift-wrapped cube in her arms. She lays it on his bed and gives him a hug.

“Can I open it now?” Art asks, thrilled by the sheer size of the box. He hasn't asked for anything, and he has no idea what it could be.

“Wait until your friends are here. You can open all your presents at once.”

Art puts on his favorite jeans and his Reds jersey and walks to the kitchen. He looks through the window into the back yard, where his father is moving the picnic table to the center of the patio. Art wonders what his friends will think of the basketball goal post planted in the grass.

His mother comes into the kitchen.

“Want some cereal?” she says, opening the cupboard and taking out the box of flakes.

“I'm going outside,” Art says. He goes to the back porch and steps outside. The air is warm and moist. Art can tell it will be a nice day.

“Happy Birthday!” says his father when he sees Art. He hugs him tight, his arms almost covering Art's whole upper body. “Did you open your present yet?”

“Mom said to wait and open them all at once.”

“That's probably a better idea,” his father says. “I think you're gonna like your present.” He gives Art a smile.

Franny arrives with Ray about an hour later. By then the back yard has been
decorated. Balloons and streamers decorate the patio and the basketball hoop. The picnic table is covered with a plastic tablecloth and set with paper dinnerware. In the middle of it sits the circular cake, frosted white and blue, bearing the appropriate message.

"Happy birthday, guy!" says Ray, shaking Art's hand vigorously. It makes Art feel older and therefore happier. Franny grabs a basketball from the patio and takes a dangerous shot from the edge of the yard.

"Franny," says Art's father. "Not now. You can play later." Surprisingly, Franny fetches the ball himself and takes another shot, which manages to pop a balloon taped to the backboard. His father curses, and Ray moves to take the basketball away from him.

Art's mother pokes her head out of the kitchen window. "Art," she says. "Your friends are here."

Rob and Jake have arrived at the same time. Chris will be here soon, Rob says. Both boys bring respectably-sized presents, which Art's mother puts in the living room with the giant cube. They go out to the back yard, where Art's father has started the gas grill, and is opening a box of frozen hamburger patties.

"Boy, it's gorgeous out here," Art's father says.

Ray is sitting at the picnic table, watching Art's brother. He has persuaded Franny to shoot lay-ups instead of long shots, and now Franny stands under the net, gently palming the ball upwards. He doesn't miss.

"He's pretty good," says Rob, impressed.

"He plays a lot of hoop," says Art. "Ray, can you teach me to shoot like him?"

"Sure," Ray says. "Maybe today, even."
“Ray used to play basketball for Fairview High,” Art says. Rob and Jake nod, impressed. Both of them, like Art, hold aspirations of playing for the Warriors someday.

Chris shows up a little while later, and the boys munch on pretzels and drink sodas while they wait for the hamburgers to cook. Art's mother comes and sits with them.

“Are you guys having fun?” she says.

They nod.

“What do you guys think of Franny?”

They shrug.

“He seems different, doesn’t he? That’s because he has a different way of communicating. He feels the same things you and I do, he just shows them differently.”

“Art said he was artistic,” says Rob.

Art's mother laughs. “Autistic. It's a disorder of the brain. He has autism.”

When the hamburgers are ready they all sit at the picnic table to eat, except for Franny. He doesn't want to sit.

“Come on, Franny,” his mother says, pulling him to the table. “Don’t you want to eat with us?” He begins moaning softly, then reaches tentatively for his face. Ray takes hold of his wrists, and Franny begins to struggle more forcefully, as if he had been waiting for Ray to try and stop him.

“It’s okay, guy. It's okay,” he says, and Franny appears to calm down. Art watches his friends, who remain silent. He can see they have become slightly anxious, and he is suddenly furious with his brother.

Eventually they let Franny eat his hamburger under the basketball hoop
while he tosses the ball through the net. Art's mother looks at his father, her wrinkled forehead showing concern. Art's father can only shrug.

After lunch the song is sung and the cake is cut, and then it's time to open the presents. But Franny doesn't want to go inside. Ray tries to lead him in, but Franny tries to pull his hand free, whimpering and grimacing.

“You boys go inside,” Art’s mother says to them. “He's being a brat. We'll be in soon.”

In the living room the boys try to guess what the giant cube contains. By the time Art's parents enter with Ray and Franny, their curiosity has got the best of them, and Art has already half unwrapped it.

“No fair,” says his mother, laughing and framing Art in the lens of her camera. Ray leads Franny to the blue recliner and puts his headphones on. While Franny rocks and mumbles, Art’s mother snaps pictures of Art and his friends.

Art's parents have given him a radio-controlled monster truck, with wheels as big as Art's open hand. The boys gasp in wonder, and Art jumps up to hug his parents. They have bought batteries and put them in the box, and Art jams them into the truck and controller, forgetting his other presents. His friends don't mind.

Franny has begun rocking harder, his eyes shut tighter, as if he's trying to levitate himself and the chair. Ray notices this.

“Hey, buddy, are you all right?” he says. As if this is his cue, Franny screams, and his hands are instantly at his face, scratching away the scabs. Ray grabs Franny's wrists, but Franny is quite agitated, and Ray doesn't have the leverage to pry Franny's hands away from his face.
The boys stare in silence, mouths open, too stunned to move, and Art feels his insides tighten. His father has moved to help Ray, and together they are somewhat successful in restraining Franny. Art looks at his mother, standing by the entrance to the kitchen, her eyes wide, her hands covering her mouth. He wants to stand up, shout at her, tell her he knew this would happen, and he wishes he had said something before.

And then Franny does something new. He kicks Ray in the chest, sending him backwards to the carpet, and breaks free of his father. Screaming, he stands up and high-steps out to the hallway, ignoring everything in his way—including Art's truck, which crunches under his foot. The sound seems to echo through Art's chest, which has suddenly become hollow. Franny bolts past his mother and down the hall to the bathroom.

"Janet, take the kids home," says Art's father, walking quickly after Franny. Ray follows.

"C'mon, boys," his mother says. Her eyes are wet. Art's friends stand up, dazed, and walk with her to the door.

"I can't figure out what's wrong with him," his mother says, almost to herself.

Art watches her eyes get wet, and tears streak slowly down her face.

Later that night Art and his father clean up the living room. They have left the back yard for tomorrow. Art's father picks up the truck, the can of which has been flattened by Franny's foot.

"I promise we'll get you a new one, Art," he says softly.

"Is Franny staying tonight?" Art says.
"Yes, just for tonight," his father says softly. He moves to kneel in front of Art. "Your mother and I don't know what's wrong with him, but we think it's best if he stays here tonight."

"Doesn't he like his group home?"

"We—we don't know. Probably he just needs some time to get used to it. It's hard to be in a new place. How would you like to be away from home?"

Art nods slowly.

"We hope he'll get to like it there eventually," his father says. "We just have to make it easier for him."

They finish picking up the paper plates and torn gift wrap, and then prepare the guest bedroom—Art's old room—for him to sleep in. Then Art goes into his present room, where his mother is sitting by Franny's bedside.

"You rest nice now," she tells Franny, whose glistening face makes Art's own feel almost sore. "Tomorrow you can play hoop all day if you want. And Art will play with you, and Ray will come over too, and he can watch you play. Arthur, did you set up your room?"

"Yes," Art says. "Is Franny going back to his group home soon?"

"Shh," she says, but nods.

She kisses Franny's forehead, and smiles at Art. "You want to stay with him for a little while?"

After she leaves Art watches Franny, who lies quietly under his covers, seemingly fascinated by his fingertips, which he moves slowly in front of his face. After a minute Art gets up to leave. Franny whispers something, and Art stops and turns.

"What? Did you say something?"
Franny lifts his head and looks at his brother. Art, stunned, moves closer.

Franny whispers again.

“Stay,” he says.

“You want me to stay here?” Art says.

Franny touches his fingertips together, as if he has decided to pray. He whispers again.

“What did you say?”

“No home,” Franny says. “Stay.”

Franny moves back, and looks at his brother. In his eyes is reflected everything Art ever felt toward his brother: the confusion, the fear, the hate. It is only a brief glance, but enough for Art to understand. He imagines Franny in bed at his group home, his solitude now physical as well as mental. Somewhere deep inside, Franny knows.

Art walks slowly back to his old room, and for a long time, what seems like hours, he lies in the dark, until the sound of the insects outside eventually becomes its own kind of silence, enveloping him, protecting him.

The door to the room creaks open, and shortly his mother is sitting on his bed. She strokes his head, looking down on him.

“How are you feeling?” she whispers.

“Okay.”

“Franny didn’t mean it, Arthur. I hope you know that.”

“I know.”

“Would you have any idea what could be bothering him?” She smooths the hair on his head with a cool hand. “You spend a lot of time with him. . . .”

Art closes his eyes, and turns on his side.
"I don’t know, I really don’t." He speaks no more, and waits for his mother to leave.
While his friend Otto the artist slept next to him, Jake watched the dancers in the parking lot, even though he knew it would put him in a mood. It was a young couple, a skinny boy in cutoffs and a short blonde girl in a summer dress. They had parked their little hatchback in the middle of the huge lot, about a hundred feet away, under the circular glow of a streetlight. Both doors were open, and the radio was turned loud enough so that even on the roof of the Handy Andy construction site Jake could make out the old Van Morrison song.

To Jake the couple seemed convinced they were in love, perhaps realizing it for the first time. Facing each other, they held hands and swayed happily, aware, perhaps, of the almost unbearable romance of this moment, or feeling the thrill of a new summer. They danced well. He dipped her slowly, so that her long hair almost touched the concrete, then raised her back up and twirled her away from him, her loose skirt flying out around her like the canopy on a merry-go-round. Suddenly she leaped laughing onto the hood of the car, and in the light of the streetlamp Jake could see the shock flash across the boy’s features, then the concern—she might hurt herself, or perhaps she would scratch the paint or dent the hood. But she jumped off into his arms, and as they embraced and spun together the boy was smiling again.

Jake crumpled a napkin and tossed it over the low concrete wall that bordered the roof. His head was light with the strange giddiness that affects lonely boys his age, and which they often mistake for intense and noble misery.

“Go home,” he said, more loudly than he had intended. But the two didn’t hear him, or see the little ball of white paper flutter onto the pile of cinder blocks directly below Jake.
Next to him, Otto Haffner sat up slowly, gazing blankly skyward. He worked at the Burger Heaven on Lorain, and lately he had been opening the store a lot, which left him tired in the evenings. He had been napping for about twenty minutes, and wore a drunken expression that made his stout face seem deceptively unintelligent. He was a big boy, and his widow’s peak and heavy, lowered eyebrows made him look like a young, sedate Jack Nicholson.

“What time is it?” Otto said slowly.

“Time to go home, I think,” Jake said, without turning his eyes away from the couple, who were no longer dancing but ardently making out in front of the car. Jake wondered briefly if the car was running, or if they would get in it to find the radio had drained the battery dead.

“Oh shit,” Otto said, smiling. He had followed Jake’s stare and was looking at the couple, and his eyes had widened in surprise. Instantly he was on his feet.

“Hey!” he shouted, slowly waving his arms as if guiding an airplane into the hangar. “Hey Nikki!”

The couple jumped apart, shocked by Otto’s voice as if by electricity. Jake saw the boy stare up at them and wave meekly. The girl glanced up and turned away immediately, covering her face.

Otto turned to Jake with a wicked grin. “Heh heh. I know that girl. She works at Burger Heaven.”

They watched the couple squeeze into their car. The girl never looked up, or took her hands away from her face. As they drove off Otto sat back down, giggling.

“She’s not gonna live that one down,” he said. “You should have woke me earlier.”
Jake lay back slowly and gazed up at the white-sprinkled darkness above. “I’m glad I didn’t,” he said.

It was after two o’clock when Jake crept into his dark house through the open patio door in back. He tried to be quiet, but he was halfway up the steps to his bedroom when he heard his mother whisper his name sharply. Nevertheless, he continued on tiptoe and silently poked his head into his parents’ bedroom.

“Where were you?” his mother said. “It’s two thirty. Why didn’t you say where you were going?”

“We didn’t know where we were going.”

This was a lie, Jake realized. Lately he and Otto had spent a lot of time on top of the unfinished Handy Andy lumber store. It was easy to scramble up the scaffolds onto the roof and sit there undiscovered, “watching the city,” as Otto put it, though there was never much to watch. Still, Jake thought, it would do his mother little good to know he was spending his nights illegally perched on top of a construction site.

“Don’t you have any common sense?” she was saying. “Don’t you have the decency to tell us where you’re going?”

Jake didn’t like the way his mother spoke when she was angry, though not for the reasons she might have guessed. She never talked about common sense or appealed to decency in her everyday language. At least she didn’t use those exact terms. They lent an irritating formality to her emotion, as if she were reading a script.

“Do you have to work tomorrow?” she said, calmer. Apparently she had decided to let the matter go.
"Of course," he said. Jake had a job painting for the summer, and worked when it did not rain.

His father stirred, and sat up suddenly, letting out a loud, surprised *huh*.

"What," he said. "What?"

"Hi dad," Jake said, walking out backwards and closing the door behind him.

The next morning, aching and sleepy, Jake drove to the new job site, a large split-level on Hubert. It would the third house of his young career. He had found the work exciting at first, climbing the sides of houses, peeking into other people's windows, reading their private lives off the wallpaper, furniture or dirty laundry on their bedroom floors. But it was turning into a very hot summer, and Jake was tiring of the long hours outdoors. He didn't need the money, and would have considered quitting if the thought of spending his days alone didn't scare him.

Both of the other painters were at the site when Jake arrived. Romolo, the crew leader, was spreading a cloth onto the floor of the open garage. Mick, a college student like Jake, was sliding fresh covers onto the rollers.

"About time," Romolo said. He was a skinny, bearded Italian who looked about forty but was really only a few years older than Jake. Romolo had never finished high school, and jokingly referred to Mick and Jake as The Schoolies. In return Jake nicknamed him Perpetual Painter.

"Nice house," Jake said. He saw the other two setting up the ladders and helped. They plugged in the electric sanders and began taking off the old paint where it had bubbled up. Jake hated sanding, hated the noise and the dust and wearing the masks and goggles, and he was glad there were few places where paint was peeling.
Two hours later he was two stories high, rolling exterior latex onto the front of a house on Hubert. The day had not yet began to heat up, and Jake was enjoying himself, looking out at the neighborhood below him and zoning out. He remembered the dancing couple in the parking lot, and and wondered where they were, if they were together, perhaps waltzing their way down the aisle at a supermarket. Jake had never been successful at relationships. More accurately, he had yet to experience what he defined as a real relationship, a definition more exclusive than inclusive. He knew what he was not looking for. His few dates in high school had consisted of uncomfortable outings, short sentences framed in silence, darting eyes and nervous giggles. Goodnight kisses more often expressed relief than romance. His freshman year of college had been worse.

Definitely, he thought, he wanted somebody to dance in a parking lot with.

As he pictured himself pirouetting across pavement with a faceless beauty, he moved his roller toward the wall before it was completely out of the paint bucket, and dislodged the bucket from the ladder hook. As he watched the pail fall Jake felt his own chest drop, and when the bucket landed on the front steps thirty feet below in an amazing burst of Summer Yellow he felt his heart had also exploded on the concrete.

He scrambled down the ladder. Romolo was racing toward him, saying “shit” over and over, sounding like a train engine. Mick was desperately trying to connect a hose to the spigot behind the front bushes.

“Jesus,” Romolo said, looking at the damage. Somehow the bucket had completely missed the nylon tarp spread under the ladder. Paint had splattered over the steps in a giant yellow Rorschach, and had covered the railings and part of one
of the evergreen shrubs. There were even some drops on the screen door and the bay window.

"How much paint did you have in that bucket?" Romolo said slowly. He was livid.

Jake shrugged, avoiding Romolo's eyes. "About a gallon, I think."

"A gallon," Romolo said. Jake could hear the disbelief in his tone, and kept his head down. "A gallon? How much paint are you supposed to have in the bucket?"

Jake stared at the mess, which Mick was now trying to hose off. The mist from the spray felt cool on his arms. "Two inches or less," he said.

"Two inches or less, not a frikkin gallon," Romolo said. "That way you don't get spills like this. It's common sense. Use your common sense, man."

Jake let out a slow breath and looked up at the top of the ladder, trying to remember what he was thinking about.

It was the dancing girl. As he walked into Burger Heaven he saw her, standing behind the counter. She wore a maroon uniform and a white beret. Her name tag was shaped like a cloud, with "Nikki K." written in gold script across it. She was holding a microphone. Jake noticed she had lovely wrists, slender and long.

"Can I help you?"

She didn't seem to recognize him.

Jake stared at her. She was not beautiful. Her face was too narrow, maybe, and her eyes small. And yet his heart had missed a beat when he entered the restaurant.

"I really don't know," he said. "Is Otto back there somewhere?"
Nikki looked behind her. "He's around someplace."

Jake looked at the back of her head. Her hair was up in a neat bun under the beret. Jake decided she was probably smart. They both spotted Otto at the same time, and Jake called out to him. Otto took his break, and met Jake at a back table.

"You have paint in your hair," Otto said.

"I always have paint in my hair. That was her, wasn't it?"

"Who"

"The one dancing in the parking lot with her boyfriend," Jake said, then remembered that Otto had been asleep. "She was making out with him in the parking lot."

Otto chuckled, remembering.

"Does her boyfriend work here too?" Jake said.

Otto shook his head. "Comes in a lot, though." He smiled. "Orders french fries from his beloved." His tone was cutting, and Jake flinched internally. Otto had never been an advocate of serious relationships, perhaps because of his parents, who were no longer living together. Instead he tried to be as promiscuous as possible. Currently he was sleeping with a stout girl named USA who also worked at the restaurant.

They made plans to meet after Otto's shift, which ended at nine.

"Why don't you ask some people from here to come along?" Jake said.

Otto shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe Lisa will want to do something."

"Lisa and anybody else. Ask."

On his way out Jake waved to Nikki.
After his shower he spent twenty minutes scrubbing the paint out of his hair, glad that it was latex paint this time, and easier to remove. When he was finished he dressed and headed downstairs, where his mother was watching television in the family room, and his father was napping on the recliner, his stethoscope still hanging from his chest.

His mother smiled. "You're all dressed up."

Jake looked down at his polo shirt and slacks. "Am I?"

"You're going out tonight, I guess. When do you think you'll be home?"

He sat down next to her. "I don't know where we're going," he said. He watched television with her for a few minutes.

"And how's the home improvement business?" she said.

"Messy," Jake said. He felt he should say more, that he should talk with her, but he could think of nothing to say, a problem he had encountered since returning from college. Actually, he realized it had existed for several years, but he hadn't been aware of it until this summer. He tried asking about her day.

"How was the office? Did Dad get a lot of patients today?"

"He doesn't have office hours today. He makes rounds at the hospital, so I didn't have to work."

Jake nodded, feeling stupid, and stood up to leave. As he walked out of the family room his father's eyes opened, and he stared at Jake for a second, as if not recognizing him.

"What?" he said.

"Jake," his mother said. He turned to look at her. She was slender, almost lost in her big pink cotton nightgown. She was pretty, he saw.
"Yes?"

She paused, as if she had forgotten her line. "Call if you’re going to be late."

"Okay," he said, walking out.

When he rang Otto’s doorbell, Jake hoped Mrs. Haffner would not answer it. Otto’s father had left about two months before—an event Otto had been predicting for a long time—and Mrs. Haffner was not taking it well. According to Otto, she stayed in her room most of the time, and hadn’t cooked or even eaten much since her husband left. Otto said she hadn’t spoken more than ten words the whole summer. The first time she had answered the door for Jake, the gaunt specter that greeted him, so pale as to be nearly transparent, had unnerved him so that he stammered and made no sense.

Fortunately Otto answered, and led him downstairs to the basement.

Like Jake, Otto had just finished his first year of college. He was a graphic design major at Kent State University, an area of study for which Jake found him well-suited. In grade school Otto impressed Jake and other classmates with his ballpoint sketches of horses in a field or World War II fighter planes going down in flames. Jake envied Otto, not only for his distinctive and exceptional talent but because of his ability to make people pay him attention.

After his father left, Otto converted a corner of the basement into a sort of studio, centered around a huge antique desk he used as his drawing table. The area was an artist’s mess. On the desk lay an open fishing box, filled with technical pens, felt markers, bits of sponge and stained wads of tissue, broken pencils, charcoal sticks and ink bottles. The top of the desk and the floor around the desk were littered
with sheets of paper and bristol board, some of them quite old, with wrinkled corners and pieces torn off.

A large, inch-thick drawing pad lay shut on the desk, and Jake picked it up and opened it to somewhere in the middle. He recognized Circel, one of the inhabitants of Keneida, the world Otto had been imagining onto this sketchbook for the last two years. It was a violent world, populated by savage but stunningly beautiful people, usually blondes with punk haircuts. Some of Keneida was endless desert, and multicolored sky broken only by monstrous rock formations, reaching upward like mangled fingers. Elsewhere, huge sailships glided across green oceans with surfaces of glass, and bubble-covered cities—brightly lit and cozy despite their apparent immensity—floated high above swirling storm clouds.

Animals or plants did not exist on Keneida. As far as Jake could tell its people were constantly waging war or making love. On one page Otto had sketched a young couple naked and intertwined, and next to it a soldier shattering another man’s skull with his fist, spraying blood and brains everywhere.

Circel was a villain, and Otto liked to draw him. This time Otto had rendered him in ink and brilliant marker, dressed him in what looked like a vest made of steel cables, and armed him with some sort of lance. Jake raised his eyebrows in admiration. Though he was good before, Otto’s work had improved considerably over the last year. His style reminded Jake of Nagel, but with more attention given to shadows and finer detail, such as the outline of the muscles, and the stubble on Circel’s proud chin.

“He looks bigger than he used to,” Jake said. “Has he been working out?”

“I want to show you something,” Otto said, heading upstairs. “Wait here.”
While Otto was gone Jake scanned through a stack of photographs he found on a shelf above the desk. They were pictures of Kent State, but Otto was in very few of them. Strangers smiled back at Jake from their cluttered dorm rooms or campus lawns. Most of them were women. When Otto returned Jake was staring at a picture of a short-haired girl wearing striped boxer shorts and holding a towel over her apparently bare chest. She was standing in front of an open bathroom, and her expression was one of surprise and amusement—she seemed about to explode in a fit of laughter.

"Who this?" he asked.

Otto glanced at the picture and smile. "Oh, she was interesting, all right" was all he said. He was carrying a T-shirt on a hanger, and purple and blue tie-dyed job with something over the left side of the chest. Otto held up the shirt, and Jake saw that the design was a green cat’s eye, perfectly painted down to the last eyelash.

"That’s incredible," he said. "Did you use airbrush?"

"Regular brush. Brush and fabric paint." Otto held the shirt against his chest, checking the fit. He took off the shirt he was wearing and put the painted one on. The green eye stared outward.

They went upstairs and Otto knocked on his mother’s bedroom door.

"We’re going now," he said loudly. There was no answer. Otto glanced at Jake and shrugged. "We’ll be back," he said to the door.

"Shouldn’t she get some help?" Jake said as they climbed into his old brown van.

Otto placed his sketchbook on the seat behind him. "Once she stops feeling sorry for herself and starts getting pissed she’ll be fine," he said.
Otto had talked some of his friends from work into going out. They were waiting sitting around a table at Burger Heaven, laughing loudly about something as Jake and Otto walked in. Otto showed them his shirt, then introduced Jake to them. There was Lisa with the glasses, and a long-haired kid named Charlie. Nikki was there as well, and when Jake saw her his blood pressure rose. Her boyfriend Greg was sitting next to her, and glancing around as if he didn’t want to be there.

They went bowling, something Jake hadn’t done for a long time with good reason. He was not the worst—Lisa was—but far below the level of Otto and Charlie, who took their competition with each other seriously. In between turns Jake watched Nikki and Greg, who sat apart from the group and leaned into each other to speak.

“So what school do you go to?” Lisa was saying. She had sat down next to him.

“It’s on the East Coast,” he said. “Connecticut. You might not have heard of it.”

“My god,” she said, sitting up straight in a gesture of surprise. “Why so far?” Jake smiled. “I just wanted to get away from here,” he said.

Otto was standing in front of him. “Your turn.”

“Keep my seat warm,” Jake said, getting up. He was talking to Otto, but Lisa smiled and moved over onto his chair.

“Hey you two,” Otto said, looking over at Nikki and Greg. “Why don’t you come join the rest of society?” They smiled and walked over.

When Jake returned from throwing two gutter balls he sat next to the couple and tried to make conversation. “So Greg. Greg, right? Where do you go to school?”
“Ohio State,” Greg said. “Pre-med.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled, as if he didn’t believe this himself.

“He wants to be a plastic surgeon,” Nikki said. Her smile was proud. “He wants to fix butts and boobs.”

Greg laughed and looked at her chest. “Yours could use some fixin’.”

Her mouth opened wide in shock, and she sat up and slapped him hard on the shoulder before breaking into a reluctant smile.

“A doctor. That’s neat,” Jake said nonchalantly. “My father’s a doctor. General practitioner. He’s never home. When he is he’s usually asleep. Don’t love your work too much.”

Greg nodded as if Jake had given him precious advice. Someone called out that it was Jake’s turn to bowl again.

“Nice chatting with you,” Jake said, getting up.

He turned and gazed down his lane, and saw the shiny red pin at the front. Charlie saw it too.

“Oh wow. A red head pin. Bowl a strike and it’s free games for all of us.” He ran off to the main desk.

Jake turned around. Lisa and Otto, even Nikki and Greg were watching him in anticipation. He saw Charlie smiling and walking back from the main desk. A shrill, happy female voice came over the P.A. system.

“We’ve got a red pin on Lane 9, everyone. Red pin on Lane 9,” the voice said. Suddenly other people, strangers, were watching him in curiosity. Old men sitting with their beers in the observation deck, kids in the lanes next to him.

“I want a free game,” Otto said.
Watching the people watch him, Jake felt no nervousness, as he thought he might. Instead he felt somehow connected with them, as if he knew what they were thinking. It was a good feeling. Jake smiled at them. He smiled at Nikki, and she smiled back.

He turned around and threw a gutter ball.

Afterwards, outside the bowling alley, they tried to decide what to do next. “We can go to my house,” Charlie said. “Nobody’s home.” He laughed.

Otto turned to Nikki and Greg. “What do you guys want to do?” he said.

The two exchanged looks, and then looked at Otto and smiled. Nikki shrugged. Jake knew they wanted to be alone together—the oddness of this phrase struck him.

Otto who decided for them. He and Jake would show them their Place, the roof of the Handy Andy. Jake was afraid someone may notice that many people on the roof, but the group ignored his concerns.

To avoid attracting attention they parked their cars at the far end of the parking lot, and in the plaza across the street, and walked to the construction site. Most of the scaffolds had been taken down, but the walls were almost complete, and they were able to use these to get onto the roof. Lisa was afraid—or pretending to be afraid—and was practically carried up by Charlie and Otto.

“Man,” Charlie said, as they stood over the far edge and looked out across Center Ridge Boulevard. At this time of night there were few cars on the road. They watched a bus rumble by, its inside brightly lit to show three or four slumped passengers on their way to who knew where. Behind them was the black sea of the parking lot, and the lamps which cast islands of light upon it.
“Neat,” Charlie said, holding his arms out. A breeze blew back his long hair.

“You could have an experience here.”

“I know what you mean,” Jake said. He looked around him and saw Lisa and Greg, but not Nikki. He turned around. Nikki and Otto sat at the other edge of the roof, using the light from the streetlamp to look at the sketchbook of Planet Keneida, which Otto had brought up. Jake walked over. They ignored him.

Nikki’s eyes were wide in surprise and admiration as Otto turned a page. She was impressed.

“It looks like a Nagel,” she said.

Otto turned the page to a complex battle scene. “This is the one I was telling you about,” he said.

“I wish we had more light,” she said.

Otto smiled. “I’d bring it to work but I’m afraid to get grease all over it.”

Listening to their exchange bothered Jake. It was clear they had talked about Otto’s art before, and it was clear that Otto was interested in more than impressing Nikki with his drawings. Jake felt a strange fear rise up inside him, almost a panic, as if he were being threatened. He could not explain it. He looked at the rest of the group, sitting and talking at the edge of the wall, and took a few steps toward them. He turned back to Nikki and Otto bent over his sketchbook. She giggled. Perhaps they were looking at one of his love scenes.

He sat down in front of them, but they didn’t look up.

“Hey guys,” Jake said casually, motioning to the group. “Come over here and look at Otto’s drawings.”

They others got up and approached. Jake turned to Otto, who looked back at him.
“Wow,” Charlie said. “Is this stuff kind of like symbolic or is it pure imagination?”

“It’s awesome,” Lisa said. “My god, Otto, how come you never showed me these?”

Nikki looked at Greg and smiled. She reached out and took his hand, pulling him down next to her.

“You should see this stuff,” she said. “It’s cool.” As Greg sat next to her she put her arm around his neck and whispered into his ear. Jake saw his fear had been irrational, or naive, or both. He sat down, bewildered by what he had yet to learn.

After they had looked at the sketchbook a while Nikki and Greg decided they would leave. Jake sat at the edge of the roof and watched them disappear over the edge of the roof, sinking into the dark.

“You know,” Lisa said to him. “You’re a very quiet kid.”

He turned to her in surprise. Her glasses sat almost at the tip of her nose, and her mouth curled into a small smile. He noticed she was wearing too much makeup. Looking away he spotted Greg and Nikki walking away from the Handy Andy, and watched them stroll hand in hand across the lot, expecting them at any time to embrace and move in graceful circles among the islands of light.

“What time is it?” he asked. “I have to call my mother.”

“I don’t have a watch,” she said. “Will you be in trouble?”

“No,” he said. “She’ll be worried about me, that’s all. It is pretty late.”

He turned onto his back and stared up into the starless sky. He tried to hear what Otto and Charlie were talking about. He reminded himself to put less paint in the bucket at work. He tried to remember what Nikki looked like.

“You’re either real shy or not very friendly,” Lisa said teasingly.
“I guess I just like to listen more than talk,” Jake said. “That sounds good, doesn’t it? So tell me about yourself.” And she talked, talked a lot, but he didn’t listen, not at first. At first he tried to figure out what time it was. People were waiting for him.
The morning after I returned home from my first semester at college, I woke up and it came over me, sudden and inexplicable—a feeling of intense and tragic freedom, a rush of loneliness, if you will. This happens to me sometimes, mostly when I’m half asleep, and I haven’t eliminated the suspicion that it’s caused by some chemical imbalance in my brain. I stretched and groaned loudly, then turned and looked across my room to where my brother Nick lay, asleep in the other bed, already three days into his Christmas vacation. All I could see was his matted orange hair sticking out from under the sheets, like the back of a guinea pig. I left him asleep and walked downstairs to my father’s study.

“Good morning, Art,” he said, without looking up from his drawing table. “Is this what time you get up at school? I’m impressed.”

If you read the Plain Dealer comics page you might be have heard of my father, or at least you might be familiar with his work. He’s the cartoonist who created Wrinkletoes. Arnold Features Syndicate picked him up last year, and now he’s in almost 50 dailies. There’s talk of a book, maybe sometime next year. Look for it.

This morning he was inking the strips for the first week of March. The room smelled like coffee, and Otis Redding was playing softly from the speakers on the wall. My father was wearing the same clothes he had on last night, when we had stayed up late talking about school and my brother’s seventh-grade science fair project and anything except my mother. I walked to his table and looked over his shoulder. Wrinkletoes the talking orangutan was
philosophizing about the greening of the planet, which for the time being was only pencil gray.

"Isn't it hard to think about spring in the middle of winter?" I asked.

"That's the most difficult part of this job," he said, running a hand through his thick hair. "Thinking four months ahead."

"You should be glad you don't do political cartoons anymore."

"It is a political cartoon," he said. "It's about people. Hairy little orange people."

My father's ability to redefine the world—as well as his penchant for hyperbole—was making him a successful cartoonist, but it was probably a big part of the reason my mother left, two months before I started college.

"So where are the Christmas decorations?" I said.

"We decided to wait for you," my father said. "If you want, you can put the lights up on the front of the house."

"Love to."

I found an empty chair next to a box of old sketches, and we sat in silence for a while, listening to Otis sing about these arms of his. The sun was not yet high enough to shine through the skylight, and my father's drawing lamp cast odd shadows everywhere.

"The house looks so damn neat," I said.

My father looked up from his work for the first time. "You make it sound like that's a bad thing."

The Otis Redding CD ended, and I walked to the door, listening to the awful new silence, wishing for a footstep, a curtain rustle, anything.

"It's just weird," I said.