Telling

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The hot sidewalk was burning his bare feet, so William ran fast and then stopped in front of the tavern door only because the sidewalk there was cool in the shade of the awning. He could see—if he dared look up and turn his head just a little toward the door—the grinning head of a huge carp which someone had nailed to the door frame. He took a deep breath of warm yeasty air and then held his breath. He could hear low voices and sultry music like from his mother's radio late at night. Bradley, whose father was the Congregational minister, had told him all about the terrible evil inside that place.

Of all the places in the hot little town on that summer afternoon, the tavern was different; the windows were painted black on the inside. Running out of breath, William turned his head and looked in through the screen door—just for one blurry moment—and then took off at a dead run. He'd seen nothing but a crescent of purple, blue and raspberry light, and a curl of smoke. Looking into that forbidden place was the bravest thing he had ever done. It hadn't looked so bad. William was seven, and afraid of the dark.

William was being pursued. His sister Junie and her friend Patsy were after him. He was getting a little tired of their game because it involved so much running, and it was so hot, but Bradley, his best friend, was on vacation, and there were no other kids his age around.

Patsy was his enemy, and somehow since she moved into town his sister had become a more serious tormentor, too. Junie wasn't so bad, really. Her hair, white by this time of the summer, did stick out from her thin face like a dandelion gone-to-seed, and her blue eyes did get kind of
narrow when she looked at him lately, but she was okay by herself. Together they were thorns in his side. That's what Dad had said, "They're like thorns in your side, aren't they, William?"

William had agreed, though he hadn't really understood. He always agreed with Dad, who knew so much. He talked to William. He'd come home from the hardware store in the late afternoon and they'd talk.

"Let's see what ideas I had today," he'd say, pulling folded scraps of paper from his deep pockets. Crumbs of tobacco would spill from the papers as he'd unfold them. "How's this: 'Hail played on the roof like castanets'? That's good, isn't it? You know what castanets are?" And then he would explain to William about castanets, or trade winds, or whatever else he'd been thinking about during the day. "Today time crawled like a turtle under fern," he might say. William hoped to understand, and he tried to think of good things to tell his dad. Dad's typewriter would clatter William to sleep at night, that and the drums and guitars from his mother's room.

Now William stood at the end of Main Street beside the hatchery. No one was in sight. He was thirsty, so he headed toward home. The girls might have given up the chase and gone inside to get away from the heat. Hard to tell about them. A tickle of sweat ran down William's back.

Patsy Castell and her mom and dad had moved into the old Stratton place early that spring. Once the center of the town had been the Stratton Farm, but the town had grown up around it, and now the house, the barn, henhouse, sheds and a few odd-shaped weedy pens were squeezed between neat rows of houses. The weathered buildings, largely unused, stretched through the entire block. Only the house was painted, only the yard around it was mowed; the rest of the old place leaned together along the lane which once had been the only access to the farm buildings. Patsy's father, Tony, had torn away part of the roof of the small barn and installed a crude skylight made of old storm windows. He used it as his studio.

He was a sculptor, a dark-haired, sad-looking man. His front teeth had gold edges, and his eyes crinkled up when
he smiled. William would see him sometimes, walking from his barn-studio to the house, wiping white powdery streaks onto the legs of his jeans. He worked without a shirt, and a long triangle of sweat would glisten from his collar bones down his lean chest. He always smiled when he saw William. “How’s the world treatin’ you, William?” he’d say. William would never know what to say back. Bradley said Tony made statues of naked women. William was afraid.

Bradley had said, in fact, that he’d seen into the barn once, actually seen Tony Castell with his hands on a stone as white as a salt block, drawing dark curves on it with long sweeping movements of his hands. “He had big pictures tacked up on the posts of that barn, whole bunches of them, and he copied them big as life onto that stone. I seen, and I’m not kidding.”

“Why would he do that?” William had wanted to know.

“Beats me. Some guys do that, I guess. Maybe he wants to be famous.”

“Can you be famous for that?”

“Of course. I seen a statue of Jesus-es mother once, but it had a kind of nightgown on.” Bradley had once lived in Omaha and knew many things. “My dad doesn’t believe in Jesus-es mother, does yours, William?”

“Of course he does,” William had said, although his dad had never actually mentioned it. It wasn’t often he could come out one better than Bradley. “My dad knows that everybody had a mother.”

Remembering that made William smile to himself. There was no one around. Crossing in front of Patsy’s house, he was day-dreaming still, watching the watery places on the blacktop which stretched through the town and deep into the cornfields that surrounded the town. Dad had told him about mirages, light rays bending in the heat. Something about wax candles in the sun. Suddenly, William heard the girls, and turning to look toward Castell’s house, he saw their skinny legs flying, and he took off running around the opposite side of the house. Patsy’s mean black braids slapped against her shoulders as she ran. He could hear them as she gained behind him, and he could imagine
the dark gleam in her narrow eyes. They caught him just as he reached the shade surrounding the old buildings. “Now you’ve had it,” Patsy snarled as she whomped him down into the sharp weeds, face first. He flipped over onto his back and Patsy sat down hard on his chest, forcing his breath out. Junie pushed her face down close to his, echoing her friend, “Now you’ve really had it.” William heaved his shoulders upward to reach for her, but Patsy had him pinned, and his arms—free only from elbows to fingers—were like dolls’ arms.

That final insulting reminder of his smallness gave him a new burst of anger. He flung his legs toward Patsy’s back as high as he could. As she threw her weight back with her arms to hold his legs, William grabbed for her braids and pulled hard. “You’re a brat,” he said to the pink part in her hair as he pinned her head down hard against his chest, “a bully brat.”

She pried at his hands with her short fingernails, but the harder she pried, the harder he pulled on the braids. Finally she reached up for his throat and pushed her thumbs into the part where he swallowed. “You’re a baby,” she was saying, her voice husky. “You can’t fight me.”

His choking gasp brought Junie into the action, her eyes round as coins in her narrow face. She pulled Patsy back away from her brother by the shoulders. But then, as he rolled over onto his knees and tried to stand, they both grabbed him, one at each arm, and dragged him over to the angular half-open door of the tool shed in the shadow of which they’d been struggling. He kicked wildly, but they pushed his shoulder blades together until it hurt. One shove pushed him off balance through the door. He threw his whole body hard against the door and gained an opening big enough for one bare foot. But Patsy was pushing the door hard and he pulled his foot in at last.

“See how you like that,” Patsy said through the door.

“Let’s let him out,” he heard Junie say.

“No way. He lost. Let him sit it out. He had it coming,” hissed Patsy. “This’ll give him a good scare.”

“I’m not scared of you,” he shouted against the rough wood. “Who’d be a-scared of you?” He heard the tall grass
move, like faint applause, and then it was quiet. He banged both his fists against the splintery door, yelling at the top of his voice. "You get back here. You get back here. Let me out of here." But they were really gone. "I'm telling."

The black inside of the shed was striped with dusty light that filtered through the slatted sides. William's heart slowed down, and he began getting used to the darkness and the musky mushroom smell of the shed. At his feet he could barely see the remains of a hand mower, black with old oil and fuzzy with dirt. A scythe full of jagged teeth hung over a nail on the wall, and an orange crate full of shadows leaned against an old sawhorse. A tiny mewing sound escaped his lips, and William started to cry. "I'm telling," he said. And then he pushed his fists hard against his wet eyes. What was the use. No one could hear.

He stood there for a long, long time. As he got more accustomed to the dark, the shadows began to make more sense. The crate was full of clay flower pots. And then the shadows began to stir, and he began turning every few moments to see what new danger might lie around beyond his vision. He knew that the dark had secret hands that could really choke; he had always supposed that he might shrink in the dark, might disappear in shadows. But here there was no escape. It was so quiet. Small sounds began to grow out of the silence. A truck went by on the blacktop. A slow click like two stones striking together sounded regularly, and then stopped. In the corner of the shed an unseen insect chirped, like a creaking hinge. The sudden rustle of wings startled him and he turned quickly to see a crow land close to the shed and then fly off with something in its beak. William suddenly realized that he could see out through the cracks between the narrow slats of the building if he wanted to.

He put his face close to the wall and looked out, moving from crack to crack to piece together the things he saw. The stripes of the bright yard toward Castell's house were empty green. Opposite one side of the shed was a lilac bush, heavy with old blossoms and white with bird droppings. A third wall faced the empty henhouse, not more than three feet away. High weeds were grown between the
buildings. The fourth side allowed a deep view of the long lane, twin dust-gray and narrow paths that ran between the rows of crooked weathered buildings and overgrown bushes on either side. There was a jagged hole in the wall on this side, about the size of William's fist.

It was nearly the middle of the day, so the lane was bright with sunlight; the shadows were on edge, making the buildings seem darker than they were. The lane came straight toward the little prison and then curved and ran around the chicken house and joined the gravel drive that ran by the house to the blacktop.

It was so hot inside the little shed that William began to move his head slowly forward and back as he breathed, forward and back, and he felt sleepy.

He wasn't paying attention, maybe he was half-asleep, standing there, because his mother was half way down the lane before he saw her. She was wearing her straw hat, so her face was in shadow, but he knew her unhurried way of walking and her short yellow dress. William felt so relieved he nearly fell over, and his forehead touched the rough wood of the wall which snagged onto his hair as he pulled back. He hardly noticed. She was coming to save him. He'd get out now. He'd tell. The girls would be in big trouble. "Mama," he said, but so softly he could hardly hear it himself. He cleared his dry throat. He'd have to yell loud, she was still so far away. She stood still now in the middle of the lane. Her name was on his lips; they were together making the "M" sound, when he stopped.

Patsy's father stepped out of the black rectangle of the barn door. As William's mother looked up at him, she leaned her head back so that the shadow on her face tilted over and William could see just her mouth and her chin. She was smiling. And then the smile disappeared as she put her head down a little. Mr. Castell looked around the sunny corridor, and seeing no one, he reached out his hand, chalky from his work. William said her name then, "Mom?" but not very loud. She was gone. It had happened so fast he thought maybe it had been a trick. It was like waking up from a dream. William stared at the barn as hard as he could. "Come back," he said to himself. "Come back."
Once he thought he heard her laugh, a high happy sound. When he had about given up, she came back outside. She had taken off the hat, ran her fingers through her short blond hair. Tony had her by the hands and tried to pull her back inside the doorway, playfully, but she pulled back and laughed that quick, high laugh again. William forgot about calling to her. She walked toward him, but she kept looking back at Tony Castell, smiling brightly. Tony leaned in his doorway until she had gone around out of his sight and then he disappeared.

William watched his mother walk across the grass toward their house, two houses down. He really wasn't sure why he hadn't called to her; she had passed by so close to the tool shed that he could hear the squashing sounds of her straw sandals as she walked. She hadn't known he was there. He felt invisible. Now he'd have to stay there forever. The stony clink, clink, began again. "Shut up," he yelled in the direction of the barn. "Just shut up."

When the girls finally came to rescue him it was not really in triumph. "Mom's calling," Junie said as they opened the door. "We better go."

"Lucky for you," snarled Patsy through her thin lips. She had pink splotches on her nose where her sunburn was peeling. "Lucky for you we didn't leave you here for days." She flipped both braids back behind her shoulders.

William blinked into the glaring sunlight. He brushed at his arms; they itched from cobwebs and from the idea of spiders. "You shitty girls are going to get it for this," he said. There were streaks of dirt around his eyes and his blond hair was dark and wet around his face.

"You tell and you'll really get it," said Patsy.

"Yeah, William, you will," said Junie, looking at Patsy as she spoke. Then she looked at him. "Don't tell, William."

"I am," he said. He moved toward them, but the quick swipes of his arms caught only the air between them as the two girls turned their backs and ran. "I'm telling right now. I'm telling Mom," he yelled as he ran across the yard toward home. "You're getting it, Junie, you'll be sorry. I'm going to tell." He didn't look back.
He ran across his own back yard. Shirts and dresses and underwear were flapping on the clothesline. He ran across the side yard, slower now, and then he took off fast.

He ran up and over the blacktop, without even looking, and then he ran down across the wide ditch on the other side. He scrambled between the strands of barbed wire of the fence and into the cornfield. He ran down between two high rows of corn. He ran as fast as he could through the clods of dirt, his arms stretched out straight on either side. The blades of corn slashed and slapped against his hands with little explosions of dust. He ran faster, pitching forward, half-stumbling. He ran to the end of the row.

Five crows, startled from their fence, clawed their way noisily into the air and then swooped up into the blue. The sound of their cawing diminished as they rose into the sky. William watched them become nearly motionless specks against the clouds, and then swoop down again into the next field.

He blew on the stinging white insides of his hands, which were creased with dirt and crisscrossed with tiny red lines from the corn leaves. He looked back up into the empty sky. Now he had secrets.

He'd tell Dad as soon as he got home what he'd seen, that the crows had reminded him of something else. Yes, the crows, dropping down from the wrinkled white clouds. They had looked like dark crumbs of tobacco spilling from the creases of unfolding scraps of paper.

Dad would like that.