

GROWNUPS

By Ian R. MacLeod

New British writer Ian R. MacLeod has been one of the most talked-about young writers of the '90s, publishing a slew of strong stories in the first three years of the decade in *Interzone*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, *Amaz-ing*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, among other markets. Several of those stories made the cut for one or another of the various "Best of the Year" anthologies, including appearances here in our Eight and Ninth Annual Collections. In 1990, in fact, he appeared in *three* different Best of the Year anthologies with three different stories, certainly a rare distinction. He has yet to produce a novel, but it is being eagerly awaited by genre insiders, and as he has recently given up his day job to write full-time; perhaps we won't have long to wait. MacLeod is in his early thirties, and lives with his wife and baby daughter in the West Midlands of England. In the disquieting story that follows, he takes us to a world that's very like our own—except for all the ways that count the *most*—to relate one of the most bizarre coming-of-age stories ever written.

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Bobby finally got around to asking Mum where babies came from on the evening of his seventh birthday. It had been hot all day, and the grownups and a few of the older children who had come to his party were still outside on the lawn. He could hear their talk and evening birdsong through his open window as Mum closed the curtains. She leaned down to kiss his forehead. She'd been drinking since the first guests arrived before lunch and her breath smelt like windfall apples. Now seemed as good a time as any. As she turned towards the door, he asked his question. It came out as a whisper, but she heard, and frowned for a moment before she smiled.

"You children always want to know too soon," she said. "I was the same, believe me, Bobby. But you must be patient. You really must."

Bobby knew enough about grownups to realize that it was unwise to push too hard. So he forced himself to yawn and blink slowly so she would think he was truly sleepy. She patted his hand.

After his door had clicked shut, after her footsteps had padded down the stairs, Bobby slid out of bed. Ignoring the presents piled in the corner by the closet—robots with sparking eyes, doll soldiers, and submarines—he peered from the window. They lived at the edge of town, where rooftops dwindled to green hills and the silver curl of the river. He watched Mum emerge from the French windows onto the wide lawn below. She stopped to say something to Dad as he sat lazing in a deckchair with the other men, a beer can propped against his crotch. Then she took a

taper from the urn beside the barbecue and touched it to the coals. She proceeded to light the lanterns hanging from the boughs of the cherry trees.

The whole garden filled with stars. After she had lit the last lantern, Mum put the taper to her mouth and extinguished it with her tongue. Then she rejoined the women gossiping on the white wrought iron chairs. The re-maining children were all leaving for home. Cars were starting up, turning out from the shaded drive. Bobby heard his brother Tony call goodnight to the grownups and thunder up the stairs. He tensed in case Tony should decide to look in on him before he went to bed, but relaxed after the toilet had flushed and Tony's bedroom door had slammed. It was almost night. Bobby knew that his window would show as no more than a darker square against the wall of the house. He widened the parting in the curtain.

He loved to watch the grownups when they thought they were alone. It was a different world. One day, Mum had told him often enough, one day, sweet little Bobby, you'll understand it all, touching his skin as she spoke with papery fingers. But give it time, my darling one, give it time. Being a grownup is more wonderful than you children could ever imagine. More wonderful. Yes, my darling. Kissing him on the forehead and each eye and then his mouth, the way she did when she got especially tender.

Bobby gazed down at the grownups. They had that loose look that came when the wine and the beer had gone down well and there was more to come, when the night was warm and the stars mirrored the lanterns. Dad raised his can from his crotch to his lips. One of the men beside him made a joke and the beer spluttered down Dad's chin, gleaming for a moment before he wiped it away. The men always talked like this, loud between bursts of silence, whilst the women's voices—laughing serious sad—brushed soft against the night. Over by the trellis archway that led by the garbage cans to the front, half a dozen uncles sat in the specially wide deckchairs that Dad kept for them behind the mower in the shed.

Bobby couldn't help staring at the uncles. They were all grossly fat. There was Uncle Stan, Uncle Harold, and, of course, his own Uncle Lew. Bobby saw with a certain pride that Lew was the biggest. His tie was loose and his best shirt strained like a full sail across his belly. Like all the uncles, Lew lived alone, but Dad or the father of one of the other families Lew was uncle to was always ready to take the car down on a Saturday morning, paint the windows of his house, or see to the lawn. In many ways, Bobby thought, it was an ideal life. People respected uncles. Even more than their girth re-quired, they stepped aside from them in the street. But at the same time, his parents were often edgy when Lew was around, uncharacteristically eager to please. Sometimes late in the night, Bobby had heard the unmistakable clatter of his van on the gravel out front, Mum and Dad's voices whispering softly excited in the hall. Gazing at Lew, seated with the other uncles, Bobby remembered how he had dragged him to the moist folds of his belly, rumbling Won't You Just Look At This Sweet Kid? His yeasty aroma came back like the aftertaste of bad cooking.

Someone turned the record player on in the lounge. Sibilant music drifted like smoke. Some of the grownups began to dance. Women in white dresses blossomed as they turned, and the men were darkly quick. The music and the sigh of their movement brushed against the humid night, coaxed the glow of the lanterns, silvered the rooftops and the stars.

The dancing quickened, seeking a faster rhythm inside the slow beat. Bobby's eyes Fizzed with sleep. He thought he saw grownups floating heartbeat on heartbeat above the lawn. Soon they were leaping over the lanterned cherry trees, flying, pressing close to his window with smiles and waves, beckoning him to join them. Come out and play, Bobby, out here amid the stars. The men darted like eels, the women did high kicks across the rooftop, their dresses billowing coral frills over their heads. The uncles bobbed around the chimney like huge balloons.

When Bobby awoke, the lanterns were out. There was only darkness, summer chill.

As he crawled back to bed, a sudden sound made him freeze. Deep and feral, some kind of agony that was neither pain nor grief, it started loud then came down by notches to a stuttering sob. Bobby unfroze when it ended and hauled the blankets up to his chin. Through the bedroom wall, he could hear the faint mutter of Dad's voice, Mum's half-questioning reply. Then Uncle Lew saying goodnight. Slow footsteps down the stairs. The front door slam. Clatter of an engine coming to life.

Sigh of gravel.

Silence.

* * * *

Bobby stood at the far bank of the river. His hands clenched and unclenched. Three years had passed. He was now ten; his brother Tony was sixteen.

Tony was out on the river, atop the oil drum raft that he and the other kids of his age had been building all summer. The wide sweep that cut between the fields and the gasometers into town had narrowed in the drought heat. Tony was angling a pole through the sucking silt to get to the deeper current. He was absorbed, alone; he hadn't noticed Bobby standing on the fissured mud of the bank. Earlier in the summer, there would have been a crowd of Tony's friends out there, shouting and diving, sitting with their heels clutched in brown hands, chasing Bobby away with shouts or grabbing him with terrible threats that usually ended in a simple ducking or just laughter, some in cutoff shorts, their backs freckled pink from peeling sunburn, some sleekly naked, those odd dark patches of hair showing under their arms and bellies. Maggie Brown, with a barking voice you could hear half a mile off, Pete Thorn, who kept pigeons and always seemed to watch, never said anything, maybe Johnnie Redhead and his sidekicks, even Trev Lee, if his hay fever, asthma, and

psoriasis hadn't kept him inside, or maybe the twin McDonald sisters, whom no one could tell apart.

Now Tony was alone.

"Hey!" Bobby yelled, not wanting to break into his brother's isolation, but knowing he had to. "Hey, Tony!"

Tony poled once more toward the current. The drums shook, tensed against their bindings, then inched toward the main sweep of the river.

"Hey, Tony, Mum says you've got to come home right now."

"All right, *all right*."

Tony let go of the pole, jumped down into the water. It came just below his naked waist. He waded out clumsily, falling on hands and knees. He crouched to wash himself clean in a cool eddy where the water met the shore, then shook like a dog. He grabbed his shorts from the branch of a dead willow and hauled them on.

"Why didn't you just come?" Bobby asked. "You must have known it was time. The doc's waiting at home to give you your tests."

Tony slicked back his hair. They both stared at the ground. The river still dripped from Tony's chin, made tiny craters in the sand. Bobby noticed that Tony hadn't shaved, which was a bad sign in itself. Out on the river, the raft suddenly bobbed free, floating high on the quick current.

Tony shook his head. "Never did that when *I* was on it. Seemed like a great idea, you know? Then you spend the whole summer trying to pole out of the mud."

Around them, the bank was littered with the spoor of summer habitation. The blackened ruin of a bonfire, stones laid out in the shape of a skull, junkfood wrappers, an old flap of canvas propped up like a tent, ringpull cans and cigarette butts, a solitary shoe. Bobby had his own friends—his own special places—and he came to this spot rarely and on sufferance. But still, he loved his brother, and was old enough to have some idea of how it must feel to leave childhood behind. But he told himself that most of it had gone already. Tony was the last; Pete and Maggie and the McDonald twins had grown up. Almost all the others too. That left just Trev Lee, who had locked himself in the bathroom and swallowed a bottle of bleach whilst his parents hammered at the door.

Tony made a movement that looked as though it might end in a hug. But he slapped Bobby's head instead, almost hard enough to hurt. They always acted tough with each other; it was too late now to start changing the rules.

They followed the path through the still heat of the woods to the main road. It was midday. The shimmering tarmac cut between yellow fields toward town. Occasionally, a car or truck would appear in the distance, floating silent on heat ghosts before the roar and the smell suddenly broke past them, whipping dust into their faces. Bobby gazed at stalking pylons, ragged fences, the litter-strewn edges of the countryside; it was the map of his own childhood. It was Tony's too—but Tony only stared at the verge. It was plain that he was tired of living on the cliff-edge of growing up.

Tony looked half a grownup already, graceful, clumsy, self-absorbed. He hadn't been his true self through all this later part of the summer, or at least not since Joan Trackett had grown up. Joan had a fierce crop of hair and protruding eyes; she had come to the area with her parents about six years before. Bobby knew that she and Tony had been having sex since at least last winter and maybe before. He'd actually stumbled across them one day in spring, lying on a dumped mattress in the east fields up beyond the garbage dump, hidden amid the bracken in a corner that the farmer hadn't bothered to plough. Tony had chased him away, alternately gripping the open waist-band of his jeans and waving his fists. But that evening Tony had let Bobby play with his collection of model cars, which was a big concession, even though Bobby knew that Tony had mostly lost interest in them already. They had sat together in Tony's bedroom that smelled of peppermint and socks. I guess you know what Joan and I were doing, he had said. Bobby nodded, circling a black V8 limo with a missing tire around the whorls and dustballs of the carpet. It's no big deal, Tony said, picking at a scab on his chin. But his eyes had gone blank with puzzlement, as though he couldn't remember something important.

Bobby looked up at Tony as they walked along the road. He was going to miss his big brother. He even wanted to say it, although he knew he wouldn't be able to find the words. Maybe he'd catch up with him again when he turned grownup himself, but that seemed a long way off. At least five summers.

The fields ended. The road led into Avenues, Drives, and Crofts that meandered a hundred different ways toward home.

The doctor's red station wagon was parked under the shade of the poplar in their drive.

"You *don't* make people wait," Mum said, her breath short with impatience, shooing them both quickly down the hallway into the kitchen. "I'm disappointed in you, Tony. You too, Bobby. You're both old enough to know better." She opened the fridge and took out a tumbler of bitter milk. "And Tony, you didn't drink this at breakfast."

"Mum, does it matter? I'll be a grownup soon anyway."

Mum placed it on the scrubbed table. "Just drink it."

Tony drank. He wiped his chin and banged down the glass.

“Well, off you go,” Mum said.

He headed up the stairs.

Doctor Halstead was waiting for Tony up in the spare room. He'd been coming around to test him every Tuesday since Mum and Dad received the brown envelope from school, arriving punctually at twelve thirty, taking best-china coffee with Mum in the lounge afterward. There was no mystery about the tests. Once or twice, Bobby had seen the syringes and the blood analysis equipment spread out on the candlewick bedspread through the open door. Tony had told him what it was like, how the doc stuck a big needle in your arm to take some blood. It hurt some, but not much. He had shown Bobby the sunset bruises on his arm with that perverse pride that kids display over any wound.

Doctor Halstead came down half an hour later, looking stern and noncom-mittal. Tony followed in his wake. He shushed Bobby and tried to listen to Mum's conversation with the doc over coffee in the lounge by standing by the door in the hall. But grownups had a way of talking that made it difficult to follow, lowering their voices at the crucial moment, clinking their cups. Bobby imagined them stifling their laughter behind the closed door, deliberately uttering meaningless fragments they knew the kids would hear. He found the thought oddly reassuring.

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Tony grew up on the Thursday of that same week. He and Bobby had spent the afternoon together down at Monument Park. They had climbed the whispering boughs of one of the big elm trees along the avenue and sat with their legs dangling, trying to spit on the heads of the grownups passing below.

“Will you tell me what it's like?” Bobby had asked when his mouth finally went dry.

“What?” Tony looked vague. He picked up a spider that crawled onto his wrist and rolled it between finger and thumb.

“About being a grownup. Talk to me afterward. I want ... I want to know.”

“Yeah, yeah. We're still brothers, right?”

“You've got it. And—”

“—Hey, shush!”

Three young grownups were heading their way, a man, a woman, and an uncle. Bobby supposed they were courting—they had their arms around each other in that vaguely passionless way that grownups had, their faces absent, staring at the sky and the trees without seeing. He began to salivate.

“Bombs away.”

Bobby missed with his lob, but Tony hawked up a green one and scored a gleaming hit on the crown of the woman’s head. The grownups walked on, stupidly oblivious.

It was a fine afternoon. They climbed higher still, skinning their palms and knees on the greenish bark, feeling the tree sway beneath them like a dancer. From up here, the park shimmered, you could see everything; the lake, the glittering greenhouses, grownups lazing on the grass, two fat kids from Tony’s year lobbing stones at a convoy of ducks. Bobby grinned and threw back his head. Here, you could feel the hot sky around you, taste the clouds like white candy.

“You *will* tell me what it’s like to be a grownup?” he asked again.

But Tony suddenly looked pale and afraid, holding onto the trembling boughs. “Let’s climb down,” he said.

When Bobby thought back, he guessed that that was the beginning.

Mum took one look at Tony when they got home and called Doctor Halstead. He was quick in coming. On Mum’s instructions, Bobby also phoned Dad at the office, feeling terribly grownup and responsible as he asked to be put through in the middle of a meeting.

Tony was sitting on the sofa in the lounge, rocking to and fro, starting to moan. Dad and the doc carried him to the spare bedroom. Mum followed them up the stairs, then pulled the door tightly shut. Bobby waited downstairs in the kitchen and watched the shadows creep across the scrubbed table. Occasionally, there were footsteps upstairs, the rumble of voices, the hiss of a tap.

He had to fix his own tea from leftovers in the fridge. Later, somehow all the house lights got turned on. Everything was hard and bright like a fierce lantern, shapes burned through to the filaments beneath. Bobby’s head was swimming. He was someone else, thinking, this is my house, my brother, knowing at the same time that it couldn’t be true. Upstairs, he could hear someone’s voice screaming, saying My God No.

Mum came down after ten. She was wearing some kind of plastic apron that was wet where she’d wiped it clean.

“Bobby, you’ve got to go to bed.” She reached to grab his arm and pull him from the sofa.

Bobby held back for a moment. “What’s happening to Tony, Mum? Is he okay?”

“Of course he’s *okay*. It’s nothing to get excited about. It happens to us all, it ...” Anger came into her face. “Will you just get upstairs to bed, Bobby? You shouldn’t be up this late anyway. Not tonight, not any night.”

Mum followed Bobby up the stairs. She waited to open the door of the spare room until he’d gone into the bathroom. Bobby found there was no hot water, no towels; he had to dry his hand on squares of toilet paper, and the flush was slow to clear, as though something was blocking it.

He sprinted across the dangerous space of the landing and into bed. He tried to sleep.

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In the morning there was the smell of toast. Bobby came down the stairs slowly, testing each step.

“So, you’re up,” Mum said, lifting the kettle from the burner as it began to boil.

It was eight thirty by the clock over the fridge; a little late, but everything was as brisk and sleepy as any other morning. Dad stared at the sports pages, eating his cornflakes. Bobby sat down opposite him at the table, lifted the big cereal packet that promised a scale model if you collected enough cou-pons. That used to drive Tony wild, how the offer always changed before you had enough. Bobby shook some flakes into a bowl.

“How’s Tony?” he asked, tipping out milk.

“Tony’s fine,” Dad said. Then he swallowed and looked up from the paper—a rare event in itself. “He’s just resting, Son. Upstairs in his own room, his own bed.”

“Yes, darling.” Mum’s voice came from behind. Bobby felt her hands on his shoulders, kneading softly. “It’s such a happy day for you, Dad and me. Tony’s a grownup now. Isn’t that wonderful?” The fingers tightened, released.

“That doesn’t mean *you* don’t go to school,” Dad added he gave his paper a shake, rearranged it across the teapot and the marmalade jar.

“But be sure to tell Miss Gibson what’s happened.” Mum’s voice faded to the back of the kitchen. The fridge door smacked open. “She’ll want to know why you’re late for register.” Bottles jingled. Mum wafted close again. She came around to the side of the table and placed a tumbler filled with white fluid beside him. The bitter milk. “We know you’re still young,” she said. “But there’s no harm, and now seems as good a time as any.” Her fingers turned a loose button on her blouse. “Try it, darling, it’s not so bad.”

What happens if I don’t . . . Bobby glanced quickly at Mum, at Dad. What happens if... through the kitchen window, the sky was summer grey the clouds casting the soft warm light that he loved more than sunlight, that brought out the green in the trees and made everything seem closer and more real. What happens . . . Bobby picked up the tumbler in both hands, drank it down in breathless gulps, the way he’d seen Tony do so often in the past.

“Good lad,” Mum sighed after he’d finished. She was behind him again, her fingers trailing his neck. Bobby took a breath, suppressed a shudder. This bitter milk tasted just as Tony always said it did: disgusting.

“Can I see Tony now, before I go to school?”

Mum hesitated. Dad looked up again from his newspaper. Bobby knew what it would be like later, the cards, the flowers, the house lost in strangers. This was his best chance to speak to his brother.

“Okay,” Mum said. “But not for long.”

Tony was sitting up in bed, the TV Mum and Dad usually kept in their own bedroom propped on the dressing table. Having the TV was a special sign of illness; Bobby had had it twice himself, once with chicken pox, and then with mumps. The feeling of luxury had almost made the discomfort worthwhile.

“I just thought I’d see how you were,” Bobby said.

“What?” Tony lifted the remote control from the bedspread, pressed the red button to kill the sound. It was a reluctant gesture that Bobby recognized from Dad.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, Bobby.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes . . . Not really.” Tony shrugged. “What do you want me to say? You’ll find out soon enough, Bobby.”

“Don’t you remember yesterday? You said you’d tell me everything.”

“Of course I remember, but I’m just here in bed . . . watching the TV, You can see what it’s like.” He spread his arms. “Come here, Bobby.”

Bobby stepped forward.

Tony grinned. “Come on, little brother.”

Bobby leaned forward over the bed, let Tony clasp him in his arms. It was odd to feel his brother this way, the soft plates of muscle, the ridges of chest and arm. They’d held each other often enough before, but only in the wrestling bouts that Bobby launched into when he had nothing better to do, certain that he’d end up bruised and kicking, pinned down and forced to submit. But now the big hands were patting his back. Tony was talking over his shoulder.

“I’ll sort through all the toys in the next day or so. You can keep all the best stuff to play with. Like we said yesterday, we’re still brothers, right?” He leaned Bobby back, looked into his eyes. “Right?”

Bobby had had enough of grownup promises to know what they meant. Grownups were always going to get this and fix that, build wendy houses on the lawn, take you to the zoo, staple the broken strap on your satchel—favors that never happened, things they got angry about if you ever mentioned them again.

“All the best toys. Right?”

“Right,” Bobby said. He turned for the door, then hesitated. “Will you tell me one thing?”

“What?”

“Where babies come from.”

Tony hesitated, but not unduly; grownups always thought before they spoke. “They come from the bellies of uncles, Bobby. A big slit opens and they tumble out. It’s no secret, it’s a natural fact.”

Bobby nodded, wondering why he’d been so afraid to ask. “I thought so . . . thanks.”

“Any time,” Tony said, and turned up the TV.

“Thanks again.” Bobby closed the door behind him.

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Tony finished school officially at the end of that term. But there were no awards, no speeches, no bunting over the school gates. Like the other new grownups, he just stopped attending, went in one evening when it was quiet to clear out his locker, as though the whole thing embarrassed him. Bobby told himself that was one thing he'd do differently when his time came. He'd spent most of his life at school, and he wasn't going to pass it by that easily. Grownups just seemed to let things *go*. It had been the same with Dad, when he moved from the factory to the admin offices in town, suddenly ignoring men he'd shared every lunchtime with and talked about for years as though they were friends.

Tony sold his bicycle through the classified pages to a kid from across town who would have perhaps a year's use of it before he too grew up. He found a temporary job at the local supermarket. He and Dad came home at about the same time each evening, the same bitter work smell coming off their bodies. Over dinner, Mum would ask them how everything had gone and the talk would lie flat between them, drowned by the weak distractions of the food.

For Tony, as for everyone, the early years of being a grownup were a busy time socially. He went out almost every night, dressed in his new grownup clothes and smelling of soap and aftershave. Mum said he looked swell. Bobby knew the places in town he went to by reputation. He had passed them regularly and caught the smell of cigarettes and booze, the drift of breathless air and sudden laughter. There were strict rules against children entering. If he was with Mum, she would snatch his hand and hurry him on. But she and Dad were happy for Tony to spend his nights in these places now that he was a grownup, indulging in the ritual dance that led to courtship, marriage, and a fresh uncle in the family. On the few occasions that Tony wasn't out late, Dad took him for driving lessons, performing endless three-point turns on the tree-lined estate roads.

Bobby would sit with his homework spread on the dining room table as Mum saw to things that didn't need seeing to. There was a distracting stiffness about her actions that was difficult to watch, difficult not to. Bobby guessed that although Tony was still living at home and she was pleased that he'd taken to grownup life, she was also missing him, missing the kid he used to be. It didn't require a great leap of imagination for Bobby to see things that way; he missed Tony himself. The arguments, the fights, the sharing and the not-sharing, all lost with the unspoken secret of being children together, of finding everything frightening, funny, and new.

In the spring, Tony passed his driving test and got a proper job at the supermarket as trainee manager. There was a girl called Marion who worked at the checkout. She had skin trouble like permanent sunburn and never looked at you when she spoke. Bobby already knew that Tony was seeing her in the bars at night. He sometimes answered the phone by mistake when she rang, her slow voice saying *Is Your Brother Around* as Tony came down the stairs from his room looking annoyed. The whole thing was supposed to be a secret, until suddenly Tony started

bringing Marion home in the second-hand coupe he'd purchased from the dealers on Main Street.

Tony and Marion spent the evenings of their courtship sitting in the lounge with Mum and Dad, watching the TV. When Bobby asked why, Tony said that they had to stay in on account of their saving for a little house. He said it with the strange fatalism of grownups. They often talked about the future as though it was already there.

Sometimes a strange uncle would come around. Dad always turned the TV off as soon as he heard the bell. The uncles were generally fresh-faced and young, their voices high and uneasy. If they came a second time, they usually brought Bobby an unsuitable present, making a big show of hiding it behind their wide backs.

Then Uncle Lew began to visit more often. Bobby overheard Mum and Dad talking about how good it would be, keeping the same uncle in the family, even if Lew was a little old for our Tony.

Looking down at him over his cheeks, Lew would ruffle Bobby's hair with his soft fingers.

"And how are you, young man?"

Bobby said he was fine.

"And what is it you're going to be this week?" This was Lew's standard question, a joke of sorts that stemmed from some occasion when Bobby had reputedly changed his mind about his grownup career three or four times in a day.

Bobby paused. He felt an obligation to be original.

"Maybe an archaeologist," he said.

Lew chuckled. Tony and Marion moved off the settee to make room for him, sitting on the floor with Bobby.

After a year and a half of courtship, the local paper that his brother had used to sell his bicycle finally announced that Tony, Marion, and Uncle Lew were marrying. Everyone said it was a happy match. Marion showed Bobby the ring. It looked big and bright from a distance, but, close-up he saw that the diamond was tiny, centered in a much larger stub of metal that was cut to make it glitter.

Some evenings, Dad would fetch some beers for himself, Tony, and Uncle Lew, and let Bobby sip the end of a can to try the flat dark taste. Like most other grownup things, it was a disappointment.

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So Tony married Marion. And he never did get around to telling Bobby how it felt to be a grownup. The priest in the church beside the crematorium spoke of the bringing together of families and of how having Uncle Lew for a new generation was a strengthened commitment. Dad swayed in the front pew from nerves and the three whiskies he'd sunk beforehand. Uncle Lew wore the suit he always wore at weddings, battered victim of too much strain on the buttons, too many spilled buffets. There were photos of the families, photos of the bridesmaids, photos of Lew smiling with his arms around the shoulders of the two newlyweds. Photograph the whole bloody lot, Dad said, I want to see where the money went.

The reception took place at home on the lawn. Having decided to find out what it was like to get drunk, Bobby lost his taste for the warm white wine after one glass. He hovered at the border of the garden. It was an undeniably pretty scene, the awnings, the dresses, the flowers. For once, the boundaries between grownups and children seemed to dissolve. Only Bobby remained outside. People raised their glasses and smiled, drunken uncles swayed awkwardly between the trestle tables. Darkness carried the smell of the car exhaust and the dry fields beyond the houses. Bobby remembered the time when he had watched from his window and the music had beaten smoky wings, when the grownups had flown over the cherry trees that now seemed so small.

The headlights of the rented limousine swept out of the darkness. Everyone ran to the drive to see Tony and Marion duck into the leather interior. Uncle Lew squeezed in behind them, off with the newlyweds to some secret place. Neighbors who hadn't been invited came out onto their drives to watch, arms folded against the non-existent chill, smiling. Marion threw her bouquet. It tumbled high over the trees and the rooftops, up through the stars. Grownups oohed and ahed. The petals bled into the darkness. It dropped back down as a dead thing of grey and plastic. Bobby caught it without thinking; a better, cleaner catch than anything he'd ever managed in the playing fields at school. Everyone laughed—that a kid should do that!—and he blushed furiously. Then the car pulled away, low at the back from the weight of the three passengers and their luggage. The taillights dwindled, were cut out by the bend in the road. Dad swayed and shouted something, his breath reeking. People went inside and the party lingered on, drawing to its stale conclusion.

Uncle Lew had Tony and Marion's first child a year later. Mum took Bobby to see the baby at his house when he came out of the hospital a few days after the birth. Uncle Lew lived in town, up on the hill on the far side of the river. Mum was nervous about gradient parking and always used the big pay and display down by the library. From there, you had to cut through the terraced houses, then up the narrowly winding streets that formed the oldest part of town. The houses were mostly grey pebbledash with deepset windows, yellowed lace curtains, and steps leading though steep gardens. The hill always seemed steeper than it probably was to Bobby; he hated visiting.

Uncle Lew was grinning, sitting in his usual big chair by the bay window. The baby was a mewling thing. It smelled of soap and sick. Marion was taking the drugs to make her lactate, and everything was apparently going well. Bobby peered at the baby lying cradled in her arms. He tried to offer her the red plastic rattle Mum had made him buy. Everyone smiled at that. Then there was tea and rock cakes that Bobby managed to avoid. Uncle Lew's house was always dustlessly neat, but it had a smell of neglect that seemed to emanate from behind the old-fashioned green cupboards in the kitchen. Bobby guessed that the house was simply too big for him; too many rooms.

“Are you still going to be an archaeologist?” Uncle Lew asked, leaning forward from his big chair to take both of Bobby's hands. He was wearing a dressing gown with neatly pressed pajamas underneath but for a moment the buttons parted and Bobby glimpsed wounded flesh.

The room went smilingly silent; he was obviously expected to say more than simply no or yes. “I'd like to grow up,” he said, “before I decide.”

The grownups all laughed. Then the baby started to cry. Grateful for the distraction, Bobby went out through the kitchen and into the grey garden, where someone's father had left a fork and spade on the crazy paving, the job of lifting out the weeds half-done. Bobby was still young enough to pretend that he wanted to play.

* * * *

Then adolescence came. It was a perplexing time for Bobby, a grimy ante-room leading to the sudden glories of growing up. He watched the hair grow on his body, felt his face inflame with pimples, heard his voice change to an improbable whine before finally settling on an octave that left him sounding forever like someone else. The grownups themselves always kept their bodies covered, their personal actions impenetrably discreet. Even in the lessons and the chats, the slide-illuminated talks in the nudging darkness of the school assembly hall, Bobby sensed that the teachers were disgusted by what happened to children's bodies, and by the openness with which it did so. The *things* older children got up to, messy tricks that nature made them perform. Periods. Masturbation. *Sex*. The teachers mouthed the words like an improbable disease. Mum and Dad both said Yes they remembered, they knew exactly how it was . . . but they didn't want to touch him any longer, acted awkwardly when he was in the room, did and said things that reminded him of how they were with Tony in his later childhood years.

Bobby's first experience of sex was with May Barton, one afternoon when a crowd of school friends had cycled out to the meadows beyond town. The other children had headed back down to the road whilst Bobby was fixing a broken spoke on his back wheel. When he turned around, May was there alone. It was, he realized

afterward, a situation she'd deliberately engineered. She said Let's do it, Bobby. Squinting, her head on one side. You haven't done it before, have you? Not waiting for an answer, she knelt down in the high clover and pulled her dress up over her head. Her red hair tumbled over her freckled shoulders. She asked Bobby to touch her breasts. Go on, you must have seen other boys doing this. Which he had. But still he was curious to touch her body, to find her nipples hardening in his palms. For a moment she seemed different in the wide space of the meadow, stranger almost than a grownup, even though she was just a girl. Here, she said, Bobby, and here. Down on the curving river, a big barge with faded awnings seemed not to be moving. A tractor was slicing a field from green to brown, the chatter of its engine lost on the warm wind. The town shimmered. Rooftops reached along the road. His hand traveled down her belly, explored the slippery heat of her arousal as her own fingers began to part the buttons of his shirt and jeans, did things that only his own hands had done before. He remembered the slide shows at school, the teacher's bored, disgusted voice, the fat kids sniggering more than anyone at the back, as though the whole thing had nothing to do with them.

May Barton lay down. Bobby had seen the drawings and slides, watched the mice and rabbits in the room at the back of the biology class. He knew what to do. The clover felt cool and green on his elbows and knees. She felt cool too, strangely uncomfortable, like wrestling with someone who didn't want to fight. A beetle was climbing a blade of grass at her shoulder. When she began to shudder, it flicked its wings and vanished.

After that, Bobby tried sex with several of the other girls in the neighborhood, although he tended to return most often to May. They experimented with the variations you were supposed to be able to do, found that most of them were uncomfortable and improbable, but generally not impossible.

Mum caught Bobby and May having sex one afternoon in the fourth year summer holidays when a canceled committee meeting brought her home early. Peeling off her long white cotton gloves as she entered the lounge, she found them naked in the curtained twilight, curled together like two spoons. She just clicked her tongue, turned and walked back out into the hall, her eyes blank, as if she'd just realized she'd left something in the car. She never mentioned the incident afterward—which was tactful, but to Bobby also seemed unreal, as though the act of sex had made him and May Barton momentarily invisible.

There was a sequel to this incident when Bobby returned home one evening without his key. He went through the gate round the back, to find the French windows open. He'd expected lights on in the kitchen, the murmur of the TV in the lounge. But everything was quiet. He climbed the stairs. Up on the landing, where the heat of the day still lingered, mewing sounds came from his parents' bedroom. The door was ajar. He pushed it wide—one of those things you do without ever being able to explain why—and walked in. It was difficult to make out the partnership of the knotted limbs. Dad seemed to be astride Uncle Lew, Mum half underneath. The

sounds they made were another language. Somehow, they sensed his presence. Legs and arms untwined like dropped coils of rope.

It all happened very quickly. Mum got up and snatched her dressing gown from the bedside table. On the bed, Dad scratched at his groin and Uncle Lew made a wide cross with his forearms to cover his womanly breasts.

“It’s okay,” Bobby said, taking a step back toward the door, taking another. The room reeked of mushrooms. Mum still hadn’t done up her dressing gown and Bobby could see her breasts swaying as she walked, the dark triangle beneath her belly. She looked little different from all the girls Bobby had seen. Through the hot waves of his embarrassment, he felt a twinge of sadness and familiarity.

“It’s okay,” he said again, and closed the door.

He never mentioned the incident. But it helped him understand Mum’s reasons for not saying anything about finding him in the lounge with May. There were plenty of words for sex, ornate words and soft words and words that came out angry, words for what the kids got up to and special words too for the complex congress that grownups indulged in. But you couldn’t use any of them as you used other words; a space of silence surrounded them, walled them into a dark place that was all their own.

Bobby grew. He found to his surprise that he was one of the older kids at school, towering over the chirping freshmen with their new blazers, having sex with May and the other girls, taking three-hour exams at the ends of term, worrying about growing up. He remembered that this had seemed a strange undersea world when Tony had inhabited it; now that he had reached it himself, this last outpost of childhood, it hardly seemed less so.

The strangeness was shared by all the children of his age. It served to bring them together. Bobby remembered that it had been the same for Tony’s generation. Older kids tended to forget who had dumped on whom in junior high school, the betrayals and the fights behind the bicycle sheds. Now, every experience had a sell-by date, even if the date itself wasn’t clear.

In the winter term, when Bobby was fifteen, the children all experienced a kind of growing up in reverse, an intensification of childhood. There was never any hurry to get home after school. A crowd of them would head into the bare dripping woods or sit on the steps of the monument in the park. Sometimes they would gather at Albee’s Quick Restaurant and Take Away next to the bridge. It was like another world outside, beyond the steamed windows, grownups drifting past in cars or on foot, greying the air with breath and motor exhaust. Inside, lights gleamed on red seats and cheap wood paneling, the air smelled of wet shoes and coffee, thinned occasionally by a told draft and the broken tinkle of the bell as a new arrival joined the throng.

“I won’t go through with it,” May Barton said one afternoon when the sidewalks outside were thick with slush that was forecasted to freeze to razored puddles overnight.

No one needed to ask what she meant.

“Jesus, it was disgusting!”

May stared into her coffee. That afternoon in biology they had seen the last in a series of films entitled *The Miracle Of Life*. Halfway through, the pink and black cartoons had switched over to scenes that purported to come from real life. They had watched a baby tumble wet onto the green sheet from an uncle’s open belly, discreet angles of grownups making love. That had been bad enough—I mean, we didn’t *ask* to see this stuff!—but the last five minutes had included shots of a boy and a girl in the process of growing up. The soundtrack had been discreet, but every child in the classroom had felt the screams.

The voice-over told them things they had read a hundred times in the school biology textbooks that automatically fell open at the relevant pages. Chapter thirteen—unlucky for some, as many a schoolroom wit had quipped. How the male’s testicles and scrotal sac contracted back inside the body, hauled up on some fleshy block and tackle. How the female’s ovaries made their peristaltic voyage along the fallopian tubes to nestle down in the useless womb, close to the equally useless cervix. A messy story that had visited them all in their dreams.

“Where the hell am I supposed to be when all this is going on?” someone asked. “I’m certainly not going to be *there*.”

Silence fell around the corner table in Albee’s. Every kid had their own bad memory. An older brother or sister who had had a hard time growing up, bloodied sheets in the laundry bin, a door left open at the wrong moment. The espresso machine pattered. Albee sighed and wiped the counter. His beer belly strained at a grey undershirt—he was almost fat enough to be an uncle. Almost, but not quite. Every kid could tell the difference. It was in the way they smelled, the way they moved. Albee wasn’t an uncle—he was just turning to fat, some ordinary guy with a wife and kids back at home, and an uncle of his own with a lawn that needed mowing and crazy paving with the weeds growing through. He was just getting through life, earning a living of sorts behind his counter, putting up with Bobby and the rest of the kids from school as long as they had enough money to buy coffee.

Harry, who was a fat kid, suggested they all go down to the bowling alley. But no one else was keen. Harry was managing to keep up a jollity that the other children had lost. They all assumed that he and his friend Jonathan were the most likely candidates in their year to grow into uncles. The complicated hormonal triggers threw the dice in their favor. And it was a well-known fact that uncles had it easy,

that growing up for them was a slow process, like putting on weight. But for everyone, even for Harry, the facts of life were closing in. After Christmas, at the start of the new term, their parents would all receive the brown envelopes telling them that the doctor would be around once a week.

The cafe door opened and closed, letting in the raw evening air as the kids began to drift away. A bus halted at the newsstand opposite, grownup faces framed at the windows, top deck and bottom, ordinary and absorbed. When it pulled away, streetlight and shadow filled the space behind. Underneath everything, Bobby thought, lies pain, uncertainty, and blood. He took a pull at the coffee he'd been nursing the last half hour. It had grown a skin and tasted cold, almost as bitter as the milk Mum made him drink every morning.

He and May were the last to leave Albee's. The shop windows were filled with promises of Christmas. Colors and lights streamed over the slushy pavement. The cars were inching headlight to brakelight down Main Street, out of town. Bobby and May leaned on the parapet of the bridge. The lights of the houses on the hill where Uncle Lew lived were mirrored in the sliding water. May was wearing mittens, a scarf, a beret, her red hair tucked out of sight, just her nose and eyes showing.

"When I was eight or nine," she said, "Mum and Dad took me on holiday to the coast. It was windy and sunny. I had a big brother then. His name was Tom. We were both kids and he used to give me piggy backs, sometimes tickle me till I almost peed. We loved to explore the dunes. Had a whole world there to ourselves. One morning we were sliding down this big slope of sand, laughing and climbing all the way up again. Then Tom doubled up at the bottom, and I thought he must have caught himself on a hidden rock or something. I shouted Are You Okay, but all he did was groan."

"He was growing up?"

May nodded. "The doc at home had said it was fine to go away, but I realized what was happening. I said You Stay There, which was stupid really, and I shot off to get someone. The sand kept sliding under my sandals. It was a nightmare, running through treacle. I ran right into Dad's arms. He'd gone looking for us. I don't know why, perhaps it's something grownups can sense. He found someone else to ring the ambulance and we went back down the beach to see Tom. The tide was coming in and I was worried it might reach him..."

She paused. Darkness was flowing beneath the river arches. "When we got back, he was all twisted, and I knew he couldn't be alive, no one could hold themselves that way. The blood was in the sand, sticking to his legs. Those black flies you always get on a beach were swarming."

Bobby began, "That doesn't ..." but he pulled the rest of the chilly sentence back into his lungs.

May turned to him. She pulled the scarf down to her chin. Looking at her lips, the glint of her teeth inside, Bobby remembered the sweet hot things they had done together. He marveled at how close you could get to someone and still feel alone.

“We’re always early developers in our family,” May said. “Tom was the first in his class. I suppose I’ll be the same.”

“Maybe it’s better ... get it over with.”

“I suppose everyone thinks that it’ll happen first to some kid in another class, someone you hardly know. Then to a few others. Perhaps a friend, someone you can visit afterward and find out you’ve got nothing to say but that it’s no big deal after all. Everything will always be *fine*.”

“There’s still a long—”

“—How long? What difference is a month more or less?” She was angry, close to tears. But beneath, her face was closed off from him. “You had an elder brother who survived, Bobby. Was he ever the same?”

Bobby shrugged. The answer was obvious, all around them. Grownups were *grownups*. They drove cars, fought wars, dressed in boring and uncomfortable clothes, built roads, bought newspapers every morning that told them the same thing, drank alcohol without getting merry from it, pulled hard on the toilet door to make sure it was shut before they did their business.

“Tony was all right,” he said. “He’s still all right. We were never that great together anyway—just brothers. I don’t think it’s the physical changes that count...or even that that’s at the heart of it. . . .” He didn’t know what the hell else to say.

“I’m happy as I am,” May said. “I’m a kid. I feel like a kid. If I change, I’ll cease to be *me*. Who wants that?” She took off her mitten, wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “So I’m not going through with it.”

Bobby stared at her. It was like saying you weren’t going through with death because you didn’t like the sound of it. “It can’t be *that* bad, May. Most kids get through all right. Think of all the grownups . . . Jesus, think of your own parents.”

“Look, Bobby. I know growing up hurts. I know it’s dangerous. I should know, shouldn’t I? That’s not what I care about. What I care about is losing *me*, the person I am and want to be. . . . You just don’t believe me, do you? I’m *not* going through with it, I’ll stay a kid. I don’t care who I say it to, because they’ll just think I’m acting funny, but Bobby, I thought *you* might believe me. There *has* to be a way out.”

“You can...” Bobby said. But already she was walking away.

* * * *

The envelopes were handed out at school. A doctor started to call at Bobby’s house, and at the houses of all his friends. Next day there was always a show of bravado as they compared the bruises on their arms. The first child to grow up was a boy named Arthur Mumford, whose sole previous claim to fame was the ability to play popular tunes by squelching his armpits. In that way that the inevitable always has, it happened suddenly and without warn-ing. One Tuesday in February, just five weeks after the doctor had started to call at their houses, Arthur didn’t turn up for registration. A girl two years below had spotted the doctor’s car outside his house on her paper round the evening before. Word was around the whole school by lunchtime.

There was an unmistakable air of disappointment. When he wasn’t performing his party piece, Arthur was a quiet boy: he was tall, and stooped from embarrassment at his height. He seldom spoke. But it wasn’t just that it should happen first to someone as ordinary as Arthur—I mean, it has to happen to all of us sooner or later, right? But none of the children felt as excited—or even as afraid—as they had expected. When it had happened to kids in the senior years, it had seemed like something big, seeing a kid they’d known suddenly walking along Main Street in grownup clothes with the dazed expression that always came to new grownups, ignoring old school friends, looking for work, ducking into bars. They had speculated excitedly about who would go next, prayed that it would be one of the school bullies. But now that it was their turn, the whole thing felt like a joke that had been played too many times. Arthur Mumford was just an empty desk, a few belongings that needed picking up.

In the spring, at least half a dozen of the children in Bobby’s year had grown up. The hot weather seemed to speed things up. Sitting by the dry fountain outside the Municipal Offices one afternoon, watching the litter and the grownups scurry by, a friend of Bobby’s named Michele suddenly dropped her can of drink and coiled up in a screaming ball. The children and the passing grownups all fluttered uselessly as she rolled around on the sidewalk until a doctor who happened to be walking by forced her to sit up on the rim of the fountain and take deep slow breaths. Yes, she’s growing up, he snapped, glowering at the onlookers, then down at his watch. I suggest someone call her parents or get a car. Michele was gasping through tears and obviously in agony, but the doctor’s manner suggested that she was making far too much of the whole thing. A car arrived soon enough, and Michele was bundled into the back. Bobby never saw her again.

He had similar, although less dramatic, partings with other friends. One day, you’d be meeting them at the bus stop to go to the skating rink. The next, you would hear that they had grown up. You might see them around town, heading out of a

shop as you were going in, but they would simply smile and nod, or make a point of saying Hello Bobby just to show that they remembered your name. Everything was changing. That whole summer was autumnal, filled with a sense of loss. In their own grownup way, even the parents of the remaining children were affected. Although there would inevitably be little time left for their children to enjoy such things, they became suddenly generous with presents, finding the cash that had previously been missing for a new bike, a train set, or even a pony.

May and Bobby still spent afternoons together, but more often now they would just sit in the kitchen at May's house, May by turns gloomy and animated, Bobby laughing with her or—increasingly against his feelings— trying to act reassuring and grownup. They usually had the house to them-selves. In recognition of the dwindling classes, the teachers were allowing any number of so-called study periods, and both of May's parents worked days and overtime in the evenings to keep up with the mortgage on their clumsy mock-tudor house.

One afternoon, when they were drinking orange juice mixed with sweet sherry filched from the liquor cabinet and wondering if they dared to get drunk, May got up and went to the fridge. Bobby thought she was getting more orange juice, but instead she produced the plastic flask that contained her bitter milk. She laughed at his expression as she unscrewed the childproof cap and put the flask to her lips, gulping it down as though it tasted good. Abstractly, Bobby noticed that her parents used a brand-name product. His own parents always bought the supermarket's own.

“Try it,” she said.

“What?”

“Go on.”

Bobby took the flask and sipped. He was vaguely curious to find out whether May's bitter milk was any less unpleasant than the cheaper stuff he was used to. It wasn't. Just different, thicker. He forced himself to swallow.

“You don't just *drink* this, do you?” he asked, wondering for the first time whether her attitude wasn't becoming something more than simply odd.

“Of course I don't,” she said. “But I could if I liked. You see, it's *not* bitter milk.”

Bobby stared at her.

“Look.”

May opened the fridge again, took out a carton of ordinary pasteurized milk. She put it on the counter, then reached high inside a kitchen cabinet, her blouse

briefly raising at the back to show the ridges of her lower spine that Bobby so enjoyed touching. She took down a can of flour, a plastic lemon dispenser, and a bottle of white wine vinegar.

“The flour stops it from curdling,” she said, “and ordinary vinegar doesn’t work. It took me days to get it right.” She tipped some milk into a tumbler, stirred in the other ingredients. “I used to measure everything out, but now I can do it just anyhow.”

She handed him the tumbler. “Go on.”

Bobby tasted. It was quite revolting, almost as bad as the brand-name bitter milk.

“You see?”

Bobby put the glass down, swallowing back a welcome flood of saliva to weaken the aftertaste. Yes, he saw—or at least, he was *beginning* to see.

“I haven’t been drinking bitter milk for a month now. Mum buys it, I tip it down the sink when she’s not here and do my bit of chemistry. It’s that simple. . . .” She was smiling, then suddenly blinking back tears. “. . . that easy. . . . Of course, it doesn’t taste exactly the same, but when was the last time your parents tried tasting bitter milk?”

“Look, May . . . don’t you think this is dangerous?”

“Why?” She tilted her head, wiped a stray trickle from her cheek. “What exactly is going to happen to me? You tell me that.”

Bobby was forced to shrug. Bitter milk was for children, like cod liver oil. Grownups avoided the stuff, but it was good for you, it *helped*.

“I’m *not* going to grow up, Bobby,” she said. “I told you I wasn’t joking.”

“Do you really think that’s going to make any difference?”

“Who knows?” she said. She gave him a sudden hug, her lips wet and close to his ear. “Now let’s go upstairs.”

* * * *

Weeks later, Bobby got a phone call from May one evening at home. Mum called him down from his bedroom, holding the receiver as though it might bite.

He took it.

“It’s me, Bobby.”

“Yeah.” He waited for the lounge door to close. “What is it?”

“Jesus, I think it’s started. Mum and Dad are out at a steak bar and I’m getting these terrible pains.”

The fake bitter milk. The receiver went slick in his hand.

“It can’t be. You can’t be sure.”

“If I was sure I wouldn’t be ... look, Bobby, can you come around?”

She gave a gasp. “There it is again. You really must. I can’t do this alone.”

“You gotta ring the hospital.”

“No.”

“You—”

“No!”

Bobby gazed at the telephone directories that Mum stacked on a shelf beneath the phone as though they were proper books. He remembered that night with Tony, the lights on everywhere, burning though everything as though it wasn’t real. He swallowed. The TV was still loud in the lounge.

“Okay,” he said. “God knows what I’m supposed to tell Mum and Dad. Give me half an hour.”

His excuse was a poor one, but his parents took it anyway. He didn’t care what they believed; he’d never felt as shaky in his life.

He cycled through the housing development. The air rushed against his face, drowning him in that special feeling that came from warm nights. May must have been watching for him from a window. She was at the door when he scooted down the drive.

“Jesus, Bobby, I’m bleeding.”

“I can’t see anything.”

She pushed her hand beneath the waistband of her dress, then held it out.

“Look. Do you believe me now?”

Bobby swallowed, then nodded.

She was alone in the house. Her parents were out. Bobby helped her up the stairs. He found an old plastic raincoat to spread across the bed, and helped her to get clean. The blood was clotted and fibrous, then watery thin. It didn't seem like an ordinary wound.

When the first panic was over, he pushed her fumbled clothes off the bedside chair and slumped down. May's cheeks were flushed and rosy. For all her talk about not wanting to grow up, he reckoned that he probably looked worse than she did at that moment. What was all this about? Had she *ever* had a brother named Tom? One who died? She'd lived in another development then. Other than asking, there was no way of knowing. “I think I'd better go and phone—”

“—Don't!” She forced a smile and reached out a hand toward him. “*Don't.*”

Bobby hesitated, then took her hand.

“Look, it's stopped now anyway. Perhaps it was a false alarm.”

“Yeah,” Bobby said, “False alarm,” although he was virtually sure there was no such thing. You either grew up or you didn't.

“I feel okay now,” she said. “Really, I do.”

“That's good,” Bobby said.

May was still smiling. She seemed genuinely relieved. “Kiss me, Bobby,” she said.

Her eyes were strange. She smelled strange. Like the river, like the rain. He kissed her, softly on the warmth of her cheek; the way you might kiss a grownup. He leaned back from the bed and kept hold of her hand.

They talked.

Bobby got back home close to midnight. His parents had gone up to bed, but, as he crossed the darkened landing, he sensed that they were both awake and listening beyond the bedroom door. Next morning, nothing was said, and May was at school with the rest of what remained of their class. The teachers had mostly given up on formal lessons, getting the children instead to clear out stockrooms or tape the spines of elderly textbooks. He watched May as she drifted through the chalk-clouded air, the sunlight from the tall windows blazing her hair. Neither grownup nor yet quite a kid, she moved between the desks with unconscious grace.

That lunchtime, she told Bobby that she was fine. But Yes, she was still bleeding a bit. I have to keep going to the little girl's room. I've gone through two pairs of underpants, flushed them away. It's a real nuisance, Bobby, she added, above the clatter in the dining hall, as though it was nothing, like hay fever or a cold sore. Her face was clear and bright, glowing through the freckles and the smell of communal cooking. He nodded, finding that it was easier to believe than to question. May smiled. And you *will* come see me tonight, won't you, Bobby? We'll be on our own. Again, Bobby found himself nodding.

He announced to Mum and Dad after dinner that evening that he was going out again. He told them that he was working on a school play that was bound to take up a lot of his time.

Mum and Dad nodded. Bobby tried not to study them too closely, although he was curious to gauge their reaction.

"Okay," Mum said. "But make sure you change the batteries on your lamps if you're going to cycle anywhere after dark." She glanced at Dad, who nodded and returned to his paper.

"You know I'm careful like that." Bobby tried to keep the wariness out of his voice. He suspected that they saw straight through him and knew that he was lying. He'd been in this kind of situation before. That was an odd thing about grownups: you could tell them the truth and they'd fly into a rage. Other times, such as this, when you had to lie, they said nothing at all.

May was waiting at the door again that evening. As she had promised, her parents were out. He kissed her briefly in the warm light of the hall. Her lips were soft against his, responding with a pressure that he knew would open at the slightest sign from him. She smelled even more rainy than before. There was something else too, something that was both new and familiar. Just as her arms started to encircle his back, he stepped back, his heart suddenly pounding.

He looked at her. "Christ, May, what are you wearing?"

"This." She gave a twirl. The whole effect was odd, yet hard to place for a moment. A tartanish pleated dress. A white blouse. A dull necklace. Her hair pulled back in a tight bun. And her eyes, her mouth, her whole face . . . looked like it had been sketched on, the outlines emphasized, the details ignored. Then he licked his lips and knew what it was; the same smell and taste that came from Mum on nights when she leaned over his bed and said, you will be good while we're out, won't you, my darling, jewelry glimmering like starlight around her neck and at the lobes of her ears. May was wearing makeup. She was dressed like a grownup.

For a second, the thought that May had somehow managed to get through the

whole messy process of growing up since leaving school that afternoon came to him. Then he saw the laughter in her eyes and he knew that it couldn't be true.

“What do you think, Bobby?”

“I don't know why grownups wear that stuff. It isn't comfortable, it doesn't even look good. What does it feel like?”

“Strange,” May said. “It changes you inside. Come upstairs. I'll show you.”

May led him up the stairs and beyond a door he had never been through before. Even though they were out, her parents' bedroom smelled strongly of grownup, especially the closet, where the dark lines of suits swung gently on their hangers. Bobby was reasonably tall for his age, as tall as many grownups, May's father included.

The suit trousers itched his legs and the waist was loose, but not so loose as to fall down. He knotted a tie over a white shirt, pulled on the jacket. May got some oily stuff from the dresser, worked it into his hair and combed it smooth. Then she stood beside him as he studied himself in the mirror. Dark and purposeful, two strange grownups gazed back. He glanced down at himself, hardly believing that it was true. He pulled a serious face back at the mirror, the sort you might see behind the counter at a bank. Then he started to chuckle. And May began to laugh. It was so inconceivably easy. They were doubled over, their bellies aching. They held each other tight. They just couldn't stop.

An hour later, May closed the front door and turned the dead bolt. Heels clipping the pavement, they walked to the bus stop. Perhaps in deference to their new status as grownups, the next bus into town came exactly when it was due. They traveled on the top deck, which was almost empty apart from a gaggle of cleaning ladies at the back. They were busy talking, and the driver hadn't even bothered to look up when he gave them two straight adult fares (don't say please, May had whispered as the tall lights of the 175 had pulled into the stop, grownups don't do that kind of thing). Dressed in his strange grownup clothes, his back spreading huge inside the jacket shoulder pads, Bobby felt confident anyway. Like May said, the grownup clothes changed you inside.

They got off outside Albee's Quick Restaurant and Take Away. For some reason, May wanted to try visiting a place where they were actually known. Bobby was too far gone with excitement to argue about taking an unnecessary extra risk. Her manner was smooth; he doubted if anyone else would have noticed the wildness in her eyes beneath the makeup. Rather than dodge the cars across the road, they waited for a big gap and walked slowly, sedately. The lights of Albee's glowed out to greet them. They opened the door to grownup laughter, the smell of smoke and grownup sweat. People nodded and smiled, then moved to let them through. Albee grinned at them from the bar, eager to please, the way the teachers were at school

when the principal came unexpectedly into class. He said Good evening Sir and What'll it be. Bobby heard his own voice say something calm and easy in reply. He raked a stool back for May and she sat down, tucking her dress neatly under her thighs. He glanced around as drinks were served, half expecting the other grownups to float up from their chairs, to begin to fly. They'd been here after school a hundred times, but this was a different world.

It was the same on a dozen other nights, whenever they hit on an excuse that they had the nerve to use on their unquestioning parents. Albee's, they found, was much further from the true heart of the grownup world than they'd imagined. They found hotel bars where real fountains tinkled and the drinks were served chilled on paper coasters that stuck to the bottom of the glass. There were loud pubs where you could hardly stand up for the yellow-lit crush and getting served was an evening's endeavor. There were restaurants where you were offered bowls brimming with crackers and salted nuts just to sit and read the crisply printed menus and say Well Thanks, But It Doesn't Look As Though Our Friends Are Coming And The Baby Sitter You Know. . . . Places they had seen day in and day out through their whole lives were changed by the darkness, the hot charge of car fumes, buzzing street lights, glittering smiles, the smell of perfume, changed beyond recognition to whispering palaces of crystal and velvet.

After changing at May's house back into his sweatshirt and sneakers, Bobby would come home late, creeping down the hall in the bizarre ritual of pretending not to disturb his parents, whom he was certain would be listening open-eyed in the darkness from the first unavoidable creak of the front door. In the kitchen, he checked for new bottles of bitter milk. By the light of the open fridge door, he tipped the fluid down the sink, chased it away with a quick turn of the hot water faucet—which was quieter than the cold—and replaced it with a fresh mixture of spirit vinegar, lemon juice, milk, and flour.

The summer holidays came. Bobby and May spent all their time together, evenings and days. Lying naked in the woods on the soft prickle of dry leaves, looking up at the green latticed sky. Bobby reached again toward May. He ran his hand down the curve of her belly. It was soft and sweet and hard, like an apple. Her breath quickened. He rolled onto his side, lowered his head to lick at her breasts. More than ever before, her nipples swelled amazingly to his tongue. But after a moment her back stiffened.

“Just kiss me here,” she said, “my mouth,” gently cupping his head in her hands and drawing it up. “Don't suck at me today, Bobby. I feel too tender.”

Bobby acquiesced to the wonderful sense of her around him, filling the sky and the woods. She'd been sensitive about some of the things he did before, often complaining about tenderness and pain a few days before she started her bleeding. But the bleeding hadn't happened for weeks, months.

They still went out some nights, visiting the grownup places, living their unbelievable lie. Sometimes as he left the house, or coming back late with his head spinning from the drink and the things they'd done, Bobby would look up and see Mum's face pale at the bedroom window. But he said nothing. And nothing was ever said. It was an elaborate dance, back to back, Mum and Dad displaying no knowledge or denial, each moment at the kitchen table and the rare occasions when they shared the lounge passing without question. A deception without deceit.

The places they went to changed. From the smart rooms lapped with deep carpets and chrome they glided on a downward flight path through urine-reeking doorways. This was where the young grownups went, people they recognized as kids from assembly at school just a few years before. Bars where the fermented light only deepened the darkness, where the fat uncles sat alone as evening began, looking at the men and the women as the crowds thickened, looking away.

Bobby and May made friends, people who either didn't notice what they were or didn't care. Hands raised and waving through the chaos and empty glasses. Hey Bobby, May, over here, sit yourselves right down here. Place for the old butt. Jokes to be told, lips licked, lewd eyes rolled, skirt hems pulled firmly down then allowed to roll far up again. Glimpses of things that shouldn't be seen. They were good at pretending to be grownups by now, almost better than the grownups themselves. For the purposes of the night, Bobby was in town from a university in the city, studying whatever came into his head. May was deadly serious or laughing, saying my God, you wouldn't believe the crap I have to put up with at the office, the factory, the shop. Playing it to a tee. And I'm truly glad to be here and now with you all before it starts again in the morning.

Time broke in beery waves. The account at the bank that Bobby had been nurturing for some unspecified grownup need sunk to an all-time low. But it could have been worse—they were a popular couple, almost as much in demand as the unattached fat uncles when a few drinks had gone down. They hardly ever had to put in for a round.

The best part was when they came close to discovery. A neighbor who probably shouldn't have been there in the first place, a family friend, a teacher. Then once it was Bobby's brother Tony. Late, and he had his arms around a fat uncle, his face sheened with sweat. He was grinning and whispering wet lips close to his ear. There was a woman with them too, her hands straying quick and hard over both of their bodies. It wasn't Marion.

"Let's go," Bobby said. There was a limit to how far you could take a risk. But May would have none of it. She stared straight at Tony through the swaying bodies, challenging him to notice.

For a moment, his eyes were on them, his expression drifting back from lust. Bobby covered his hand with his mouth, feeling the grownup clothes and confidence

dissolve around him, the schoolkid inside screaming to get out. Tony made to speak, but there was no chance of hearing. In another moment, he vanished into the mass of the crowd.

Now that the danger had passed, it was the best time of all; catching Tony out in a way that he could never explain. Laughter bursting inside them, they ran out into the sudden cool of the night. May held onto him and her lips were over his face, breathless and trembling from the sudden heightening of the risk. He held tight to her, swaying, not caring about the cars, the grownups stumbling by, pulling her close, feeling the taut rounded swell of her full breasts and belly that excited him so.

“Do you want to be like them?” she whispered. “Want to be a fool and a grownup?”

“Never.” He leaned back and shouted it at the stars. “Never!”

Arm in arm, they swayed down the pavement toward the bus stop. Incredibly, Tuesday was coming around again tomorrow; Doc Halstead would be pulling up the drive at home at about eleven, washing his hands one more time and saying How Are You My Man before taking best-china coffee with Mum in the lounge, whispering things he could never quite hear. May’s eyes were eager, gleaming with the town lights, drinking it all in. More than him, she hated this world and loved it. Sometimes, when things were swirl-ing, she reminded him of a true grownup. It all seemed far away from that evening in town after biology, leaning on the bridge alone after leaving Albee’s and gazing down at the river, May saying I won’t go through with it, Bobby, I’m not just some kid acting funny. As though something as easy as fooling around with the bitter milk could make that much of a difference.

Doctor Halstead arrived next morning only minutes after Bobby had finished breakfast and dressed. In the spare bedroom, he spread out his rubber and steel. He dried his hands and held the big syringe up to the light before leaning down.

Bobby smeared the fresh bead of blood over the bruises on his forearm, then licked the salt off his fingertips.

Doctor Halstead was watching the readouts. The paper feed gave a burp and chattered out a thin strip like a supermarket receipt. The doc tore it off, looked at it for a moment, and tutted before screwing it into a ball. He pressed a button that flattened the dials, pressed another to make them drift up again.

“Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.”

The printer chattered again. He tore it off “You’ve still got some way to go.”

“How many weeks?”

“If I had a dollar for every time I’ve been asked that question...”

“Don’t you *know*?”

He handed Bobby the printout. Faint figures and percentages. The machine needed a new ribbon.

“Us grownups don’t know everything. I know it seems that way.”

“Most of my friends have gone.” He didn’t want to mention May, although he guessed Mum had told him anyway. “How long can it go on for?”

“As long as it takes.”

“What if nothing happens?”

“Something always happens.”

He gave Bobby a smile.

Bobby and May went out again that night. A place they’d never tried before, a few stops out of town, with a spluttering neon sign, a shack motel at the back, and a dusty parking area for the big container rigs. The inside was huge, with bare boards and patches of linoleum, games machines lining the walls, too big to fill with anything but smoke and patches of yellowed silence on even the busiest of nights. Being a Wednesday, and the grownups’ pay packets being thin until the weekend, it was quiet. They sat alone in the smoggy space for most of the evening. They didn’t know anyone, and for once it seemed that no one wanted to know them. Bobby kept thinking of the way Doctor Halstead had checked the readouts, checked them again. And he knew May had her own weekly test the following afternoon. It wasn’t going to be one of their better nights. May looked pale. She went out to the ladies room far more often than their slow consumption of the cheap bottled beer would explain. Once, when she came back and leaned forward to tell him something, he realized that the rain had gone from her breath. He smelled vomit.

At about ten, a fat uncle crossed the room, taking a drunken detour around the chairs.

“Haven’t seen you two here before,” he said, his belly swaying above the table, close to their faces. “I’ve got a contract delivering groceries from here to the city and back. Every other day, I’m here.”

“We must have missed you.”

He squinted down at them, still swaying but now seeming less than drunk. For places like here, Bobby and May wore casual clothes. Bobby dressed the way Dad did for evenings at home, in an open-collared striped shirt and trousers that looked as though they had started out as part of a work suit. May hadn't put on much makeup, which she said she hated anyway. Bobby wondered if they were growing complacent, if this fat uncle hadn't seen what all the other grownups had apparently failed to notice.

"Mind if I . . ." The uncle reached for a chair and turned it around, sat down with his legs wide and his arms and belly propped against the backrest. "Where are you from anyway?"

Bobby and May exchanged secret smiles. Now they were in their element, back in the territory of the university in the city, the office, the shop, the grownup places that had developed a life of their own through frequent re-telling.

It was pleasant to talk to an uncle on equal terms for a change—away from the pawings and twittering of other grownups which usually surrounded them. Bobby felt that he had a lot of questions to ask, but the biggest one was answered immediately by this uncle's cautious but friendly manner, by the way he spoke of his job and the problems he was having trying to find an apartment. In all the obvious ways, he was just like any other young grownup. He bought them a drink. It seemed polite to buy him one in return, then—what the hell—a chaser. Soon, they were laughing. People were watching, smiling but keeping their distance across the ranks of empty tables.

Bobby knew what was happening, but he was curious to see how far it would go. He saw a plump hand stray to May's arm—still covered by a long sleeved shirt to hide the bruises—then up to her shoulder. He saw the way she reacted by not doing anything.

"You don't know how lonely it gets," the uncle said, leaning forward, his arm around Bobby's back too, his hand reaching down. "Always on the road. I stay here, you know. Most Wednesdays. A lot of them sleep out in the cab. But they pay you for it and I like to lie on something soft. Just out the back." He nodded. "Through that door, the way you came in, left past the kitchens."

"Will you show us?" May asked, looking at Bobby. "I think we'd like to see."

The motel room was small. Someone had tried to do it up years before, but the print had rubbed off the wallpaper by the door and above the green bed. The curtains had shrunk, and Bobby could still see the parking lot and the lights of the road. A sliding door led to a toilet and the sound of a dripping tap.

The fat uncle sat down. The bed squealed. Bobby and May remained

standing, but if the uncle saw their nervousness he didn't comment. He seemed more relaxed now, easy with the drink and the certainty of what they were going to do. He unlaced his boots and peeled off his socks, twiddling his toes with a sigh that reminded Bobby of Dad at the end of a hard day. He was wearing a sweatshirt that had once said something. He pulled it off over his head with his hands on the waistband, the way a girl might do, threw it onto the rug beside his feet. He had an undershirt on underneath. The hems were unraveling, but he and it looked clean enough, and he smelt a lot better than Uncle Lew did at close quarters, like unbaked dough. He pulled the undershirt off too. His breasts were much bigger than May's. There was hardly any hair under his arms. Bobby stared at the bruised scar that began under his ribcage and vanished beneath the wide band of his jeans, slightly moist where it threatened to part.

"You're going to stay dressed, are you?" he said with a grin. He scratched himself and the springs squealed some more. "This goddamn bed's a problem."

"We'd like to watch," May said. "For now, if that's okay with you."

"That's great by me. I'm not fussy ... I mean..." he stood up and stepped out of his trousers and underpants in one movement. "Well, you know what I mean."

Under the huge flap of his belly, Bobby couldn't see much of what lay beneath. Just darkness and hair. Every night, he thought, a million times throughout the world, this is going on. Yet he couldn't believe it, couldn't even believe it about his parents with Uncle Lew, even though he'd seen them once on that hot afternoon.

"Tell you what," the uncle said. "It's been a long day. I think you'd both appreciate it if yours truly freshened up a bit." He went over to Bobby, brushed the fine hairs at the back of his neck with soft fingers. "I won't be a mo. You two sort yourselves out, eh?"

He waddled off into the bathroom, slid the door shut behind him. They heard the toilet seat bang down, a sigh, and the whisper of moving flesh. Then a prolonged fart. A pause. A splash. Then another.

May looked at Bobby. Her face reddened. She covered her mouth to block the laughter. Bobby's chest heaved. He covered his mouth too. He couldn't help it: the joke was incredibly strong. Signaling to Bobby, tears brimming in her eyes, May stooped to pick up the sweatshirt, the shoes, the undershirt. Bobby gathered the jeans. There were more clothes heaped in a corner. They took those too, easing the door open as quietly as they could before the laughter rolled them over like a high wind.

They sprinted madly across the parking lot, down the road, into the night.

* * * *

Next morning, the sky was drab. It seemed to Bobby like the start of the end of summer, the first of the grey veils that would eventually thicken to autumn. Downstairs, Mum was humming. He went first into the kitchen, not that he wanted to see her, but he needed to re-establish the charade of them ignoring his nights away from the house. One day, he was sure, it would break, she'd have a letter from the police, the doctor, the owner of some bar, a fact that couldn't be ignored.

"It's you," she said. Uncharacteristically, she kissed him. He'd been taller than her for a year or two, she didn't need to bend down, but it still felt that way. "Do you want anything from the supermarket? I'm off in a few minutes."

Bobby glanced at the list she kept on the wipe-clean plastic board above the stove. Wash pow, toilet pap, marg, lemon juice, wine vinegar. He looked at her face, but it was clear and innocent.

"Aren't you going to go into the dining room? See what's waiting?"

"Waiting?"

"Your birthday, Bobby." She gave him a laugh and a quick, stiff hug. "I asked you what you wanted weeks ago and you never said. So I hope you like it. I've kept the receipt—you boys are so difficult."

"Yeah." He hadn't exactly forgotten, he'd simply been pushing the thing back in his mind, the way you do with exams and visits from the doctor, hoping that if you make yourself forget, then the rest of the world will forget, too.

He was seventeen and still a kid. It was at least one birthday too many. He opened the cards first, shaking each envelope carefully to see if there was any money. Some of them had pictures of archaic countryside and inappropriate verses, the sort that grownups gave to each other. One or two people had made the effort to find a child's card, but there wasn't much of a market for seventeen year olds. The most enterprising had combined stickons for 1 and 7. Bobby moved to the presents, using his toast knife to slit the tape, trying not to damage any of the wrapping paper, which Mum liked to iron and re-use. Although she hadn't spoken, he was conscious that she was standing watching at the door. Fighting the sinking feeling of discovering books on subjects that didn't interest him, accessories for hobbies he didn't pursue, model cars for a collection he'd given up years ago, he tried to display excitement and surprise.

Mum and Dad's present was a pair of binoculars, something he'd coveted when he was thirteen for reasons he couldn't now remember. He gazed at the marmalade jar in close up, through the window at the individual leaves of the nearest cherry tree in the garden.

“We thought you’d find them useful when you grew up too,” Mum said, putting her arms around him.

“It’s great,” he said. In truth, he liked the smell of the case—leather, oil and glass—more than the binoculars themselves. But he knew that wasn’t the point. And then he remembered why he’d so wanted a pair of binoculars, how he’d used to love looking up at the stars.

“Actually, I’ve lots of stuff to get at the supermarket, Bobby. Dad’s taking a half day and we’re going to have a party for you. Everyone’s coming. Isn’t that great?”

Bobby went with Mum to the supermarket. They drove into town past places he and May had visited at night. Even though the sky was clearing to sun, they looked flat and grey. Wandering the supermarket aisles, Mum insisted that Bobby choose whatever he want. He settled at random for iced fancies, pâté, green-veined cheese. Tony came out from his office behind a window of silvered glass, a name badge on his lapel and his hair starting to recede. He clapped Bobby’s shoulder and said he’d never have believed it, seventeen, my own little brother. They chatted awkwardly for a while in the chill drift of the frozen meats. Even though there was a longer line, they chose Marion’s checkout. She was back working at the supermarket part time now that their kid had started nursery school. It wasn’t until Bobby saw her blandly cheerless face that he remembered that night with Tony and the other uncle in the bar. He wondered if she knew, if she cared.

There were cars in the driveway at home and spilling along the cul de sac, little kids with names he couldn’t remember running on the lawn. The weather had turned bright and hot. Dad had fished out all the deckchairs as soon as he got home, the ordinary ones and the specials he kept for uncles. People kept coming up to Bobby and then running out of things to say. He couldn’t remember whether they’d given him cards or presents, what to thank them for. Uncle Lew was in a good mood, the facets of one of the best wine glasses trembling sparks across his rounded face.

“Well, Bobby,” he said, easing himself down in his special deckchair. He was starting to look old, ugly. Too many years, too many happy events. He was nothing like the fresh fat uncle at the motel. “And what are you going to be when you grow up?”

Bobby shrugged. He had grown sick of thinking up lies to please people.

The canvas of Lew’s deckchair was wheezing and slightly torn. Bobby hoped that he’d stay a kid long enough to see him fall through.

“Well, get yourself a nice girlfriend,” he said. “It means a lot to me that I’m uncle to your Momma and Poppa *and* to Tony and Marion too.” He sucked at his wine. “But that’s all up to you.”

Looking back up the lawn toward the house, Bobby saw May and her parents emerging into the sunlight from the open French windows. May looked drab and tired. Her belly was big, her ankles swollen.

She waddled over to them, sweat gleaming on her cheeks.

“Hello, Bobby.” She leaned over to let Uncle Lew give her a hug. He put his lips to her ear. She wriggled and smiled before she pulled away.

“Hello, May.”

She was wearing a cheap print, something that fell in folds like a tent.

“This whole party is a surprise, isn’t it? Your Mum insisted that I didn’t say anything when she told me last week. Here. Happy birthday.”

She gave him a package. He opened it. Five minutes later, he couldn’t remember what it contained.

Dad banged the trestle table and people gathered around on the lawn as he made a speech about how he could hardly believe the way the years had flown, saying the usual things that grownups always said about themselves when it was a child’s birthday. He raised his glass. A toast. Bobby. Everyone intoned his name. *Bobby*. The sun retreated toward the rooftops and the trees, filling the estate with evening, the weary smell of cooking. Those grownups who hadn’t been able to skip work arrived in their work clothes. Neighbors drifted in.

May came over to Bobby again, her face flushed with the drink and the sun.

“Did the doc come over to see you today?” he asked, for want of anything better. The hilarious intimacy of the things they had done in the night suddenly belonged to a world even more distant than that of the grownups.

“Nothing happened,” she said, spearing a piece of herring on the Paper plate she carried with a plastic fork. “Nothing ever happens.” She took a bite of the herring, then pulled a face. “Disgusting. God knows how the grownups enjoy this shit.”

Bobby grinned, recognizing the May he knew. “Let’s go somewhere. No one will notice.”

She shrugged yes and propped her plate on the concrete bird bath. They went through the back gate, squeezed between the bumpers on the driveway, and out along the road.

“Do you still think you’ll never grow up?” Bobby asked.

May shook her head. “What about you?”

“I suppose it’s got to happen. We’re not fooling anyone are we, going out, not drinking the milk? I’m sure Mum and Dad know. They just don’t seem to care. I mean, we can’t be the first kids in the history of the world to have stumbled on this secret. Well, it can’t *be* a secret, can it?”

“How about we climb up to the meadows?” May said. “The town looks good from up there.”

“Have you ever read *Peter Pan*?” Bobby asked as they walked up the dirt road between the allotments and the saw mill. “He never grew up. Lived in a wonderful land and learned how to fly.” He held open the kissing gate that led into the fields. May had to squeeze through. The grass was high and slivered with seed, whispering under a deepening sky. “When I was young,” he said, “on evenings like this, I used to look out of my bedroom window and watch the grownups. I thought that they could fly.”

“Who do you think can fly now?”

“No one. We’re all the same.”

They stopped to catch their breath and look down at the haze below. Hills, trees, and houses, the wind carrying the chime of an ice-cream van, the river stealing silver from the sky. He felt pain spread through him, then dissolve without finding focus.

May took his hand. “Remember when we came up here alone that time, years ago?” She drew it toward her breast, then down. “You touched me here, and here, we had sex. You’d never done it before.” She let his hand fall Bobby felt no interest. May no longer smelled of rain, and he was relieved that he didn’t have to turn her down.

The pain came again, more strongly this time. He swayed. The shimmering air cleared, and for one moment there was a barge on the river, a tractor slicing a field from green to brown, a hawk circling high overhead, May smiling, sweet and young, as she said Let’s Do It, Bobby, pulling her dress up over her head. He blinked.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, leaning briefly against her, feeling the thickness of her arms.

“I think we’d better go back.”

Down the hill, the pain began to localize. First circling in his spine, then gradually shifting orbit toward his belly. It came and went. When it was there, it was so unbelievable that he put it aside in the moments of recession. Had to be a bad dream. The trees swayed with the rush of twilight, pulling him forward, drawing him back.

Progress was slow. Night came somewhere along the way. Helped by May, he staggered from lamppost to lamppost, dreading the darkness between. People stared, or asked if everything was okay before hurrying on. He tasted rust in his mouth. He spat on the pavement, wiped his hand. It came away black.

“Nearly there,” May said, half-holding him around his searing belly.

He looked up and saw houses he recognized, the mailbox that was the nearest one to home. His belly was crawling. He remembered how that mailbox had been a marker of his suffering one day years before when he’d been desperate to get home and pee, and, another time, walking back from school when his shoes were new and tight. Then the pain rocked him, blocking his sight. True pain, hard as flint, soft as drowning. He tried to laugh. That made it worse and better. Bobby knew that this was just the start, an early phase of the contractions.

He couldn’t remember how they reached home. There were hands and voices, furious dialings of the phone. Bobby couldn’t get upstairs and didn’t want to mess up the settee by lying on it. But the grownups insisted, pushed him down, and then someone found a plastic sheet and tucked it under him in between the worst of the waves. He thrashed around, seeing the TV, the mantelpiece, the fibers of the carpet, the light burning at his eyes. I’m not here, he told himself, this isn’t real. Then the biggest, darkest wave yet began to reach him.

Wings of pain settled over him. For a moment without time, Bobby dreamed that he was flying.

* * * *

Bobby awoke in a chilly white room. There was a door, dim figures moving beyond the frosted glass. He was still floating, hardly conscious of his own body. The whiteness of the room hurt his eyes. He closed them, opened them again. Now it was night. Yellow light spilled through the glass. The figures moving beyond had globular heads, no necks, tapering bodies.

One of the figures paused. The door opened. The silence cracked like a broken seal. He could suddenly hear voices, the clatter of trolleys. He was conscious of the hard fatness of the bed against his back, coils of tubing descending into his arm from steel racks. His throat hurt. His mouth tasted faintly of liquorice. The air smelled the way the bathroom cabinet did at home. Of soap and aspirins.

“Your eyes are open. Bobby, can you see?”

The shape at the door blocked the light. It was hard to make it out. Then it stepped forward, and he saw the soft curve of May’s cheek, the glimmer of her eye.

“Can you speak?”

“No,” he said.

May turned on a light over the bed and sat down with a heavy ‘sigh. He tried to track her by moving his eyes, but after the brief glimpse of her face, all he could see was the dimpled curve of her elbow.

“This is the hospital?”

“Yes. You’ve grown up.”

The hospital. Growing up. They must have taken him here from home. Which meant that it had been a difficult change.

May said, “You’re lucky to be alive.”

Alive. Yes. Alive. He waited for a rush of some feeling or other—relief, gratitude, achievement, pride. There was nothing, just this white room, the fact of his existence.

“What happens now?” he asked.

“Your parents will want to see you.”

“Where are they?”

“At home. It’s been days, Bobby.”

“Then why...” the taste of liquorice went gritty in his mouth. He swallowed it back. “Why are you here, May?”

“I’m having tests, Bobby. I just thought I’d look in.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I won’t forget the times we had.”

Times. We. Had. Bobby put the words together, then let them fall apart.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well.” May stood up.

Now he could see her. Her hair was cut short, sitting oddly where her fat cheeks met her ears. Her breasts hung loose inside a T-shirt. Along with everything else about her, they seemed to have grown, but the nipples had gone flat and she'd given up wearing a bra. She shrugged and spread her arms. He caught a waft of her scent: she needed a wash. It was sickly but somehow appealing, like the old cheese that you found at the back of the fridge and needed to eat right away.

“Sometimes it happens,” she said.

“Yes,” Bobby said. “The bitter milk.”

“No one knows really, do they? Life's a mystery.”

Is it? Bobby couldn't be bothered to argue.

“Will you change your name?” he asked. “Move to another town?”

“Maybe. It's a slow process. I'm really not an uncle yet, you know.”

Still a child. Bobby gazed at her uncomfortably, trying to see it in her eyes, finding with relief that the child wasn't there.

“What's it like?” May asked.

“What?”

“Being a grownup.”

“Does anyone ask a child what it's like to be a child?”

“I suppose not.”

His head ached, his voice was fading. He blinked slowly. He didn't want to say more. What else was there to say? He remembered waiting stupidly as his brother Tony sat up in bed watching TV that first morning after he'd grown up. Waiting as though there was an answer. But growing up was just part of the process of living, which he realized now was mostly about dying.

May reached out to touch his face. The fingers lingered for a moment, bringing a strange warmth. Their odor was incredibly strong to Bobby. But it was sweet now, like the waft from the open door of a bakery. It hit the back of his palate and then ricocheted down his spine. He wondered vaguely if he was going to get an

erection and killed the thought as best he could; he hated the idea of appearing vulnerable to May. After all, she was still half a child.

“You’d better be going,” he said.

May backed away. “You’re right.” She reached for the handle of the door. Clumsily, without looking.

“Goodbye, May,” Bobby said.

She stood for a moment in the open doorway. For a moment, the light fell kindly on her face and she was beautiful. Then she stepped back and all her youth was gone.

“Goodbye, Bobby,” she said, and glanced down at her wristwatch. “I’ve got things to do. I really must fly.”