

Abstract

Hoppenworth, Elizabeth Jane. "An Innocent Sky." (Under the direction of John Kessel)

"An Innocent Sky" is a coming-of-age story in novella form. The novella is almost a kind of literary Purgatory, in a nebulous category all its own somewhere between the short story and the novel. Although it should have a tight structure and limited point of view, like a short story, the novella allows the luxury of unfolding time and space, and including a larger cast of characters, that the short story cannot accommodate. Told from a limited point of view, as in a short story, "An Innocent Sky" follows a young boy who will turn twelve on July 20, 1969, the day the first men set foot on the moon. Like most Americans in July, 1969, Tommy Ryan closely follows the momentous events of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. Even in the small town of Mormons' Crossing, in southeastern Iowa, where "nothing ever happens," there is a sense that the moment men set foot on the moon, nothing will ever be the same. For five days, between July 16, when the Apollo 11 rocket left the confines of earth, and July 20, when the spacecraft touched down on the surface of the moon, Tommy and the people around him watch expectantly, not knowing what will happen. Tommy learns that growing up is "not all it's cracked up to be." Worlds great and small can change within a matter of days, and in only one moment, a boy can cross a line and leave innocence and childhood forever.

“AN INNOCENT SKY”

by

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Biography

Elizabeth Jane Hoppenworth was born in Des Moines, Iowa, and grew up in a small town in southeastern Iowa much like the fictional town of Mormons' Crossing portrayed in her novella, "An Innocent Sky." She attended Iowa State University and Indian Hills Community College in Iowa, and completed her Bachelor's Degree at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has worked at a variety of jobs, from reader to a blind student, to telephone repair dispatcher, to adult education teacher at a prison, but has mostly worked in secretarial jobs at universities. She has published one story in a small (tiny) Southern literary journal. The novella, "An Innocent Sky," was written to fulfill requirements for a Master's Degree in English in the Creative Writing Program at North Carolina State University.

The initial idea for "An Innocent Sky" is based on an actual event in the author's life, as is much of her writing. As anyone who has lived in the Midwest knows, it wouldn't be summer without windstorms and tornados blowing "some town away." When she was seventeen, the author was caught out in the open and experienced a severe windstorm such as the one described. When she sought shelter at a nearby house, she encountered a young boy delivering newspapers who was also caught out in the open by the storm. The image of the paperboy huddling on a porch, unable to make enough noise to bring the occupants from the safety of their basement, has stayed with the author many years, and grew into a short story, and then the novella, "An Innocent Sky."

Acknowledgments

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She would like to express her gratitude to the unknown reference librarian at Iowa State University's library who was kind enough to search the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* archives for the headlines of July 16 to July 20, 1969, and e-mail the information. Use of the headlines became crucial to the structure of the novella, and to giving it a sense of time and place.

Most of all, the author would like to thank her husband of thirty-one years, Richard, for putting up with her all this time.

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Chapter One

Wednesday, July 16, 1969

“MOON VOYAGE BEGINS TODAY!

ASTRONAUTS CARRY HOPES OF AMERICA

Lift Off Scheduled for 8:32 a.m.”

Tommy Ryan could hit a doorstep with a rolled newspaper almost every throw, and had never yet dented an aluminum screen door with a careless aim of the *Des Moines Tribune*. He would never toss an unrolled paper onto the ground, letting the inside sections spew out across the walkway and lawn like whoever had delivered the *Des Moines Register* this morning.

He straightened the scattered sections and brushed dirt from the front page as he walked back into the house.

Would the astronauts really get to the moon in four more days? That would be something, knowing that men walked on the moon on his twelfth birthday.

“Morning,” Mom said when he came into the kitchen. “If you eat breakfast now, your stomach will have plenty of time to settle before swimming lessons.”

He set his cereal bowl beside the newspaper and spread the front section out on the table.

She sat down and picked up the back sections of the paper. “Since when do you read anything but the funnies?”

“Mom.” He dragged the word out into two syllables. “I been reading the paper for a long time, now. At least the front pages and the sports section.” Hadn’t she noticed? “The moon shot’s today. Apollo 11.”

She set her coffee mug down and looked at the photograph under the headline, a picture of the launch rocket. “Going up in space is no big deal anymore. You were too little to remember the first one. You were three, no, four, Mary Fran was three, and Katie was two. The whole country was excited, back then. Your dad went to a special early morning mass the day Alan Shepard went up.” She sighed. “I don’t know. There’s been too many space launches, now. It’s too hard to remember them all or tell them apart. Two or three just this year, and now the moon. Seems like there’s enough problems right here on earth they could spend all those millions of dollars on instead of throwing it away in outer space.”

“Yeah, but going to the moon. That’s never been done before. It’s like everything Jules Verne said a hundred years ago is all coming true.” This summer, Tommy had read

every Jules Verne book the town library had. “Submarines. Going to the moon. I bet by the time I grow up, people’ll be living on the moon. I want to go there.”

A corner of her mouth pulled down into a half frown. “If God wanted us on the moon, He’d have put us there to begin with.”

She sounded like Grandma Connor, who always seemed to know exactly what God wanted. “Yeah, but if God didn’t want us on the moon, then why did he give us the brains to figure out how to get there?”

“Why don’t you ask Father Heinrich?”

He mumbled into his cereal bowl, “I’d rather eat liver for dinner the rest of my life than ask Father Heinrich what time it is, even.”

“What was that?” Her voice was sharp.

“Nothing. I don’t think Father Heinrich’s interested much in the moon shot.”

Tommy tried not to think about Father Heinrich, who had eyes the color of dirty ice and a mouth that never smiled at any kid older than seven. He spooned Corn Flakes into his mouth and read, never lifting his face from the newspaper. He read every article on the moon shot he could find, then the funnies, and even *Dear Abby* until he no longer felt his mother’s eyes upon him. When she got up and rinsed her coffee cup in the sink, he felt it was safe to read through the inspirational column written by an Episcopal minister. The column was about giving thanks to God for human ingenuity, like going to the moon, and asking for guidance on how to best help mankind with this wonderful knowledge. Why couldn’t Father Heinrich talk like that in his sermons?

“Mom, was there a special mass this morning for the moon shot? You said Dad went to one the day the very first astronaut went up. He never goes to church without you or us along.”

“I don’t remember any announcements about it on Sunday.” She looked at the kitchen clock, which was in the shape of a black-bottomed copper teakettle with a spoon for the hour hand and a fork for the minute hand. “You could skip swimming lessons or go late, and still make the nine o’clock mass.”

“Naw, I don’t want to miss the liftoff. I’ll just say some more prayers for them.” After a while, he asked, “Did Dad quit reading the paper? He never brings it in anymore.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He can sleep a little while longer if he doesn’t read it in the mornings.”

He studied her back. She was wearing one of Dad’s summer shirts, which hung loosely over her shorts. “How long is Dad going to keep working two jobs? We never even see him anymore. All he ever does when he is home is sleep.” He carried his cereal bowl to the sink and stood next to her. For several minutes, she stared out the window as if she could see for miles and not just as far as the garage and garden and Mr. Peavey’s back yard behind theirs. Her face was expressionless when she turned, then she blinked and stared at him closely, like a stranger who has just recognized an old friend.

“You’re as tall as I am,” she said. “Go get the yardstick. Let’s measure you now instead of waiting ‘til Sunday.”

He stretched his arm into the space between the refrigerator and the wall and pulled out a wooden yardstick. The top half of the yardstick curved slightly, the wood

beginning to warp between the words ‘Harper’s’ and ‘Lumber Co.’ He handed it to her, then stood beside the back door.

“Stand up straight, now.” She placed her hand on the top of his head and held her fingertips against the doorframe. “Step out now and measure.”

He butted the yardstick against the frame and marked the 36-inch placement with his thumbnail, then slid the stick up to her hand. “What’s it say?”

“Thirty-one and a half inches. Plus thirty-six. Did you push the stick flush against the woodwork?” She made a pencil mark on the narrow strip of wood of the inner doorjamb. “Five foot seven and a half. Probably closer to five eight, since the yardstick isn’t straight.” She wrote ‘Tommy 12’ above the pencil line and stepped back. “You’re taller than me, now. Almost half an inch.”

Tommy studied the penciled lines marching up the doorframe, marking every birthday for him and his sisters for the last six years. “Almost three inches since last year.”

“Just ‘cause you’re getting tall doesn’t mean you’re grown up. You’re still only eleven. For a few days, anyway.”

The sound of footsteps overhead meant his sisters were up. He could not make out the words, but he knew from the voice that Mary Fran was yelling.

“Godzilla’s awake,” he said.

“Don’t call your sister that.”

Ten-year-old Kate came into the kitchen, leading three-year-old Maggie by the hand. Mary Fran followed, her morning scowl pulled across her face.

Tommy gathered the newspaper from the table. "Guess what? I'm taller than Mom."

"You are not." Mary Fran said, as she opened a cupboard and removed plastic bowls.

"Am, too. We just measured. Go check the doorjamb."

Mom said, "Put those back, except one for Maggie. You didn't get up early enough to eat breakfast. It won't be a full hour before you go swimming." A bowl skidded past Maggie and disappeared over the edge of the table, clattering noisily on the floor. "Mary Fran, you pick that up right now and get a clean one," Mom snapped. "You do not toss dishes at people like you're dealing cards."

"Look, Mary Fran." Tommy pointed to the height marks on the doorframe. "I'm five eight, now. You're only five two. Kate's already five one, and she's a whole year-and-a-half younger than you." He waited for her to explode. "You're going to be short and squatty, just like Aunt Porkchop." He darted past the table, as he heard her begin to squall.

Mom snapped a dishtowel at him and missed. "Don't you call your Aunt Patty that." She followed him into the front room.

"But Uncle Frank calls her Porkchop."

"That doesn't make any difference. And don't call Mary Fran squatty."

He had heard her call her sister Patty far worse than squatty when she and her other sisters were together. He shrugged and said, "I'm sorry," in a weak voice.

"And don't start in with Mary Fran. It's too early in the morning for that nonsense."

It was 8:35, by the starburst shaped brass clock in the front room, which was always several minutes slow.

“The moon launch! The paper said they were going to lift off at 8:32.”

It seemed to take forever for the television set to warm up. The voice always came on a few seconds before the picture did. For a few heartsick moments, Tommy thought he had missed the launch. Relief washed over him when the picture came into focus and the rocket was still in the gantry.

“I wish we had a color TV. This’d be so neat to watch in color.”

“I’d rather have a new washing machine.” She tossed the dishtowel over her shoulder and leaned against the arched doorway between the dining room and the front room. “All those rocket launches look the same. If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. Well, if they do make it to the moon, I suppose that’s something.”

Tommy leaned forward to see and hear better. Even Walter Cronkite sounded excited, narrating a replay of the astronauts waving at the cameras as they walked toward the gantry.

Walter Cronkite said something about a “truly historic moment,” but all Tommy caught was that “word has been given to commence countdown.”

His sister Kate quietly joined him on the sofa, but Tommy did not notice. At the moment his head was full of numbers. He silently mouthed the countdown along with the disembodied voice from the television.

“Ten...nine...eight.”

Gray-black billows of smoke filled the screen, blotting out everything in view. Tommy was grasped by a sudden fear that Apollo 11 was exploding before his eyes.

Bright white tongues of fire darted below the dark clouds, then the nose cone appeared. The rocket rose slowly through the smoke, as if being lifted by an invisible hand. It slipped the confines of earth, breaking the gantry into pieces that dropped into the flames as if in slow motion. It climbed higher as the camera tracked it into the sky. The first booster exploded and fell away, slinging the nose cone forward at tremendous speed. The second booster exploded, and within a few seconds, there was nothing more on the screen except a tiny white dot as the camera followed the rocket out of sight. Tommy gasped for air, not even realizing that he had been holding his breath, and leaned back into the sofa.

“Godspeed, Columbia.” said the unmistakable voice of Walter Cronkite.

Mom headed toward the kitchen. “Say a prayer for the astronauts, Tommy, then go bring the swimsuits in off the line. You left them out again last night.”

“No, I didn’t. I got mine.” He pulled the waistband of his cut-offs away to show her the swimming trunks. “Mary Fran and Kate left theirs out.”

“You should’ve brought theirs in, too.”

“They need to look out for their own stuff. Why do I always have to do everything?”

“Because a boy should take care of his sisters.”

Tommy went outside to the clothesline and took down the swimsuits and towels. He pretended the pinch clothespins were darts and tossed them at the clothespin holder. At least four pins sailed neatly through a wide hole cut into the plastic bleach bottle that served as a clothespin bag. Sun had barely faded the words “Close Pins” printed in Magic Marker above the cut-out hole.

He wondered why his mother kept all the stuff he and his sisters made. The clothespin holder had to be four or five years old, from back when he was in Cub Scouts. She acted like it was such a big deal then, on Mother's Day, and didn't even get mad that he had ruined her good kitchen knife using it to cut plastic.

He wiped his bare feet on the doormat, letting the rough cocoa-husk fibers brush between his toes. There had been no dew on the grass to even dampen his feet. On the thermometer nailed to the back porch doorsill, the mercury column stopped two lines below the ninety-degree mark.

Another scorcher.

The astronauts!

Tommy looked around the neighboring yards. He was about to cross himself when he saw the back door open at Steve Caldwell's house, which was on the corner lot across Fourth Avenue, just parallel to the Ryan house. It was Steve's father, leaving for work.

Tommy said a fast Our Father in his head. Please, God. Let the astronauts get to the moon and back safe. Thank you. Amen.

A strange feeling swept over him, and he quickly stepped inside, as if to hide. He felt ashamed of being ashamed. As he made his way through the house, the notion that his prayers wouldn't count because he did not make the sign of the cross pushed its way into his conscience.

Which sin is worse, not wanting to show the world that you're Catholic, or not saying your prayers right?

The idea of having to mention either one to Father Heinrich in confession made a sick feeling in his stomach.

In the front room, his sisters were waiting for their swimsuits. Mary Fran said, “You’re going to make us late ‘cause you had to watch the stupid rocket launch.”

“Your legs ain’t broke. You could’ve gotten your own stuff off the line last night.” He tossed Kate and Mary Fran their swimsuits, and sat down on the sofa to wait for them.

There was a gentle knocking at the front door. He opened it for the neighbor girl. “Hi, Jenny. Sorry, we’re running late.”

“Hi, Tommy.” She smiled at him. Her ponytail brushed his cheek as she passed through the door, her hair giving off a piney scent like a Christmas tree. “I’m late, too. Did you see the liftoff? Daddy went to work late so we could watch it together. He said I’d remember this birthday the rest of my life.” She sat down on the footstool to wait with him.

“That’s right.” Her birthday was a few days before his. “Happy Birthday.” After a moment, he said, “It’s pretty neat, don’t you think? The astronauts starting out on your birthday, and on mine, they’re supposed to be on the moon.”

His sisters came downstairs, and they trouped outside. Mom called after them, “And don’t take a shortcut on the railroad tracks, even if you are late. Bums hang out on the tracks and grab little girls that walk there.”

“Jeesh, she says that every single day, like we’re too stupid to remember anything,” he muttered when they were out of sight of the house. If mothers had x-ray vision like Superman, his mom would have burned a hole all the way through the kitchen

window and into his back from a block away. “Don’t walk on the tracks. Don’t swim for one hour after you eat. Don’t call your sister names. Even if she is a pain in the neck. Yang-yang-yang.”

He did not notice that Jenny had fallen in step beside him until she spoke.

“Yeah. My mom’s like that, too. Like there’s supposed to be something magic about waiting exactly sixty minutes after you eat before you get in the water.”

“Shoot, Coach Horchow and Mr. Gahlen are always late anyway. We have to wait around the pool until they come.”

“Half the time they come carrying coffee cups to lessons,” she said.

“And then by the time they make us kids do jumping jacks and stuff, it’s nine twenty-five already. My mom thinks I’m going to get a cramp and drown if I have even one swallow of bacon fifty-five minutes before I put my big toe in the water.”

“How’s anyone going to drown with Coach there and all those life guards around teaching swimming lessons?”

“Hey, what’re you doing for your birthday?” If she was having a party, he hadn’t been invited.

“I’m getting my ears pierced. Mom’s taking me to the doctor this afternoon to have them done. Grandpa and Nana’ll come over for dinner and cake. That’s about all, I guess. Nothing much.”

Kate piped up. “Ooh, I want to get my ears pierced, but Mom won’t let me.”

“I’m never getting my ears pierced,” Mary Fran said, turning around and briefly walking backwards to make this pronouncement. “Grandma Connor says only fast girls have pierced ears.” She turned around.

Tommy and Kate glared at the back of Mary Fran's head. He said, "I bet you don't even know what fast means."

"Do, too."

"Prove it."

"I don't have to."

"Ha! You can't because you don't know."

Jenny said, " 'Bout all the high school girls have their ears pierced now, and lots of grown women have them, too. My Nana's had them for years, and Mom got hers done last year."

"Mary Fran wouldn't get her ears pierced even if Mom let her," Kate said. "She's afraid of needles. She passed out last summer when she stepped on the nail and had to get a tetanus shot."

"Did not." Mary Fran drew her fist back to slug Kate on the arm, but the sound of a car coming behind them made them move to the side of the street.

They had turned the corner from Main Street onto Third Avenue, which had no sidewalk. A black-and-red Impala convertible, driven by a woman, drew near. The driver's face was hidden behind large sunglasses, and the tails of her scarf flapped behind her as the car passed by.

Tommy waved the rolled-up towel in his hand in salute to his friend Renfrew Harper, who was in the passenger seat. Renfrew turned and waved, and called out, "Hi, Jenny." Renfrew's mother reached to pull him down in his seat. The car accelerated and disappeared down the street.

In the shuffle when the car passed, Jenny and Mary Fran now walked together, slightly ahead of Tommy and Kate.

“I think Renfrew Harper’s the cutest boy in seventh grade,” Mary Fran said.

Tommy didn’t hear Jenny say anything in reply, and watched her head closely for even the slightest nod. “How would you know who’s the cutest boy in seventh grade, Mary Fran? You’re only going to be a sixth grader, and still going to St. James. You haven’t even seen all the kids who’ll be coming in from the country schools for junior high.”

Junior High. The words even sounded a little scary. He decided from now on he would call it junior high, like Jenny did, instead of seventh grade. When school started, the day after Labor Day, for the first time since Tommy could remember he would not have to walk to school with his sisters.

“I bet Renfrew Harper’s the cutest boy in the whole county,” Mary Fran said.

A sharp reply formed in Tommy’s head, but he let it go. Poor Mary Fran, he thought, watching her walk beside Jenny and comparing the two. Her dark crimped hair refused to curl like Maggie’s or lie smooth and flat like his and Kate’s. Jenny’s ponytail curved in a smooth, light brown loop that ended between her shoulder blades. A peppering of rust colored freckles wrapped around the backs of Mary Fran’s legs while Jenny’s were lightly tanned, without a freckle or mark anywhere from what he could see.

Kate’s rubber thong shoes slapped against her heels as she walked in a slightly pigeon-toed gait, much slower than the others. The thongs were Mom’s shower shoes, much too big for Kate, and she had to walk with her toes pinched together to keep them on. “Where’d you get the beach cover-up, Jenny?” she asked. “That’s neat.”

Jenny was wearing a dress-like garment made from two green and blue bath towels sewn together, and carried a bag made from another matching towel. The straps of her bathing suit were visible, next to the drawstrings that held the towel dress from her shoulders.

“My Nana’s teaching me how to sew,” Jenny said. “This is real easy. You just sew two towels together and use cord for the shoulder straps. And fold another towel in half for the bag.” She held the bag out to Kate to examine.

Tommy touched the beach bag, also. “You did a real good job.”

When Jenny looked up at him and smiled, he detected a minty toothpaste smell on her breath. He could feel a rolled-up towel inside the bag, and little else. The thought struck him that if she carried her wet bathing suit rolled up in a towel, like he and his sisters did after swimming, then Jenny wouldn’t have anything on beneath the towel dress but her underwear. He dropped the beach bag as if it were scorching hot and stepped back, relieved to hear Mary Fran urging them to hurry as she swiftly climbed up the overpass embankment to the railroad tracks.

Jenny followed easily. Tommy moved up the bank slowly, pulling Kate behind him as she maneuvered the ruts and loose gravel in her rubber thongs. At the top, Kate stepped hesitantly from one wooden cross tie to another. He pulled her elbow gently to get her into the center of the track, where the gravel nearly filled in the gaps between the ties. Even this early in the morning, the sun’s reflection on the polished tops of the rails hurt his eyes. When he closed his eyes for a moment, green afterglows burned on the inside of his eyelids in the shape of the glare spots on the tracks. The charred smell of creosote oozing from the cross ties hung in the air. He tried walking tightrope fashion on

the tops of the rails, like Mary Fran and Jenny, but he could not stay balanced for as long as they could. Tommy decided he would rather hang back with Kate, and watch Jenny walk the rails.

Kate nudged his arm and pointed. “Look,” she whispered. “Jenny’s shaved her legs.”

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After lunch, Tommy crossed the street to Steve Caldwell’s house.

At the door, Steve handed him a cardboard box. “Wait a minute,” he said. “I need to get something from the garage.”

The Caldwell’s garage smelled like the Ryan’s garage. Both had the same earthy scent of dirt floors that even the odor of motor oil could not overcome, but the resemblance ended with the smell. Tommy’s Dad kept their garage as tidy as Mom kept the house, with garden tools hanging on orderly rows of nails and baby food jars of sorted nuts and screws held by pegboard clips.

“Nothing but slotted heads,” Steve muttered. “I need a Phillips screwdriver. A little one.” He pulled out soggy cardboard boxes from beneath the workbench and poked around.

While Steve rummaged through the boxes, Tommy glanced around the garage, at the leaf rake with broken tines hanging from two nails and the rust-edged snow shovel leaning against the wall at an angle that would not defy gravity much longer. He cast his eyes everywhere at the same things he had been seeing for years in the Caldwell garage, anything to avoid the follow-you-everywhere-around-the-room eyes of the woman on the

calendar. Tacked to the side of some haphazard shelves made from packing pallets, she had been staring back at Tommy since August 1966, watching him with the same haughty expression, as if he were rusted in place before her along with the Folgers cans of nails and mismatched bolts and washers. In the photograph, she kneeled sideways, holding a vase with a Greek zigzag line along its rim. Her elaborately styled long hair curled around her face, accentuating a pouty smile, and dropped in a curling pony-tail pendant just above the top of her toga. He knew that already among the greasy thumbprints on the corners of the clear plastic sheet were his own, and lifting it would mean having to add bad thoughts to the list of sins at his next confession, trying to squeeze them quickly in between swearing and fighting with his sister and eating a banana before communion, hoping Father Heinrich would not demand to know what bad thoughts a boy his age would be having. Tommy glanced at Steve's back and lifted the plastic sheet. The woman was naked, with large pink breasts only partly hidden behind the vase she was holding. Something about the size and droop of her breasts always made Tommy think uncomfortably about the dairy cows on his Uncle Frank's farm, but he had to look, anyway.

Steve's voice brought him up short. "Found one." He held up a Phillips screwdriver. "This should work. Come on."

They carried the boxes a block over to Main Street, to Renfrew Harper's house. Tommy had been to the door many times, on his paper route, and had played ball in the yard with Renfrew, but had never been inside the house itself since the Harpers moved in at the end of May. In answer to the bell, they heard Renfrew's voice above them, on the upstairs porch.

“I’ll be down in a second.”

Shortly, Renfrew opened the front door and crossed the screen porch to unlatch the door. “Hey, Caldwell, did you bring them?”

“Yeah. Under my train stuff. But I got to get them back before my old man comes home.”

Tommy wondered what it was Steve had brought beside a model train set. The sudden chill of air conditioning felt wonderful as he followed the other boys through a long hallway to the stairs. He walked behind them, glancing at the rooms along the hallway.

“Careful,” Renfrew warned as he stepped past a small table on the stair landing, and pointed to a china figurine. “ You knock that over and my mom will have a cow. It’s some of her Doulton.”

Tommy didn’t know what Doulton was, but nodded as if he did. He stopped to study the figurine of a man dressed in clothes like in the old Sherlock Holmes movies, but with a sheep and a shepherd’s crook. The only shepherd figurines Tommy had ever seen were the ones in the church nativity set, with chalky scars in their robes and the tops of their crooks missing. He hurried to catch up with the other boys, down a long hallway on the second floor with doors opening to large bedrooms on both sides. Renfrew opened a door at the end of the hall, and they stepped onto a screened porch that ran the entire width of the house front. Going into the heat and humidity again after being in air conditioning felt like walking into a wall. Tommy picked his way carefully through model train parts spread across the floor. This was a real sleeping porch, not like the tiny porch at his house that could barely hold an army cot. Four daybeds lined the perimeter

of the porch, and there was still plenty of room for small tables and an old vinyl recliner. A box fan and two circulating fans blew warm air around.

Another boy was kneeling on the floor, assembling model train tracks.

“Hi, Mark,” Tommy said. “How’s it going?”

Mark Veer nodded and saluted him with a track section in his hand.

Tommy knelt down and lifted pieces of Steve’s model train tracks from the box he had carried. Steve had the Lionel Circus Train set, and Tommy’s favorite piece was the blue boxcar with the plastic giraffe’s head poking through a hole in the roof. There were two special sections of track that tripped a sensor to make the giraffe pull its head inside when the car went into the Styrofoam mountain tunnel. He got up to get the mountain piece from the box Steve had carried over.

Steve and Renfrew were sitting cross-legged on one of the day beds, with a pile of magazines between them.

“Want one?” Steve pushed a *Playboy* toward Tommy, without looking up from his page.

Tommy hesitated. He was about to say, ‘I thought we come over here to play trains,’ but the word ‘play’ stuck in his throat. He took the *Playboy* and the Styrofoam mountain back to the other side of the porch.

“What about you, Veer?” Renfrew said, as he turned his magazine sideways and pulled out the centerfold. “You too cherry to look at them?”

“I can see *Playboys* anytime I want to at my dad’s shop,” Mark said. “There’s magazines there that make *Playboy* look like *Archie* comic books. Where’s the screwdriver?”

Steve leaned over and pulled the screwdriver from the box near his feet, and tossed it side-handed toward Mark. The screwdriver skittered past Mark and hit the porch wall, leaving a gouge mark. Tommy couldn't believe Steve had done something like that. Renfrew lifted his eyes only briefly, but did not seem concerned.

“Way to go, Caldwell. Look what you did.” Mark shook his head and picked up the screwdriver.

Tommy busied himself putting track sections together, and connecting to the track Mark had already set up.

“It's ready,” Mark announced when the tracks had been connected from all four collective train sets. Steve and Mark each had a Lionel train set, and Renfrew had two. Mark placed a steam engine locomotive on the tracks and selected cars to couple behind it. He nodded at Tommy and flipped the control switch. The train began snaking its way around elaborate turns and loops. Tommy knelt with his cheek to the floor, sighting directly down the tunnel in the Styrofoam mountain. For a brief moment, he saw the engine headlight as it passed through the tunnel. When it seemed like the train was just about to smash into his face, it turned away suddenly, and he got up in time to see the giraffe pull its head into its boxcar before the mouth of the tunnel, then pop out again afterward.

Mark said, “My brother Pete's in the Air Force, and when we went to see him at tech school, he showed us this train setup at the rec center on base. Man, you should see it. It must cover thirty, forty feet. On plywood set up on barrels, with holes in the center to run the trains that you have to crawl underneath to get to. It had whole little towns and farms, and an air base, and cars and people, and everything, all in scale.”

Watching the train go around was not as interesting as laying out the tracks and arranging the few pieces of model scenery and buildings. While Mark busied himself with the screwdriver and one of the control switches, Tommy sprawled on one of the daybeds with the *Playboy*. He had seen *Playboys* before, in quick peeks stolen at the barbershop when the grown men didn't seem to be watching. There was always at least one *Playboy* in the stack of magazines in the barbershop, among ancient issues of *Field and Stream*. This was the first time he had been able to look at one all the way through. The girls in the magazine were much younger and prettier than the calendar woman in the Caldwell's garage. Looking through the magazine gave him a strange feeling, and he studied Steve and Renfrew often to gauge their reactions.

"You know they ain't real, don't you?" Mark pointed his screwdriver at the *Playboy* Tommy was reading. "The girls. They ain't really that good looking."

Renfrew asked, "What're you talking about?"

"It's all trick photography and the pictures are doctored up afterwards."

"Ah, you're full of it."

"No, really," Mark insisted. "My oldest brother told me how they do it. They use fish-eye lenses on the cameras so the girls' boobs look bigger, and then they paint out all their freckles and moles on the photographs. Plus they wear a ton of makeup."

Tommy considered this. There were no girls in Mormon's Crossing as pretty as the ones in the magazine, and he had never seen anyone except babies with skin so perfectly pink as the Playmate of the Month he had been looking at. None of the real girls and women he knew would be as happy as Miss August 1968 seemed to be about being jaybird naked. "Mr. Peevey, across the street, says that all these space pictures are fake,

too. That the pictures of the earth they been sending back are made in Hollywood and the government's spending all the NASA money on something else."

"Mr. Peevey's a crazy old fart," Steve said. "My dad says he's drunk all the time."

"He's not so bad. He used to be a lot different before his wife died."

Renfrew got up. "Wait'll you see what I got." He went inside the house and returned a few minutes later. "I saved it from Fourth of July. I'm going to light this baby up when they get to the moon."

In his palm lay a plastic cherry bomb, slick and red as blood.

"Cool. " Mark picked it up delicately by the fuse, like you would pick up a real cherry by its stem.

"Is that what you put in my paper bag Fourth of July?" Tommy asked. "I had to pay Mr. Peterson for the papers that got blowed up and go around apologizing to the rest of my customers 'cause there weren't enough extra ones left to give them."

A few weeks ago, Uncle Frank had brought sparklers, which were o.k. for girls and little kids, and black snakes, which smelled bad and left greasy ash smears on the sidewalk. Neither had satisfied Tommy's craving for real, loud, illegal fireworks smuggled across the Missouri border. He had not even seen the July Fourth fireworks display at the county fairgrounds this year because Dad had to work his second job and couldn't take them. Steve Caldwell had invited Renfrew instead of Tommy to go to the fairgrounds with his family.

Tommy picked up the cherry bomb to examine. It seemed both benign and dangerous at the same time, and made the old-style paper mache cherry bombs look like wads of paper spitballs.

Mark said, “My brother Mike’s got an M-80 he’s been saving, but he can’t decide whether to use it Sunday when the astronauts hit the moon or blow up pumpkins with it on Halloween.”

Tommy was nearly finished looking at the *Playboy*. A watch advertisement in the back of the magazine reminded him that it must be nearly time to start his paper route. “What time is?”

Renfrew glanced at his wristwatch. “Three-forty.”

“May I use your bathroom?”

“First door on the right’s my bedroom,” Renfrew said. “Bathroom’s through there.”

The air conditioning felt great again, although after a few minutes he thought the air inside had a faintly stale odor. He tried to imagine what it would be like having a bedroom this big for himself. Renfrew’s bedroom was much bigger than the room his three sisters shared, which was the largest bedroom at his house. He knew it was impolite to snoop, but he could not help looking around Renfrew’s room. On the desktop was a partially assembled model airplane, a B-52 with only one wing attached and a thumb-print crater on its fuselage where Renfrew had wiped a spot of glue. Tommy shook his head. Renfrew had put the parts together without even filing down the armature nubs. Didn’t he know it worked better to paint the inside parts first, before gluing them together?

Next to the model plane was a dressy-looking wristwatch with a silver-tone band.

“Damn,” he said softly. “He’s got two watches.”

Tommy looped it over his own wrist, then set it down in what he hoped was the exact same spot. All the furniture in Renfrew’s bedroom matched, from bed frame to dressers to bookshelves and desk, but seemed too modern and out of place in this high-ceilinged room with its dark wallpaper and oak mantled fireplace. Renfrew hadn’t made his bed or picked up his dirty clothes from the floor. An open door on the left side of the fireplace led to a cavernous closet. The door on the opposite side had to be to the bathroom. Tommy stepped on a wet towel left on the bathroom floor and picked it up and hung it on a towel rack. The bathroom had a second door, to another bedroom. There were only two toothbrushes in the holder. He pulled a small Dixie cup from a wall dispenser and filled it with cold water.

He returned to the porch, and said, “I got to go now, for my paper route. Thanks, Ren, for having me over. See you guys.” He found his own way out of the house.

#

The smell of newsprint and ink permeated the office of the *Trailblazer*. Tommy walked past the counter back into the press area. A hot breeze from the huge fan in front of the open loading-dock doors blew his hair back from his face. Randy Jamison and a truck driver were pushing movers dollies stacked high with *Des Moines Tribunes* when Randy noticed him. Randy placed his thumb and forefinger to his mouth and whistled shrilly above the roar of the fan and the rhythmic pounding of the printing-press drum. He motioned Tommy forward.

Tommy nodded and joined them, not bothering to speak over the din.

Randy leaned close enough for Tommy to smell cigarette breath and shouted, “You unload the rest of these papers while I go help Mr. Peterson.”

There were inky fingerprints on the corners of Randy’s mouth. Jenny Jamison’s older brother usually had something tucked behind his ear, and today there was a tooth-marked pencil behind his right ear, and a cigarette behind the left one.

Did his ears always stick out that much, like Charlie Brown’s, Tommy wondered, or had poking pencils behind them all the time made them that way?

Randy joined Mr. Peterson, the newspaper editor and owner, at the printing press and the two of them worked smoothly together. A long strip of paper snaked its way through an intricate series of rollers and over a larger revolving drum. At the end of the machinery, pages of Mormon’s Crossing’s biweekly paper, *The Trailblazer*, were ejected into a metal sided frame and piled into a neat stack, where Mr. Peterson and Randy alternated in removing the completed issues and folding them in half.

Tommy struggled to move stacks of *Tribunes* onto the worktable as fast as the truck driver, and raced to follow him to the truck for the last batch. When he returned, Jenny Jamison was at the worktable the news carriers used to fold papers. She had taken over her brother’s old route since he started working in the press area. She looked up and smiled, her lips forming the words, “Hi, Tommy,” inaudible over the noise.

He picked up a stack of papers and joined her, folding evening *Tribunes* into rolls and securing them with green rubber bands. From time to time, he stole quick glances at Jenny, trying to see if her ears stuck out like her brother’s. Her ears seemed all right, small and flat, o.k. except for some things that looked like steel rods pinned through the

lobes. He remembered that she was going to have her ears pierced today. Before he could say anything to her, she hoisted the canvas news bag over her shoulder and waved. By the time he finished rolling the thirty papers for his route and went outside to his bike, Jenny was gone.

A red ten-speed was parked next to Tommy's bike, Eddie Brasovich's bike. Eddie's bike was a Western Auto, not as nice as Renfrew Harper's Peugeot or even Steve Caldwell's Schwinn, but it was still a ten-speed and Tommy felt ashamed of his balloon-tired antique. He hoisted the heavy canvas carrier bag into the handlebar basket, and held the bicycle upright until he could swing his leg over and get moving. A four-inch long scar zig-zagged down the bike's front fender, a souvenir from the first time the weight of the newspaper bag had toppled the bike over. Ever since then, the kickstand would not stay secure to keep the bike parked upright, and he had to lay it down on the grass or lean it against buildings. He had brushed over the scar with model airplane paint, but Air Force blue was much brighter than the chalky, sun-faded paint of the fifteen-year old bike. The bike had belonged to Mom's youngest brother.

Before leaving home, he had tucked a dollar bill into his pocket, intending to buy bubble gum and a *Mad* magazine at the drugstore, but seeing Jenny reminded him of her birthday.

He pedaled half a block over to the stores lining the courthouse square, and stopped in front of the optometrist's office, which was faced with a wall of brick high enough to lean his bike against. Most of the stores were fronted with tall display windows. Renfrew's Jewelry Store, next door, also had the same high, brick façade, but

Tommy did not feel right propping his bike there. He peered into the jewelry store's high window, shading his eyes against the afternoon sun's glare reflected in the glass.

Two display towers turned slowly at opposite ends of the window, tiny carousels of gems and gold twinkling in the sunlight. One held engagement rings with small diamonds, nestled in velvet boxes. Gold bracelet charms and earrings glittered on the other carousel. He waited impatiently as parades of tiny seashells, tennis rackets, and telephones slowly paraded past. Jenny was not the charm bracelet type. The earrings held Tommy's attention, especially a pair with a white cameo profile of a woman's face on a black background. He remembered the difficult time he had had carving a racecar from a block of pine for Boy Scouts and tried to imagine carving on a small surfaced rock like cameo. Along the front edge of the window were several rows of watches. He looked for several minutes at a man's Timex watch, which had a large clock face and a black leather strap. On a small card by the watch was printed, 'Waterproof' and 'Luminescent,' but no price tag was visible. Dirty fingerprints dotted the window glass and they smeared when he wiped them with ink-stained hands. He rubbed his hands on his cut-offs, and walked on to McClellan's Variety Store.

Once inside the store, he wasn't sure what to get, and began to browse along the aisles. There was a display of earrings, but they were all clunky looking plastic things, as big as coat buttons. He picked up a card of hair ribbons, of various colors, and was suddenly aware that someone was standing next to him, close enough for him to smell coffee breath.

"Can I help you?"

The sales clerk's voice startled Tommy and he dropped the hair ribbons. "I want to get something for a birthday." His voice sounded tinny.

The clerk was a middle-aged woman, a few inches shorter than him. She had no eyebrow hair, and had drawn a single brown line over each eye. The skin over her left eye curled up, and the penciled eyebrow formed a crooked question mark.

"It's for my sister," he said quickly. "She's twelve."

"A toy?"

"She's too old for toys."

"How about a transistor radio? We have some nice ones for fifteen dollars."

"No, I don't have that much to spend."

"What about a manicure set?"

"No," he said.

"How much do you have to spend?"

Tommy looked down. He curled his toes as tightly as he could, away from the hole in the tip of his sneaker. The legs of his cut-off jeans shorts were cut unevenly, and the row of unraveling threads of the left pant leg was lower than on the right one. "A dollar," he mumbled.

"What?"

"A dollar." He did not mean to say it so loud. "O.k. if I just look around?"

She nodded, but hovered nearby as he walked along the aisles.

There didn't seem to be anything cheap enough for him to buy that didn't look cheap. A pen and pencil set in the stationery section looked nice, but cost five dollars. He was about to give up when a display of small figures caught his attention. There was a

small old-fashioned sewing machine, a tiny typewriter, a horse, a dog. He picked up a miniature space capsule, with Apollo printed on it in raised letters, and saw a pencil sharpener hole in the base. The sharpener felt surprisingly heavy for something so small. 'Solid Brass' and 'Since 1892' were printed on the box. He looked for a price and brightened when he saw ninety-eight cents written in pencil.

#

From the front porch step, Tommy watched Jenny's house, which was across the street and two houses down. He sat in the shadows, away from the flickering blue television light shining through the door and window, the same blue light shining from most of the houses along Oak Street. The sound of canned laughter from the program his sisters were watching blared out the window, but did not interrupt the ratchety song of crickets. The yellow porch light came on at Jenny's, and dark figures of people got into a car and left. He scratched a mosquito bite behind his knee until the welt began to burn with sweat salt. He had taken a shower after dinner, and the mosquitoes seemed to relish the taste of Dial soap. He stood up when the light went out on Jenny's porch.

This is not a such a good idea after all, he thought. Just march right up and knock on the door. Happy Birthday. Here's this crummy pencil sharpener I got you. I'm sure you'll love it, specially after all the nice stuff your family gave you.

There was a slight movement on the Jamison porch, someone sitting on the swing. He stood and began walking slowly, on his side of the street, under the dark umbrella of the big maple tree. He walked to the end of the block, then crossed the street, hoping it would look as if he was coming from Mark Veer's house.

The closer he came to her house, the more certain he became that it was Jenny on the porch swing.

“Hi,” he called out, trying to make his voice seem casual, but it didn’t sound right.

“Hi, Tommy.”

It was Jenny. He approached the porch, looking around for her family. The front door was closed, an air conditioner set in a side window hummed noisily. “Did you have a good birthday?”

“Yeah, real nice. I got some new clothes for school.”

“How’d it go getting your ears pierced? I didn’t get a chance to ask you at the newspaper office. Did it hurt?”

“The first one did, a little, but the numbing medicine was working better when he did the second one. Want to see?”

He stepped up to the porch and walked almost on tiptoe toward her, slipping quickly past the window.

“Here.” She leaned forward into the yellow rectangle of light falling from the window and pulled the hair back from her face. “These are just surgical studs. I have to wear these a week, and twist them around several times a day, until my ears heal, then I can start wearing earrings. I have to wear steel or gold posts, though, like on good earrings. I’m allergic to nickel.”

The chains suspending the porch swing creaked when he sat next to her. They pushed the swing back in unison, then lifted their feet up to let it sway.

Back in June, about this time of night, they had been playing hide-and-seek with the neighborhood kids, and they both ended up in the same hiding place, behind the

Gahlen's bridal wreath shrubs. They had crouched together, on the dirt, and just about everything he whispered to Jenny made her giggle until she had to clap her hands over her mouth to keep silent while Mary Fran, who was "it," walked by them. Now, he couldn't think of a thing to say.

She asked, "You excited about starting junior high?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too. It'll be different, changing rooms for every class."

"We'll probably be in a some of the same classes. Maybe." Suddenly, he wasn't so sure. He had never been to public school before. Who knows what happens when you get to junior high?

"We'll have Mrs. Gahlen for science. Won't that be weird, having your neighbor for a teacher?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"We won't get her 'til second semester, though. A substitute's teaching all her classes until after she has her baby."

"She's pregnant? She doesn't look it. That's probably why she hasn't been out working on her tan for a while. I thought it was 'cause of the heat."

He had not seen Mrs. Gahlen outside sunbathing, with her kitchen timer ticking away at exactly ten minutes for each side, since May, long before the summer heat had fired up..

"She has to stay on bed rest, or she might lose the baby." Jenny said this in the tone of voice his mother and her sisters used whenever he asked them 'what're you

talking about?' They would wave their hands at him like they were shooing away flies and say 'woman talk.'

"Oh," he said and nodded as if he understood perfectly what she meant. He kept quiet, hoping for more.

Jenny lifted her legs up and held them straight out. He pushed the swing a little faster. The street lamp had drained the color from the world, making her blouse look blue, but he knew it was probably white like the straps of her sandals. She scratched the top of her knee.

"Skeeter bite?" He asked.

"I'm wearing hose. They're hot and they itch."

"Hose?"

"Pantyhose. You know, nylons."

Was there a note of exasperation in Jenny's voice, like he was some little kid pestering her? Hose was such a grown-up word. Mom always called them stockings, or nylons, which he and his sisters had learned not to touch when she washed them out on Sunday nights and hung them over the towel bar to dry.

"So, what did you get for your birthday?"

Nana and Grandpa Schliemel gave me a sewing kit and a pair of pearl earrings, and Mom and Dad gave me a necklace with a pearl that matches the earrings, and a pair of gold starter earrings, for when the steel posts come out, and some clothes, and Randy gave me a pen and pencil set, and Grandma and Grandpa Jamison gave me a savings bond."

"Sounds nice."

They rocked for a while, not talking. Tommy scratched the mosquito bite behind his knee until he felt blood. The crickets chirped louder, so loud he wanted to yell at them to shut up.

Jenny said, “You want to come in for some cake and ice cream?”

The idea was tempting. He debated between extra chores as punishment for not hearing his mother call him to come home, or telephoning that he was at Jenny’s house and having to put up with Mary Fran’s teasing. “No, thanks.” What time was it? Mom would be calling him any moment now. “I got you something. For your birthday.” He held out the pencil sharpener. He wished he had wrapped it, with a bow and card and everything, but that would have cost more than the gift, and he suddenly wished he had never said anything about getting her something in the first place.

“What is it?” Her voice sounded excited. “I can’t make it out in the dark.” She held it up to the light from the window.

“It’s only a little pencil sharpener. But it’s shaped like a space capsule. I thought it’d make a nice keepsake, you know, since they went up on your birthday.”

“That’s so neat. Thank you, Tommy.”

His face felt warm, and he was grateful for the darkness.

She asked, “You sure you don’t want to come in and have a piece of cake?”

He was about to say yes, but his mother called his name from across the street. “I got to go in now.”

They walked to the end of the porch, which was completely in the shadows. He could sense her next to him, the pine tree smell of her hair filling the air, and something else, something sweet welling up from the base of her throat. Perfume.

“Happy birthday,” he said, and suddenly kissed her, lightly, not knowing if he had touched her cheek or her mouth, then jumped off the porch and ran as fast as he could.

Chapter Two

Thursday, July 17, 1969

“NEXT STOP: THE MOON”

Beneath the banner headline across the *Register's* front page was “All is Well on Apollo’s Historic Journey. Armstrong: Trip is ‘Magnificent.’ ” Tommy dropped the paper on the kitchen table. He reached around his mother and snatched a piece of bacon..

“Put it back,” she said.

“I’m starving.”

“That’s for lunch. I fixed some bacon and eggs for your dad, and decided to go ahead and cook enough for lunch, before it gets too hot. Get yourself some cereal.”

He dropped the bacon strip back onto the paper-towel covered plate. “What’re you doing?”

“Blanching tomatoes. Bring that knife and board over here.” She wiped her sleeve across her forehead and pushed back her hair with her forearm. “Damn, it’s hot. Kitchen’s like a steam bath already, and it’s not even eight o’clock.”

He looked at her in surprise. Mom hardly ever swore.

She finished the last tomato and turned the stove burner off. “So, are they on the moon yet?” Her voice did not sound as if she was really interested.

“Still heading that way. They’re supposed to get there on Sunday. You want the paper?” He offered her the front section.

“No, I just want to sit down a while.”

The kitchen was full of small sounds, the tick of the wall clock and the gentle clinking of Mason jars vibrating in the canning pot on the back of the stove, yet it was Mom’s silence that Tommy was most aware of. He cleared his throat, and said, “You think it’ll rain, today? Paper says scattered thunderstorms.”

“What’s that?” She fanned herself with an advertisement insert. “We could use the rain. Anything to break this heat spell, except a bad storm.”

“When I brought Mr. Peevey his paper yesterday, he said dog days came early this year. What’re dog days?”

“I don’t know.”

“The almanac shows dog days are next month, but it didn’t say what they are.”

“People always call it dog days when the summer gets too hot and sticky. Go look it up in the library.” She rubbed a glass of ice water slowly over her face.

“Mom? I heard Mrs. Gahlen’s going to have a baby. Did you know that?”

She looked at him sharply, then glanced away. “Yeah. Mary Fran’s going to start cleaning their house for a while, so she can earn some money of her own. Pauline’s supposed to stay off her feet so she won’t lose another baby.”

“What happens when a woman loses a baby?” He remembered his newborn cousin’s funeral last year, and how unreal and doll-like the baby had seemed in its tiny white coffin.

She studied his face closely, then lowered her voice to that hushed tone she and her sisters used when they didn’t want kids to hear what they were talking about. “The baby dies inside, before it’s ready to be born.”

“Does a baby that dies before it’s born go to Limbo, too, with the babies that got borned, but died without getting baptized?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.” She got up and started peeling tomatoes.

“Doesn’t it seem kind of unfair, that babies can’t get into heaven just because someone didn’t sprinkle them with holy water? Babies don’t even have any sins yet. It don’t seem right to keep them out of heaven, does it?”

“Why do you ask me such questions? Go ask Father Heinrich if it bothers you so much.”

Father Heinrich was the last person on earth Tommy would ever ask a question.

She said, “Go get the bathing suits and take them up to the girls.”

At the top of the stairs, his youngest sister Maggie waddled out of the bathroom, wearing just a pair of shorts and dragging her shirt along the floor. She saw him, and held

up her hands to him. “Mary Fran won’t help me.” At three, she lisped, and her r’s came out sounding like w’s.

“Close the door, Maggie!” Mary Fran yelled from the bathroom.

He caught a glimpse of Mary Fran’s broad, pale back and thighs and white underpants.

Mary Fran squealed when she saw Tommy’s reflection in the mirror. She grabbed a towel to her chest, and whirled around. “I’m telling Mom!” Her voice was muffled by toothpaste. A large drop of toothpaste foam fell from her mouth onto the throw rug. She wiped her face with a corner of the towel clutched in front of her and slammed the door.

“I didn’t see nothing worth looking at, anyway!” Tommy yelled through the closed door.

He led Maggie into his nearby bedroom. “You’ve got your shorts on backwards.” He sat down on the bed and drew her into his lap. In a few deft movements, he pulled her shorts down and off. “Here. See the pockets? They go in front.” She kicked her legs and giggled as he tried to maneuver a pants leg over her chubby toes. “Stop it, Mag.” He stilled one wiggling foot after the other until the shorts were over her ankles, and set her on her feet. “You’re a big girl, now. You can do the rest.” He hooked his thumbs through the collar opening of her striped shirt, and gathered up the sides in his long fingers. She tried to put an arm through the neck opening. “That’s not where it goes. You know better than that.” He pulled the shirt over her head and helped her arms through the sleeves.

Kate appeared in the doorway, holding a rolled up towel. Tommy pulled one of the swimming suits draped over his shoulder and tossed it to her.

“What’s with Maggie?” she asked. “She’s been acting like a baby lately. She crawled in bed with me again, last night. Why am I always the one she gets in with when she’s scared?” Kate leaned across the hall and pounded on the bathroom door, “Hurry up, Mary Fran. We ain’t got all day.” She turned to Tommy, “I wish they’d left Maggie in the crib and not even flipped it over into the convert-a-bed. When she was still in the crib, at least she couldn’t get out to crawl in with me after she’s wet the bed.”

Mary Fran came out of the bathroom, wrapped in the plaid flannel bathrobe that everybody but Maggie used. “I’m going to tell Mom you swore,” she said, looking at Kate, and then at Tommy, “and you’re a peeking Tom.”

“Pee is not a swear word,” Kate snapped at the same time that Tommy threw Mary Fran’s swimsuit.

The swimsuit draped itself over Mary Fran’s face and head. When she snatched it away, her wiry hair recoiled like a spring, “I just got through fixing my hair.”

“Could’ve fooled me. Bozo Head.” The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

Mary Fran rushed downstairs, the tails of the flannel bathrobe flapping on each step and wails of “Mom” trailing behind her.

Kate shook her head at Tommy. “Come on, Maggie. Let’s get your breakfast.”

Maggie had sucked her thumb contentedly throughout the entire exchange. The thumb came out with a small popping noise when Kate pulled it gently from her mouth. Maggie sing-songed “Bozo Head, Bozo Head,” softly, to herself, as if memorizing the words.

“Shush, Maggie,” Kate said.

“Great,” Tommy muttered to himself as he folded the sheet on the army cot on the sleeping porch and brought the pillow inside his room to the bed. “Just great.”

He went to the hallway linen closet and pulled out a clean towel. As he was rolling a pair of underwear into the towel, he heard the indignant stomping that meant Mary Fran was coming upstairs.

How could anyone *walk* mad?

She blocked his way in the hall. “You’re in trouble, now,” she said, and slugged him hard on the upper arm.

Tommy was still rubbing his arm when he walked into the kitchen. He was surprised to see Jenny sitting at the table with Kate and Maggie. “Hi, Jenny.”

“Hi, Tommy.” Jenny returned with a quick smile.

Her smile was the same smile she gave him yesterday morning when she said hello to him, the same smile she had for him every day, as if last night was no different from any other night.

Mary Fran came into the kitchen from the basement. “Mom says you have to take my turn washing dishes the rest of the week for calling me names.”

“Says you. Hey, Maggie, did I call Mary Fran a name?”

Maggie turned to him and smiled, as Corn Flakes slid from her spoon onto the floor.

“What’d I call Mary Fran? You remember?”

Maggie slowly licked the spoon like a lollipop, smacked her lips, and said, “Bozo head.”

“Good girl.”

“What do you call Mary Fran, now?”

“Bozo head.”

Mary Fran stomped out of the kitchen, whining “Mom” as she went downstairs to the basement.

He wet a paper towel and wiped the floor by Maggie’s chair.

Jenny shook her head. “I’m glad I don’t fight with my brother the way you and Mary Fran fight.”

“That’s ‘cause your brother’s not a pain in the neck like Mary Fran,” Kate said. “Tommy and I never fight. Do we?”

Their mother appeared in the doorway, a basket of laundry balanced on her hip. “Here.” She handed the basket to Tommy. “Go hang these sheets up. Not only will you take Mary Fran’s turn washing dishes the rest of the week, but you’ll go over to help her clean the Gahlen’s house today, too.”

He didn’t say anything as they walked to the swimming pool by the long route. Several times he glanced at Jenny, but looked away quickly whenever she turned his way.

#

At lunchtime, they said the blessing together, with Mary Fran finishing a few seconds before everyone else. As she said amen, she touched her right shoulder to finish crossing herself and in one continuous motion reached across the table for the plate of bacon. In an equally swift motion, Mom’s hand darted out and clasped Mary Fran’s wrist.

“Quit rushing through your prayers like that, or you can say them over.” Mom guided Mary Fran’s arm back. “It’s not lady-like to reach over the table.” She picked up a

plate holding stacks of dry toast and placed two pieces on Maggie's plate. "You can start passing the bacon, now, Tommy. There's enough for everybody to get two slices."

The house rule was you started a dish by offering it to the next person, never serving yourself first. By the time the bacon plate returned to Tommy, he knew the only slices left would be the ones with the largest sections of fat on them. He speared tomato slices and spooned creamed cucumbers onto his plate. When Kate handed him the bacon, there were three slices left on the paper-towel covered plate. Two of the strips were long, the rippled fat curving around the narrow border of meat. The remaining short strip was crisply cooked throughout, nearly blackened and burned, just the way he liked bacon. He took the short strip and the least fatty looking long strip, laid them over lettuce and tomato slices, and covered the stack with a slice of toast.

Mary Fran said, "I came in first, swimming laps at lessons. I was behind at first, in the side stroke, but then I caught up in the breast stroke and beat everybody else in the crawl." She had announced this news earlier, when they came home from swimming lessons, and Mom said "That's nice," again in a distracted voice.

"I swum faster than all the boys, even," Mary Fran said. "I beat Tommy." She looked across the table at him, in triumph.

"Yeah," Tommy agreed. "She even beat Renfrew Harper, and she's got a crush on him."

"Do not," Mary Fran returned, as a blush darkened her cheeks.

"Do, too."

"That's enough," Mom said. "Why must you two bicker over every little thing?" She sighed and rested her elbow on the table. She leaned her head on her hand, and

scattered the remaining cucumbers around her plate, as if she hadn't the strength to lift the fork.

Tommy picked up the bacon plate. The remaining strip of bacon had a puckered edging of fat that was nearly translucent, and in some places it was the same pale color as the grease-soaked paper towel beneath it. "Does anyone want this last piece?" He tried to make his voice sound casual, as if eating the bacon and tossing it in the garbage were all the same to him.

"I do," Mary Fran said.

He tried to read her face, wondering if she wanted it just for the sake of argument or whether she was still hungry, like him. Lately, it seemed like he was never full. "We'll split it, then," he said and tried to tear the strip as evenly as he could. "Pass the tomatoes, please." There were never arguments over vegetables.

Kate lifted her plate toward him. "You can have my cucumbers."

"You finish what's on your plate, Katie," Mom said. "Including the cucumbers."

"Ah, Mom," Kate said. "Cucumbers make me burp."

"They're good for you," Mom countered.

Mary Fran got up from her chair and crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator.

"Mom, you want me to get out the Jell-O and bowls?"

"It's not set up, yet," Mom said. "I just made it a while ago, since I was boiling water anyhow to pour over the canning jars. We'll have it tonight."

Mary Fran took the sugar bowl from a cupboard and set it before her plate.

Tommy handed her the plate of tomatoes without waiting to be asked. He finished the last bites of liberally peppered tomato slices on his own plate. "May I be excused?" He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and stood up, pushing his chair back.

"Don't go anywhere," Mom said. "Remember? You're going to help Mary Fran clean Mrs. Gahlen's house today. The next time you think about calling your sister names, think about the extra work you'll have to do."

He knew better than to protest.

#

"Mrs. Gahlen?" Tommy opened the glass storm door and knocked on the interior wood door. Could she even hear him? He wondered if the Gahlen's air conditioner made as much noise indoors as it did outside. He thought he heard someone say "Come in." He opened the door and called her name again.

"Come on in," Mrs. Gahlen said from across the room. She was lying on the sofa. "I'm not supposed to get up."

Tommy carried a tank vacuum cleaner inside. He went out again and returned with a length of vacuum hose looped over his shoulder and a cardboard box with various nozzles and attachments poking out of the top. "I'm here to help Mary Fran."

"Oh." Mrs. Gahlen lifted herself from the pillow and leaned on her elbow. "I guess it'll go quicker with two of you, but I thought I was just paying for Mary Fran. She's working upstairs."

"You just pay Mary Fran," he said. "I'm here 'cause it's the first time." He did not want to tell her that he was doing it as punishment.

“I’ve got a vacuum cleaner.”

“Yes, Mrs. Gahlen.” He had read books where boys said, ‘yes, ma’am,’ but the only person he had ever actually heard say that was his Uncle Frank, who grew up in Missouri. “Mom told me to do the walls and furniture with our vacuum, and use yours for the carpet. You want me to start in the other room?”

The color television was on. Onscreen, a man and woman were yelling at each other, then the man stormed out the door and slammed it shut. The woman leaned her back against the door, as if to brace it. Music flared as the camera closed in to her face, and tears filled her blue eyes. The music and the scene of the soap opera ended suddenly. Instead of a commercial, there was a view of banks of control consoles with men in white short-sleeved shirts and dark ties moving before them. Walter Cronkite’s voice announced that the Apollo 11 mission was on schedule and not experiencing any difficulties, and that a transmission from the spacecraft would be broadcast at six o’clock, Eastern Daylight Savings Time. “We now return you to your regular programming.” Regular programming was a commercial showing a woman wearing a crown of daisies, licking margarine from her finger and pronouncing it butter. A disembodied voice told her it was Parkay, and the woman waved her arm, turning the tranquil woods into thunder and lightning. ‘It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature.’ The soap opera resumed, with a scene of a woman in a dress and a string of pearls wiping a dust cloth over a shiny coffee table until the doorbell rang.

Tommy sighed.

His one chance to see color TV and there’s nothing on but crummy soap operas and commercials.

He connected tubes and hosing to the cleaner tank, and pushed the starter button down with the toe of his sneaker. He gently moved the brush around the base of the dining room light fixture. Small cobwebs that stretched across loops of the brass frame disappeared into the vacuum. A few more cobwebs lurked in ceiling corners. There were several bookcases in the room. Tommy maneuvered the brush nozzle over the tops and fronts of books of chemistry and biology. He figured they were college books. The Gahlens were both teachers, who had moved into the neighborhood two years ago. There were several books on sports, including one on baseball he wondered if he could borrow. He worked the room from ceiling to floor, switching attachments several times. He turned the vacuum off, and the motor wheezed to a stop like a deflated bagpipe.

Mrs. Gahlen had reversed her position on the sofa, and had been watching him while he worked. “Well, you certainly know how to clean.”

“Mom’s real picky about house cleaning. All us kids clean, except Maggie ‘cause she’s too young. We got a big calendar, with all the chores marked out in turns.” He thought for a moment. “There’re some things, like mowing lawn and shoveling snow, that only I do ‘cause I’m a boy, and some things that my sisters do that I don’t have to do.”

Except for ironing, he couldn’t think of any chores that only his sisters had to do and he didn’t. Steve Caldwell only had to mow lawn and shovel snow and keep his room picked up, and never had to help his sister and mother with housecleaning. He wasn’t sure what house chores Mark Veer and all his brothers did, but the Veer house and garage were always clean and tidy. If Renfrew Harper ever did chores, he never mentioned them.

“Well, I’m impressed,” said Mrs. Gahlen.

“If you sit up, I can pull the sofa out real quick and do it.”

She held out her hands. “Help me up.” She grasped his hands and pulled as she rose. When she was standing, she swayed slightly and grabbed his arm to steady herself.

“I get dizzy if I get up too quick.”

Mrs. Gahlen only came up to Tommy’s chin. She was no taller than Kate, and looked no older than a high school girl. Her hair smelled of pine needles, just like Jenny Jamison’s hair, and something else, almost like the peppery fragrance of Mom’s red geraniums. She still held his arm as she walked slowly toward the chair. He felt the pull as she lowered herself to sit down. The hem of her loose blouse caught on the arm of the chair, briefly exposing the small mound of her stomach.

He turned around and pulled the sofa away from the wall. He worked quickly with the vacuum, nudged the sofa back into place with his knees, then picked up the bed pillows and fluffed them. “You can come back, now.” He offered his hands to her, but she only grasped one.

She lay down, and propped her feet up on pillows. Her toes were long and slender, and looked like they were longer even than his little sister Maggie’s fingers. Her toenails were painted with iridescent polish a color between pink and purple, like the inside of the sea shell Aunt Patty and Uncle Frank had given him from their trip to Florida.

“Are you thirsty, Tommy? Get yourself a Coke, why don’t you, and bring me a little glass of milk.” As he walked to the kitchen, she added, “The church key’s in the little drawer next to the fridge.”

He felt sneaky about opening someone else's refrigerator and rummaging through someone else's junk drawer for a bottle opener. He opened cupboard doors until he found the drinking glasses. Inside were three neat rows of glasses in graduated sizes, all the same shape and the same smoky color. There was not a single jelly jar or olive jar glass on the shelf. He poured her milk and opened a bottle of Coke. There was no garbage pail in sight, so he put the bottle cap in the pocket of his cut-offs.

Mrs. Gahlen leaned on her elbow and took the glass from his hand. She sipped the milk and made a dissatisfied face before setting it down on a coaster on the end table. She motioned at the Coca Cola bottle. "Let me have a swig." She drank a small amount from his bottle, without even wiping the top off first. "God, I miss this," she said, wiping the taste from her lips with a slow circling of her tongue. "I'm not supposed to have any until after the baby's born."

He tilted the bottle back and swallowed, not sure what to make of sharing a soda with a woman who wasn't a relative by blood or marriage and who was going to be his science teacher, to boot.

"So," she said after a while. "You're going to be in seventh grade? Big jump from Catholic school to public school, huh? Looking forward to it?"

"I guess."

"You're a pretty tall kid. Like sports? My husband's the junior high coach. You'll have him for P.E."

"I like basketball and baseball. I'm in Pony League, now."

“You like science? You’ll be in my class when I go back teaching in January, after the baby’s born. Your mother’s said she’ll take care of the baby. That’ll be quite a lot of work, taking care of two babies.”

“You’re having twins?”

Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry. I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

”Nothing. That your mother’s going to take care of the baby when I’m ready to go back to work.”

Something about the way she watched him reminded him of a cat twitching its tail and just waiting for a mouse stupid enough to poke its nose out and run for it. He looked around the room, but felt her eyes studying him. There was a picture on the table by his chair. “Is this you?”

“Hard to believe that was only three years ago.” She patted her stomach and laughed. “Those days are over. I used to be in the modern dance troupe in college. Charlie was taking a photography class, and out looking for things to take pictures of. We were performing outside and he saw me through the camera lens. That’s how we met.”

He picked up the framed black-and-white photograph. In the picture, Mrs. Gahlen was standing on one leg, her back arched, and the other leg bent behind her. Her bare foot curved into a crescent that nearly touched the back of her head. She was wearing a costume just like the toga on the nude calendar woman in Steve Caldwell’s garage.

Tommy’s throat constricted mid-swallow into a choke. He coughed into his hand and bent over. A loud burp escaped. He tried to say “excuse me,” through the coughing.

“You all right?”

He nodded. "Went down the wrong pipe." A burning sensation traveled from the back of his nose all the way down. He pulled the cap from his pocket and pressed it onto the bottle.

"Don't you want the rest of your Coke?"

"I'm saving the rest for Mary Fran."

"She can have one for herself when she comes down later."

"What time it is, Mrs. Gahlen?"

She leaned over to pick up a wristwatch from the end table. "Quarter to three."

"I got to leave in a little while for my paper route." He heard a buzzing noise in the back of the house. "What's that? You got something cooking?"

"That's the clothes dryer. The sheets're dry. Why don't you get them? The washer and dryer are out on the back porch, just off the kitchen."

Tommy followed the sound of the buzzer, which stopped when he opened the clothes dryer door. He should have known that the Gahlens would have an automatic washer and dryer; there was no clothesline in their back yard. When he carried the sheets to the front room, he dropped the bundle onto the chair and picked up a sheet to begin folding. He brought two corners of a sheet to Mrs. Gahlen to help fold, just as if she were one of his sisters. They folded the sheet together until it became a size he could manage himself. Tommy picked up the next sheet, , and held it out, puzzled. "How do you fold this?"

"It's a fitted sheet."

"Oh," he said. "Yeah." All of the sheets at home were flat and white.

"Bring it here. I'll show you how to do it."

He picked up the pillowcases. “Where’s your dampening basket?”

“My what?”

“Stuff you’re going to sprinkle and iron.”

Mrs. Gahlen’s eyebrows shot up. “You iron pillowcases? I need to send Charlie over to your mother to train. You’re really housebroke.”

Housebroke. It made him sound like a puppy.

“Mom does the ironing. Or she did, anyhow, until this summer. Kate irons now.”

“They’ll be fine just folded. The linen closet’s upstairs, at the end of the hall.” Her soft laughter followed him as he went upstairs. He looked for Mary Fran, but she wasn’t in either bedroom.

Mary Fran squealed when he opened the bathroom door. “You scared me to death. I thought it was Mrs. Gahlen.” She was standing inside the bathtub, wiping a shower door with a scrub pad. Her lips were unnaturally red.

The smell of Lysol hung in the air, mingling with the scents of other people’s perfume and cologne, and beneath it all, another familiar smell he couldn’t place.

“What’s that red stuff on your face?” He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “You been in Mrs. Gahlen’s makeup.”

“I just wanted to see how I looked. It won’t come off. What am I going to do?”

“Did you use soap?”

“I tried that already, but it didn’t get all of it.”

He opened the medicine cabinet as softly as he could. “Maybe they got some peroxide. That’s what Mom used to get the blood out of the towel that time I cut my

knee.” There was a bottle of Aqua Velva aftershave next to a razor. “Maybe this’ll work.” He jerked a square of toilet paper off the roll and soaked it with Aqua Velva.

“It stings,” Mary Fran said as he dabbed her lips. She trembled, and a tear squeezed from the corner of one eye.

“Yeah, well, you should’ve thought of that before you go messing in other people’s stuff.” He surveyed the job. “It’s looks a little better, but she can probably tell you been in her makeup.”

“Here, put these in your pocket.” She stuffed red stained tissues into his cut-off pockets. “I already took the wastebaskets downstairs and emptied them. “

“Now your mouth looks like you been drinking strawberry pop.”

Mary Fran looked in the mirror, moving her head slowly from side to side. “Darn.”

Tommy surveyed the bathroom. Next to the facial tissue box on the back of the commode was a wicker basket filled with women’s makeup. He poked around in the basket and found a small bottle of beige liquid. “Let’s try this stuff.” He opened the bottle, rubbed his pinky finger over the rim. “Hold still.” He patted Mary Fran’s lips. “There. Nobody’ll notice unless they’re looking for it.”

Mary Fran inspected his handiwork in the mirror.

He looked around the room. The Gahlens’ house was probably the same age as the Ryans’, but the bathrooms were very different. There was a low bathtub with a Fiberglas door here instead of a high-backed tub on claw feet. He tried to imagine taking a shower in a warm bathroom in the winter instead of going down to the basement to shower over the same drain hole the washing machine emptied into.

Tommy picked up a shampoo bottle of dark green liquid and sniffed the cap. Christmas tree pine. Jenny Jamison must use this same kind of shampoo.

“You told me to stay out of people’s stuff, and here you go around smelling other people’s things,” Mary Fran said.

“Who got into the lipstick, just like some little kid like Maggie? If I hadn’t come along, you never would’ve figured out how to get it off your face, and you don’t even say thank you. Maybe I should tell Mom.”

“Please don’t say anything, Tommy.”

“I don’t know what’ll make Mom more mad, you getting into somebody else’s things, or you fooling around with makeup.”

“Please, Tommy?”

The sight of tears welling up in her eyes made him feel uncomfortable, and she looked more like she would start crying than when he had scrubbed her mouth with Aqua Velva. For all her whining and arguing, Mary Fran seldom cried.

“Oh, all right,” he said as he turned to go. “But don’t forget. You owe me.”

#

The last house on his delivery route was on the corner of Main and Fourth Street, directly behind his own house on the corner of Oak and Fourth. As usual, Mr. Peevey was sitting on his porch about the time Tommy brought the paper.

“Hi, Mr. Peevey.” He laid his bike down on the grass and carried the *Des Moines Tribune* up the walk.

Mr. Peevey leaned forward in his metal lawn chair to take the paper. The chair's paint had faded from dark red to a strawberry soda color, with chalky looking streaks of white. On a rusted TV tray next to the chair stood a brown paper sack twisted around the neck of a pint bottle. "Well, what's the bad news today, boy?" He unfolded the newspaper with shaking hands and spread it over his lap.

"The astronauts are on their way to the moon. That's not bad news. That's good news."

Mr. Peevey made a hacking noise in the back of his throat and leaned over to spit through the porch rail into what had once been a flowerbed when Mrs. Peevey had been alive. "That ain't good news. You mark my words, boy, when they set foot on the moon, it's going to upset everything in creation. You're too young to remember, but before they started shooting up all them rockets and Rooshian Spootniks, the weather weren't nowhere near as bad as it is now. Dog days're so damn hot now, people are dying in their houses. And hurricanes so bad, snakes get blowed backwards up the Mississippi. That last one washed Louisiana cottonmouths all the way up here to Iowa."

Tommy said nothing. Last week Mr. Peevey had told him no rockets had ever actually gone into space, that it was all fake photographs the government made up to fool the people.

"You just watch." Mr. Peevey drank from the paper-covered bottle, and held it in his hand, jabbing at Tommy to punctuate his words. "I'm old. I'll be dead, but you'll be around to see it. There's going to be tornadoes and windstorms and hurricanes the likes of which mankind ain't never seed before. Every time one of them rockets goes up, it punches a hole in the sky, and lets all the heat from the sun in. Pretty soon, it's going to

be so full of holes, the whole earth's going to burn up. When them assernauts set foot on the moon, ain't nothing going to be the same. Ever again. You just wait and see, young man, you just wait. Look how dark it is over there." He pointed vaguely west. "See that black cloud? There's a storm just waiting to bust loose in that cloud."

"I got to go, now, Mr. Peevey. See you tomorrow." Tommy lifted the bike up and swung his leg over it in the one smooth motion. He turned the bike around in a tight circle, and pedaled home.

The radio was playing in the kitchen, but Mom was not there. He saw Mary Fran and Kate in the dining room, working on a jigsaw puzzle. "Where's Mom?"

"Shhh." Kate motioned toward the front room. "She's asleep."

He tiptoed into the front room. Mom lay on the sofa, an arm covering her eyes. Her bare feet were propped up on one of the sofa arms. Maggie was playing nearby on the braided rug, making up conversation that only she and her Fisher Price toy people understood.

The shirtfront of the man's shirt his mother was wearing was flipped up, exposing a bit of bare midriff. The button of her shorts was undone, and her stomach seemed to bulge slightly in the same concave curve as Mrs. Gahlen's.

He turned around. "What about supper?" Mom never took naps.

"I guess we eat late Mary Fran said.

He pulled up a chair and sat down to work the jigsaw puzzle with his sisters. They leaned over the worn metal kitchen table that had belonged to Grandma Connor. The old kitchen dinette set and an ironing board leaning in the corner were the only furnishings in the Ryan dining room. Tommy picked up a puzzle piece and snapped it into place. In a

very short time, his thighs were slick with sweat where they touched the vinyl chair seat. The air seemed thick and still. He picked up the cardboard puzzle box and waved it in front of his face, then went into the front room.

The television set was turned on to the evening news, the volume barely audible. Weatherman Russ van Dyke was marking symbols on a Plexiglas map of the U.S. A map of Iowa appeared on-screen. Using his marker as a pointer, he circled a section of the southeastern part of the state.

Mormon's Crossing was inside the black circle.

Tommy got up and turned the volume a little louder, in time to catch the words "...a tornado and severe storm watch is in effect for these counties until eight p.m. Stay tuned to KRNT for further updates." The camera turned to Bud Sobel and the sports news.

Mom sat up slowly and rubbed her eyes. "What was that about a tornado?"

"We're in the middle of a watch area."

She stood and stared uncertainly at the television a moment, then yawned. "Sloppy Joes o.k. for supper, kids? I was going to make meatloaf, but I fell asleep." Soon, she called Kate and Mary Fran to help in the kitchen.

Tommy sat in the recliner and flipped the handle that pushed the footrest up. He sighted the television screen between his sneakers. The six o'clock CBS national news had started, with coverage of the Apollo mission. Neil Armstrong spoke briefly and a film played of him moving his arms in a choppy motion, like in an old-fashioned silent movie. A small object floated past Armstrong's face. The news reverted to the situation

here on earth, the usual daily pronouncements on the fighting in Vietnam and the Gaza Strip. Tommy went out to the front porch.

The air was no longer still. Hot blasts of wind whipped dust down the center of Oak street. The treetops waved and fluttered faster than the lower branches. He squinted his eyes against the blowing grit to a sky suffused with a greenish yellow light. The wind pressed the screen door back against the house, and he fought to open the door.

The Emergency Broadcast Signal blared from the television in its heart-sickening single tone. “We interrupt this program for an emergency weather broadcast. A tornado warning is issued for Monroe and Appanoose counties. Take shelter immediately. Repeat, a tornado warning...”

Tommy yelled “Mom!” at the same time that she yelled his name. He grabbed Maggie and rushed to the kitchen. They headed toward the basement. Before turning to go down the basement stairs, Tommy looked out the back door. Their swim suits danced around and around the clothesline, slipped the grasp of the pins, and bounced over the ground in three different directions.

“Mary Fran. Take her.” He handed Maggie over, and ran outside.

“Tommy, don’t go out there!”

He rushed outside and grabbed the scattered swimsuits, thankful that they had not blown far once they landed on the ground. A garbage can lid from the Caldwell’s back yard skittered over the street and skipped across the Ryan back yard like a Frisbee. When he turned to run back to the house, the town siren began to wail. His heart felt like it would never stop sinking. Mary Fran was waiting for him at the top of the basement stairs, her eyes and mouth wide open. They rushed down the stairs together.

“What the hell did you go out there for?” Mom balanced Maggie on her hip and grabbed his arm hard with her free hand.

“The bathing suits.”

“Forget about the bathing suits. You hear that siren, you get down in the basement right away. We can always buy new bathing suits.”

One of the basement windows slammed shut with a bang like a gunshot, the stick that had propped the casement open falling and rolling across the cement

Mom pushed them forward. “Everybody get into the coal bin.”

They went to the corner of the basement to what had once been a coal bin before the house had been converted to natural gas heat. The room was empty, and retained the cave-smell of coal. The girls hung back before the door until Tommy went in first and pawed the air for the string pull of the light bulb. Crazy shadows danced on the walls as the hanging light swayed.

Maggie began to wail when her mother carried her inside. “Spiders! Spiders!”

“Shush, Maggie,” Mom said. “Don’t worry about spiders. Tommy, bring that chair in here.” She motioned to a backless wooden chair near the washing machine.

Tommy placed the chair inside the coal bin. His mother sat down, Maggie clinging tightly around her neck. Kate and Maggie crowded near her.

Something hit the outside of the house with a loud thud.

Maggie began screaming.

“Maggie, for the love of God,” Mom said as she tried to pry Maggie’s hands from her throat. “You’re choking me to death. Shush, shush.” She rocked Maggie back and forth. “It’s o.k., it’s o.k.”

“What about Daddy?” Kate’s voice was near tears.

“He’ll be alright,” Tommy said. “He’s already in a basement, working at the bar under the hardware store. He’ll be fine.”

Mary Fran started, “Hail Mary, full of grace...” Mom and Kate joined in.

Tommy stood in the doorway of the coal bin, looking up through the small nearby window. From this angle, below ground, the tops of the trees looked bent over so far, the trees seemed to be bowing. He could not tell if the rushing sound he heard was the wind or the sound of his own blood rushing through his ears. He felt scared and, strangely, not scared, both at the same time.

“Pray,” Mom pulled him backwards into the coal bin..

“It won’t change anything.” His voice seemed like it belonged to somebody else, neutral and devoid of emotion, like Walter Cronkite announcing that’s the way it is.

She shook his arm, hard. “Pray,” she commanded.

#

Chapter Three

Friday, July 18, 1969

“APOLLO ZEROES IN ON MOON TV PHOTOS OF FADING EARTH BEAMED BACK”

The sound of voices awakened Tommy. Anger lifted his parents' voices through the kitchen window and up to the tiny sleeping porch above the back porch where Tommy slept on an army surplus cot. He lifted himself up and leaned on an elbow to listen.

“Make up your mind.” It was his father's voice, deep, and final sounding. “What's more important to you? Having me around more or keeping the girls in St. James? For what we paid to send three kids to parochial school last year, you could have

had a brand new washer and dryer. You complain now about that old wringer washer of your mother's getting you down in the back. What do you think it's going to be like in a few more months? ”

“But it's only two now, with Tommy starting public school.”

“They've raised the tuition enough, it's going to cost as much to send two this year as it did three last year. And I hear they're going to raise it again. Working at the Shamrock was only supposed to be for a little while, to save up some for next year. But now it looks like I'm going to be working two jobs forever. I don't know how much longer I can keep it up, Peg. I'm so tired now, I don't know whether I'm coming or going.”

Tommy couldn't make out his mother's reply, only that her voice was muffled by crying.

His father's voice was softer. “I miss you and the kids. I never see them anymore. When I'm not working, I'm too tired to do anything but sleep, and when I'm awake, I'm crabby with them. What do you say? How 'bout you sign the girls up for public school, and I can quit The Shamrock? We can get by on what I make at Deere if we don't have to pay for parochial school. It'll be tight, but we can manage.”

Tommy strained to hear his mother's answer.

The back door slammed. “Have it your way, then, damn it! Keep the girls in that firetrap they call a school. That's just fine. But don't you dare give any more money to the church on Sundays. I'm not going to work myself to death so that pinch-faced old priest can buy a new black Cadillac every year.”

The back door slammed.

Tommy knelt on the cot, pressing his fingers and nose against the rusty screen.

His father walked to the car without looking back. He backed the car out of the drive in a hurry, causing gravel to spew from under the tires, and drove away.

Tommy dressed quickly and went outside for the newspaper. Beneath the *Register's* headline was a photograph of a small looking earth. There was an article titled "Possible Landing of Soviet Luna Seven" on the front page, and another about fighting on the Gaza Strip and the usual reports on the war in Vietnam, but nothing about the windstorm. He flipped through pages as he walked to the kitchen.

"Look, Mom," he said as he came into the kitchen. He held the paper open to a short article on page 8. "It says a small funnel cloud was sighted in a cornfield outside of Centerville in northern Appanoose County, and surrounding communities reported high winds. That must be what we are. Surrounding communities."

She stepped back from the sink and wiped her face with a dishtowel. "Just thank God it wasn't a full blown tornado. What we had was bad enough."

"Is everything o.k.? Your face is red."

"It's just hot. I was splashing cold water on my face. Why?"

"It sounded like you and Dad were fighting."

"No. He's just a little cranky because he's tired. That's all. It's fine."

He waited for her to say something more.

"Mom?"

"What?" She said as she carried the percolator to the sink, and was about to pour out the contents.

"Nothing. Can I try some coffee?"

She looked at him for a moment. “Why not? I started drinking coffee when I was younger than you. The nuns always used to tell me it would stunt my growth, but I still ended up towering over everybody.” She filled a mug half with coffee and half with milk and set it before him. “You’ll want sugar.”

He reached up into the highest shelf in the cupboard for the sugar bowl. He tasted the coffee and tried not to make a face. It wasn’t too bad, once he had stirred three spoonfuls of sugar into it.

“What’s next, now that you’re turning twelve? You going to start using your dad’s razor?”

“I just wanted to see what coffee’s like.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry to grow up.” She swirled the dregs around in her cup and swallowed. “Being grown up’s not everything it’s cracked up to be.”

“What do you mean?”

She puckered the corner of her mouth into a half frown, and he knew she would try to change the subject.

“You’re so grown up now, you think you’re too big to pray?” She said.

“I pray.” His voice trailed off.

“Why didn’t you want to pray with us during the windstorm yesterday?”

He looked down and picked at a tear in the newspaper, anything to avoid her hard stare.

“Well? Answer me.”

“Because it wouldn’t have done any good.” He glanced up. Her face was unreadable. “The windstorm was going to happen whether we prayed or not. If God made everything, then He made windstorms and bad weather, too, so they’re going to happen anyway.”

“You don’t pray to make nature stop. You pray for your soul. For your life to be spared.”

“Everybody prays when they’re in trouble. But why do some people have good luck and other people have bad luck, if they’re all good people and they’re all praying for the same thing? It don’t seem fair that God helps some and not others, does it?”

“You need to talk to Father Heinrich.”

Tommy was glad to hear her sigh, which meant she was tired of arguing. He wanted to brush his teeth again. The coffee left a bittersweet taste in his mouth.

#

Tommy stared at the sky and wondered how it could be so innocently blue after a storm like last night.

On the walk to the swimming pool, he paid little attention to Kate and Mary Fran jabbering away and pointing to the raw wounds on the trees where limbs had broken.

A woman picking up branches and piling them into a wheelbarrow called to them as they passed. “Wasn’t it terrible? Did you have any trees down at your place?”

From what he could see along the way, the windstorm had done little to the town except knock some branches down and blow the lids off garbage cans. His mind was on

other things. “Mary Fran, did Jenny say anything about not walking with us to swimming lessons this morning?”

“No. Why?”

“Nothing. Just wondering. She won’t want to miss the last day. We’ll get our pins if we pass.”

Kate grinned at him and pointed down the street. “There she is.”

A black and red convertible drove by, Renfrew Harper and his mother in the front seat, Steve Caldwell and Jenny Jamison in back. Jenny turned and waved to them.

During warm-up laps, Tommy felt a small surge of satisfaction when Mary Fran swam ahead of Steve and Renfrew and was the first in the swim class to touch the side of the pool. She swam laps in the same fast and furious way she did everything she did not particularly like to do, as if she was in a hurry to get it over with. As soon as she finished the American crawl, she pushed off from the side into the next stroke, , and kept far ahead of everyone in the backstroke except the big-shouldered country boy.

In the side-stroke lap, Tommy and Renfrew Harper were nearly even. They swam facing each other, each leading the sidestroke with the opposite hand. Tommy scissored his legs as hard and fast as he could, and tried to cup his hands like Coach had taught them to pull more water. He reached the side barely an arm’s length ahead of Renfrew. He blew hard, trying to catch his breath, and could not tell if the look on Renfrew’s face was anger or exhaustion.

“O.K. Everybody come out now.” Coach Horchow’s voice boomed over them.

They all held the pool edge and gulped air in ragged breaths as they edged toward the ladder, then one by one, pulled themselves out.

Coach Horchow slapped a clipboard against a darkly tanned thigh below his yellow swim trunks. “Most of you are too young to take Junior Life Saving next year, but you’re not too young to learn what to do if someone’s drowning. What’s the last thing you do when someone’s drowning?”

“Swim out after them,” said a tall boy, who was taking Swimmer Class for a second time this summer.

“Right. What do you do first?”

Renfrew Harper said, “Throw something that floats.”

“Good. It doesn’t matter what it is. A tree branch. A boat cushion. A beach ball. Anything that floats. If you swim out to them, a drowning person will panic and try to pull you under. I’m going to show you how to do resuscitation. You got to get the water out of their lungs and get them breathing again. I need somebody to be the victim.” He looked around. “You,” he said, pointing to Tommy. “Lay down on your stomach.”

Tommy spread himself out on the pool deck. The sun-warmed concrete felt good along the length of his body.

“Place the arms and head like this,” Coach Horchow said while turning Tommy’s face to the side. He knelt down, straddling Tommy’s lower back.

Tommy clenched his teeth to keep from giggling. It was weird enough having a grown man sitting on top of him, but the soft hairs of Coach’s thighs were rubbing the ticklish spots on his sides. The laughter left his body like the air in his lungs when Coach’s big hands pressed his rib cage hard into the cement. Next, Coach pulled Tommy’s elbows back.

“Count while you do this, one, two, one, two.”

Every time Coach said “two,” it felt like what little air was left in Tommy’s lungs was being squeezed out.

“Keep up the rhythm until the water is emptied from the victim’s lungs and he’s breathing on his own.”

Tommy got up and brushed his stomach. Small red impressions dotted his ribcage from concrete grit.

Coach said, “O.k., now, everybody buddy up and practice on each other.”

The girls chose other girls, and the boys chose other boys. Mary Fran lay down and Jenny took the part of the rescuer. Steve and Renfrew became partners. Tommy found himself paired with the country boy, who was about the same height as him, but seemed twice as wide.

The resuscitation lesson barely seemed long enough to let them catch their breath from swimming laps.

“O.k., class, last test,” said Coach Horchow. “You got to be able to tread water for twenty minutes.”

Several people groaned.

“Come on, people. Everybody back in the water.”

It could not have been more than five minutes later, but it seemed to Tommy that they had been treading water forever. He arched his head back, trying to keep his mouth out of the water, and faced the cloudless sky. He moved his arms back and forth in long, slow arcs, and pumped his knees like a runner being filmed in slow motion. He slowly e

Coach Horchow and Mr. Gahlen were leaning against the low diving board, talking. From time to time, Coach glanced at a stopwatch, then surveyed the swimming

class students spread around the deep end of the pool. He grasped the whistle suspended from a cord around his neck and blew one short blast. Everyone turned toward him. He pointed at Suzy Baxter, who was always the last one to finish swimming laps, and beckoned her over.

Suzy dog-paddled over to the side of the pool. Her breaths came in loud gasps.

Coach Horchow knelt down and said something softly to Suzy, then lifted her out of the pool by her arms. Mr. Gahlen wrapped a towel around her shoulders, and said, “You’ll do better next year, honey.”

“Eight minutes,” Coach announced. “Twelve more to go. Pace yourselves.”

Tommy turned around in a slow circle to watch the other swimmers. Renfrew Harper bobbed steadily in the water, although not as fast as when they first started. Jenny was only a few feet away. Her eyes were closed and her face was calm, as if she were soaking in a bathtub.

His fingertips brushed Jenny’s arms. She opened her eyes and smiled, barely moving her arms and staying afloat in effortless serenity. Her smile was as open as the cloudless sky above them.

When Coach announced, “Fifteen minutes,” Tommy’s lungs felt like they were collapsing. Coach slowly repeated the words, “Front, back, front, back.”

Tommy moved his arms in unison, and slowly edged toward the side of the pool. His sides hurt so much, he felt like as if he could slip under the water at any moment, too weak to fight. He wanted to be close enough to the edge for the coaches to pull him out, like Suzy Baxter. He was close enough to hear some of their conversation.

“I don’t know if I can take it any more,” Coach Horchow said in a low voice to Mr. Gahlen, but his voice was too deep to drop to a whisper. “It tore me up bad when Nicky Brasovich got killed. That kid played every kind of ball for me for six years, from the first time he showed up in my seventh grade P.E. class to his graduation day. He was good at anything he played, but not quite good enough at any one sport to get a scholarship. When I told Nicky I tried to talk the other members of the Board to pass over him and pick out one of the rich kids, like Mason Willis, who was probably going to flunk out even if we gave him a college deferment, he said if the Draft hadn’t got him first, he would have joined the Army just to get some money to go to school with later.”

“If you quit,” Mr. Gahlen said, “old man McClellan will just fill your place with one of his buddies, and there’ll be more kids like Nicky Brasovich getting sent to Vietnam while the ones whose daddys own stores on the courthouse square, like Willis or the Harper boy, get to go on to college.”

“There’s got to be a better way to draft young men than letting a bunch of locals play God.”

“Until the government comes up with something better, the kids will be better off with you still on the Board than some old fart friend of McClellan’s.” Mr. Gahlen looked at his watch. “Their twenty minutes are nearly over.”

Tommy looked at the faces in the water to see if anyone else had overheard the coaches’ conversation. He remembered when Eddie Brasovich’s brother had died. Please, God, he prayed, don’t let Mark Veer’s brother end up like Nicky Brasovich, keep him safe if he gets sent to Vietnam, Amen.

They all moved closer to the side of the pool when Coach raised his stopwatch in his left hand and counted down, “ten, nine, eight.” By the time he reached three, Tommy touched the edge. When Coach Horchow blew his whistle, they dragged themselves from the pool and dropped to the concrete, their sides heaving.

After a while, Coach looked at his watch and said, “O.k. You ready to get your pins?”

He called out names of the passing students and checked a mark on his clipboard as Mr. Gahlen handed each one a pin with a red cross printed on its center.

Tommy changed clothes quickly and waited outside the dressing rooms for Jenny and his sisters. Mary Fran came out wearing her pin on her blouse. He pocketed his.

Kate had a glum look on her face. “I flunked Intermediate. I can swim, but they won’t pass me ‘cause I won’t put my head under water.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Jenny said. “We’ll be taking Swimmer class over again next year, too. The next level up is Junior Life Saving, and we can’t take that ‘til we’re fourteen.”

Tommy felt a stabbing pain in his rear end and spun around to face Renfrew and Steve.

Renfrew laughed and held out his Swimmer’s pin, showing the sharp point. “Got you, Ryan.”

Tommy stepped in front of Renfrew, blocking his way.

“There’s my mom,” Renfrew said, and skirted around Tommy. He got into the Impala as it pulled up, tossing his towel into the back seat.

“Aren’t you two going with them?”

“Naw,” Steve said. “Renfrew’s mom’s taking him to his music lesson. We’ll walk with you.”

#

Every ten seconds, the circulating fan on the Harper sleeping porch swept hot air over Tommy, ruffling the pages of the *Mad* magazine he was reading. He lay on his side, his ribs too sore from Coach Horchow’s “resuscitating” to sprawl on his stomach even on one of the soft daybeds. Comic books and *Mad*’s were scattered among the model train tracks. Mark Veer sat on the floor, leaning against Tommy’s daybed and trying to catch the fan’s breeze.

“Look at this one. ‘Star Blechh.’ ” Mark held up his *Mad* to Tommy. “This guy always puts big feet and pot bellies on people, but he sure can draw faces real good. You always know who it is he’s making fun of.”

Tommy peered over Mark’s shoulder at the parody of *Star Trek*. “Mr. Spook” had ears as long as a donkey’s that pointed to a tiny drawing of a potted plant in the margin between the cartoon frames. “Look, there’s Arthur.” Tommy touched the page. “I wrote Arthur on my mom’s philodendron flower pot with Magic Marker last year, and she had a fit.”

“What’d she do?” Renfrew said from the recliner. “Make Saint Tommy go to church and light a candle?”

“What’s your problem?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem. Nothing ever happens here.” Renfrew kicked the recliner footrest down and jumped up. “I wish the wind storm had blown this stinking little town right off the map.”

He picked up the circulating fan and held it near the small buildings of the model train town. The plastic buildings remained upright, but three wire-and-moss trees fell over.

“Wooh, tornado, tornado.” When the electrical cord brought him up short, Renfrew set the fan on the floor and nudged the locomotive and cars over with his foot. “Tornado!” He wedged his shoe into one of the tunnel entrances of Steve’s Styrofoam mountain and lifted it up. It fell from his shoe and toppled onto its side. “Look, the tornado blew the mountain over.”

“You want to tear things up, do it to your own stuff, man,” Steve said.

“I didn’t hurt it any.” Renfrew fell onto one of the daybeds, pulled a *Playboy* from under the mattress, and began flipping pages..

Mark exchanged *Mad’s* with Tommy. “You think it’ll ever get to be like *Star Trek*, when we can go whizzing around outer space in minutes?”

“Maybe in a couple thousand years,” Steve said. “Look how long it’s taking just to get to the moon. The astronauts won’t even get there ‘til tomorrow or Sunday, and we’re close enough to see the moon from here.”

Tommy said, “I’ve been reading this really neat library book about a kid who wins a trip to the moon from selling magazine subscriptions, and he gets kidnapped by space smugglers, and ends up going to another galaxy.”

“You read books in the summer?” Renfrew and Steve exchanged looks.

“So?” Tommy said hesitantly. He didn’t tell them that he had read through all the books of horse and dog stories, and was halfway through the adventure and science fiction shelves at the town library.

“What a sissy.” Renfrew shook his head. “You read library books. And you’re always hanging out with girls.”

“They’re not girls. They’re my sisters.”

“What about Jenny Jamison?” Something in Renfrew’s tone of voice changed, and Tommy tried to keep his own voice neutral. “What about her?”

“She’s my girlfriend.”

“What?” This was news. “Did she say so?”

Renfrew blinked. “Well, no. Not yet.” He stood up. “She will though, when school starts. You stay away from her.”

“Just ‘cause you’re rich, you think you own everything and everybody in town. You don’t own me and I can hang out with anybody I want to.”

“Then go hang out somewhere else besides here, sissy. Why’d we even let you in the train club? You don’t even have a train.”

“Suits me.” Tommy stood up. He looked at Steve, but Steve turned away.

As he walked home, Tommy held his head up and his back straight, trying to seem unconcerned that the other boys were probably watching him. He went upstairs to the tiny screened porch off his bedroom and flopped down on the army cot. He replayed the argument in his head, and wished that he had said all the mean things that now came to mind.

#

He was working on the jigsaw puzzle when Uncle Frank called out, “Anybody home?” from the back porch. Tommy went out to the kitchen.

“Put these in the ice box.” Uncle Frank pulled a can of Hamms from the plastic ring and handed the rest of the beer to Tommy. “Every time I see you, boy, you’re getting bigger. You’re going to end up taller’n your daddy, yet.” Uncle Frank looked around the kitchen. “Peggy, where’s that man of yours hiding out these days? I ain’t seen him in ages.”

“John’s at work.” Mom said.

“Work? Deere running overtime?”

“No.” She looked at Aunt Patty, who shook her head. “He’s got a second job, now. Four nights a week at tending bar at The Shamrock. He won’t be home ‘til late. Did Mama come with you?”

“We can’t get her to leave the house, anymore,” Aunt Patty said. “She don’t even want to go to church. But it lets Frank and me get out more, since she stays to watch the girls.”

“Well, I see you two hens want to talk,” Uncle Frank said. “Tommy, go get you dad’s glove and let’s me and you throw the ball around.”

It took a few minutes for Tommy to locate his father’s glove in the small closet under the stairs. The leather was stiff and dusted with a pale green mold that Tommy wiped off against his cutoffs.

Uncle Frank was waiting for him on the metal glider. He set his beer can on the arm of the metal glider and wriggled his fingers into the baseball glove. They moved to

the long side yard. Uncle Frank threw the ball harder and faster than Dad, but not as straight. Tommy had to move around to catch the throws.

“You get any wind from the storm yesterday, Uncle Frank?”

“An old tree blew over in the pasture and knocked down some fence. We were going to cut it down, anyway, it was half rotten. I just got the cows in when the storm came up. We had to wait for the thunder and lightning to stop before we could start milking. Animals know better’n people when a storm’s coming. The cows were all bunched up at the gate, just waiting to get in, right before the storm hit.”

Uncle Frank lobbed a high ball. Tommy gauged the arcing ball and stepped under it. It dropped into the worn pocket of his glove with the reassuring sound of leather hitting leather.

“Been fishing much?”

“Sometimes in the evening, just to fool around. I usually throw them back in the pond. When’re you and your dad and me going to get together to go out on the boat?”

“I don’t know.”

Tommy lost his concentration for a moment, realizing that he and his father had not played catch since last summer. His father had started working the second job just before the weather had warmed up in Spring. A fast grounder whizzed past him and the ball hit an exposed tree root, deflecting into the Gahlen’s yard. He dropped to his hands and knees to crawl deep under the Gahlen’s bridal wreath bushes to get the ball. It had rolled to a stop in the same space where he and Jenny Jamison had hidden during the hide-and-seek game.

“Sorry about that,” said Uncle Frank. “I’m kind of rusty. I don’t got no boy to play catch with.”

“It’s o.k.,” Tommy said as he threw the ball.

“You got a good arm. Like your dad. He show you his fast ball?”

“He doesn’t have much time to play catch. He’s either working or trying to catch up on his sleep. Mary Fran and I practice some. She ain’t too bad, for a girl.”

“Speaking of girls, where are all your sisters?”

“Around. Playing at the neighbors.”

“Must be tiresome, having all them girls hanging around.”

“Yeah.” He threw the ball.

“How ‘bout you come out to the farm for a week? I’ll show you how to drive the tractor. I got another cutting of hay to put up you can help me with. We can do some fishing in the evenings.”

“Sounds great”

“This is thirsty work. Let’s take a break.” Uncle Frank sat down on the glider.
“How ‘bout getting me another cold one?”

He opened the screen door quietly and stepped across the porch rug. It sounded like someone was crying in the kitchen. “Mom?”

She stood up suddenly and went to the sink, filled a glass with water..

Aunt Patty spoke. “There’s a box in the back of our truck. Why don’t you bring it in for me? And get that sack of sweet corn on the front seat.”

He carried the beer outside and brought the things from the truck.

“Man, it’s been a hot summer.” Uncle Frank held his beer toward Tommy.
“Thirsty? Want a sip?”

Tommy looked around, took a quick swig, and handed it back. It had a grainy taste, and he liked it better than the coffee he had tried this morning, but he would rather have Coca Cola.

Tommy left the box by the basement stairs and carried the sack of corn inside, , followed by his uncle.

“Peggy,” Uncle Frank said. “How ‘bout letting Tommy come stay with us for a few days? We’ll bring him back when we come in for Patty’s ballgame Tuesday night.”

“I need him around home, now that John’s away so much,” Mom said. “Maybe some other time. You’re playing ball now, Patty?”

“She’s the best shortstop in women’s softball,” Uncle Frank said. “This is the first year the lady Methodists are going to win the league.”

“You going to the Methodist Church, now, too, Patty, or just playing on their team?”

“Both.”

“What’s Mama say?”

“Nothing. She don’t leave the house. She thinks we’re going to nine o’clock mass.”

Uncle Frank said, “That old S.O.B. priest at St. James has made more protestant converts in this town than the Baptists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses put together. My girls’re going to be Methodists. I just signed that paper about raising them Catholic to trick Patty into marrying me.””

“Hush, Frank!” Aunt Patty swatted his arm.

“Come on, Porkchop.” Uncle Frank reached around Aunt Patty in a bear hug and took a playful bite of her neck. “If your sister won’t let us borrow her boy for a few days, let’s us go home and make one of our own.”

Aunt Patty giggled and pulled the fallen strap of her sundress. “You’re terrible.”

After they left, Tommy asked, “What’s in the box they brought?”

“Just some clothes. Take it down to the basement and put it by the washer for me, please.”

He did as she told him, but wondered why they needed clothes from Aunt Patty, who was shorter and heavier built than Mom, and whose twins were much younger and smaller than Maggie. He dropped the box on the floor next to the washing machine and lifted the cardboard flaps. He dug through the clothing, pushing aside shorts and blouses he recalled seeing Aunt Patty wear two years ago when she was pregnant. He reached far down into the box and pulled out a baby’s snap-legged snuggle suit and a handful of cloth diapers.

“Damn,” he said softly.

#

Mrs. Harper was sitting in a white wicker chair on the front screen porch when Tommy came to collect for the newspaper. He wondered if Renfrew had told her about their fight. Her bare feet were propped up on the wicker coffee table and she leaned forward to stroke orange-red polish on her toenails. An inch of black panties peaked from the hem of her minidress.

She didn't seem to notice he was there until he knocked on the screen door.

She looked up. "Rennie can't play now." She dropped her feet to the floor and smoothed her dress down with the heel of her left hand.

He waved a rolled newspaper. "Collect."

"Bring the paper in and put it on the table." She was holding the nail polish brush with just the tips of her thumb and index finger, and set it carefully back into the bottle.

"It's Friday, Mrs. Harper. Collect day."

"I can't get into my purse now. My nails are wet."

"Maybe Renfrew or Mr. Harper could get the money."

She picked up a cigarette from an ashtray, careful not let it touch her nails. "My husband's not home yet, and Ren's not feeling well. We just got back from Ottumwa. He had braces put on today." When she took a drag on the cigarette, the lines between her eyes drew closer, and her lips puckered, as if she had to steel the edges of her face against being drawn in along with the smoke.

"It's going on three weeks, Mrs. Harper."

She snorted, and twin plumes of smoke shot down from her nostrils all the way to her lap. She returned the cigarette to the ashtray. "Come back, tomorrow." She fanned her hands through the air, to dry her nails and dismiss him.

He finished his route at Mr. Peevey's house.

Mr. Peevey shifted in his lawn chair and reached into his gray workpants for a small leather coin purse as cracked and age-browned as his hand. He counted aloud as he slowly picked out two dollars worth of coins. "I suppose you want a tip, boy?"

"Don't take any wooden nickels?"

“Nope.”

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket?”

“Nope.”

“I give, Mr. Peevey. What’s my tip?”

“All hell’s going to break loose. The day them men set foot on the moon. Yesterday was just a taste of what’s coming.”

#

Working with Kate in the kitchen was usually quick. They each did whatever task needed to be done next, and seldom argued about who got stuck with the hardest work, like he did whenever it was his turn to do kitchen chores with Mary Fran. It was understood, somehow, that he would wash and rinse the dishes while Kate dried and put things away. Tommy pulled two plastic dishpans from the cupboard and dropped them into the sink. He held up a large bottle of pink dish detergent.

“Mom’s buying the cheap stuff, again.”

“Yeah, I wish she’d get Ivory. That stuff there make my hands itch worser than Joy.” Kate scraped a plate over the garbage pail. “Where’ll I stack the dirty dishes? There’s no room on the counter with all these canning pots and stuff.”

“Leave them on the table, I guess.”

Tommy tried to carry all of the aluminum drinking glasses from the table at one time, pressing his fingers inside them to pinch three together in each hand. A blue

tumbler slipped from his grasp and hit the floor, clanging like a dropped bell as it bounced and rolled, dribbling remnants of milk. Kate stopped it with her bare foot.

She picked it up and looked it over. “Good thing it wasn’t glass. One more dent in these old things won’t make any difference. Besides,” she added, “this one’s Mary Fran’s.”

He took it from her hand and dropped it into the dishpan. “I ought to put some more dents in it, then. Remember how she used to cry when she was little and she didn’t get the blue one?” He washed it quickly and dropped it into the rinse water.

“Yeah.” Kate fished the glass out of the hot water, picking it up with her thumb and index finger, and set it on the drain rack. She blew on her fingers. “That metal gets hot. Mary Fran always had to have the blue one ‘cause they’re the prettiest. None of them are pretty, now. I don’t see why Mom won’t let us use the glasses Grandma Ryan gave her.” She nodded toward the top of the refrigerator, at a tray holding a pitcher and matching set of tumblers. “I know they come from the Green Stamp catalog, so they probably didn’t cost much.”

“There’re for good. Like when company comes.”

“When are we going to be good enough for the good stuff?”

#

Tommy and Mary Fran sat cross-legged on the floor watching the Friday night late movie, a bowl of popcorn between them. Kate was asleep on the sofa, snoring softly like a purring cat.

“The movie’s not very good tonight,” Mary Fran said.

“What do you mean *The Day The Earth Stood Still* isn’t a good movie? It’s a great movie.”

“Is that the best they could come up with to celebrate going to the moon?”

“I can’t think of any movie that’s just about going to the moon.”

“What about the Abbot and Costello one? The one where they think they’re on the moon, but they’re someplace on earth where people’ll be dressed up in costumes with big heads.”

“That’s a funny one. They never show funny movies on Gravesend Manor. They’re supposed to be scary.”

“This isn’t scary.”

“Yes it is. It’s to scare people into getting rid of atomic bombs and quit killing each other, or the Martians or wherever the spaceman came from are going to blow us up.”

It’s still not scary. Except maybe when Gorp opens his eyes and—”

“Gort.”

“Who cares? It’s boring until Gorp starts shooting lightning from his eyes.” She went on, waving a hand at the television. “The Gravesend Manor jokes get dumber and dumber, and the guy playing Igor isn’t even the same, this one’s different from last week.”

“Gravesend Manor is just a bunch of college kids in Ames, fooling around during the commercials.” Arguing with Mary Fran was as automatic as breathing, but he really didn’t feel up to it tonight. He picked the scab from a mosquito bite on his ankle, a souvenir from Wednesday night waiting for Jenny to come out.

“They’re still dumb.”

“Who cares. Would you rather watch the *Tonight Show*?”

“What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing.” He drew his knees up and rested his chin on them. “Has Mom said anything to you lately?”

“About what?” She tilted her head back and suspended a palmful of popcorn above her face, dropping kernels one at a time into her mouth.

“Does she seem different to you?”

“She’s crabbier lately, but that’s probably ‘cause Dad’s gone all the time. Why?”

“Nothing.”

They heard the back screen door shut.

“Dad,” they both said in unison and scrambled up.

Kate woke up. “The movie over? I thought I heard something.”

“Dad’s home!” Mary Fran said.

They rushed to the kitchen. Their father stood in the doorway, his black lunch pail tucked under his arm as he checked for new bills in the mail holder on the wall.

“Daddy!” The girls rushed him and hugged him around his waist. Tommy stood back, watching.

“What’re you doing up so late? It’s way past your bedtime.” Dad’s voice was not stern. He rested his hands on the girls’ shoulders.

“It’s Friday night, Daddy. We always get to stay up on Friday and Saturday, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. How’s everybody doing?”

A slender man, he seemed thinner than usual to Tommy, and his blue-gray eyes that everyone said Tommy had inherited looked dark brown, sunk in deep-set shadows. He kissed the girls on their foreheads, and rubbed the top of Tommy's hair. When he bent to kiss the girls, Tommy noticed a peppering of white hairs on his father's head.

Kate and Mary Fran spoke at the same time. "They didn't pass me in Intermediate 'cause I wouldn't put my head under water," and "See my pin, Daddy? I passed Swimmers and I can swim faster than everybody in the class, except this one boy. I even beat Tommy."

"That's great."

"Will you take us swimming at the lake, Daddy, like you did last summer?" Kate asked.

"Please, Daddy, please?" Mary Fran said. "Take us to the lake."

"I'd love to, kids, but I can't make any promises. We'll see."

He walked slowly through the house, the girls hanging on his waist.

"You want to watch TV with us, Daddy?"

"I don't think so. I'm beat, kids. Give me a goodnight kiss." He leaned down for Kate and Mary Fran to kiss him on the cheek. "See you in the morning."

The girls followed him upstairs.

Tommy turned out the lights and lay down on the sofa. He stared at the dancing shadows on the ceiling cast by the television until the station played the Star Spangled Banner and went off the air.

Chapter Four

Saturday, July 19, 1969

“GREAT APOLLO SPACE SHOW”

Tommy set the newspaper on the table. “You want the front section?”

“I’ll look at it later. It’s all the same old doom and gloom. You want some coffee again this morning?” Mom held up a mug.

“I’ll get some juice. Maybe I’ll try it again when winter comes.”

The *Register* headlines were printed all in capital letters. He smoothed a wrinkle in the page that made the moon photo look like there a river was running through the Sea of Tranquility. The moon shot was not as exciting as it had been three days ago, but he still wanted to keep up with it.

“Isn’t this pretty?” Mom held up the Home Section of the paper to show him pictures of a renovation project on an old house. “Maybe we could do something like that with this place someday.”

“Uh huh.” He went back to reading an article that described how the astronauts would check the landing craft.

“Is the Renfrew house nice inside? You’ve been playing over there lately, haven’t you?”

“It’s o.k.” Renfrew would probably never let him set foot in it again.

“What’s it like? Do they have a lot of antiques?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see much except the upstairs screen porch. Renfrew’s bedroom is humongous. It’s even got a fireplace in it. They got a sleeping porch big enough for their whole family, but they got air conditioning so why even have one? I think there’s a big piano in the front room.” He added, “Renfrew’s got two wristwatches, one with a leather strap, and a dressy one,” but his mother didn’t seem to hear.

“I wonder if it’s the one Peter used to play. I went to school with the Renfrews. Lenore was stuck-up, but her brother was always nice. He left for college and went someplace else to live. She stayed and married one of the Harpers and took over the jewelry store when her dad died, and got the house when her mother passed away this year. I guesst Peter didn’t want to come back.

“I think they’re building a new house. Renfrew talks about it. He doesn’t like living there.”

She drew her finger in slow circles through a small puddle of coffee that had dribbled down her cup. “I went out with Peter Renfrew a couple times, when I was in

high school.” She caught him staring at her. “That was before your Dad and I started going together.”

He studied her face. It was hard to imagine his parents as ever being young. It had never occurred to him that his mother could have had a life apart from his father and him and his sisters.

“Mom, you ever wish we were rich and had a big house, like the Harpers?”

“Everybody wishes they were rich, sometime or another. It’d be wonderful to have a place big enough for all of you to have your own bedrooms.”

“The Harper’s house only has four bedrooms. Mary Fran and Kate would still have to share one.” He bent his head over the newspaper before saying in a lower voice, “and either me or Maggie would have to share, depending on what the new baby is.”

“Oh, Jesus.” He looked up at her.

She leaned her chin in her hand, covering her mouth. Her eyes grew shiny with tears. “How did you find out?”

“The maternity clothes and baby stuff in the box Aunt Patty brought.”

“I thought I could put off saying anything until I started showing more.” She looked down at her stomach. “Do the girls know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Let’s not say anything about it for a while. I’ll tell them later when the time’s right.”

“Will Dad have to work two jobs from now on, ‘cause of the new baby?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can have all my paper route money from now on. And all the money you been making me put away in the jar. I’ll stop holding back money to buy *Mad* magazines and candy bars. I promise.”

“So, you’ve been holding out all these times I told you to put money in the offering envelope for church?”

“Sometimes,” he said, his head down.

“You don’t have to put any more money in the collection basket than you want to, but try to spend it on something better than *Mad’s* and candy. Don’t worry. We’ll get by without your paper route money.”

“But what about Dad? He’ll still have to work two jobs.”

“We’ll work something out. I’ll be getting a little money for taking care of Mrs. Gahlen’s baby when it comes. Don’t worry about it.”

Maggie appeared in the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

“Mommy, I’m hungry.”

Mom picked her up and smoothed her hair. “You wet the bed again, didn’t you, baby? Let’s get you cleaned up” She looked at Tommy. “You won’t say anything, will you? About what we talked about?”

“I promise.”

#

Tommy went upstairs to change into his baseball uniform. His bedroom felt hotter than the rest of the house. By the time he finished buttoning the striped shirt with *The Trailblazer* embroidered on the back, he had to wipe sweat from his face. His swimming

trunks were folded on the top of his bed, along with other clean laundry to put away. Instead of putting the trunks in the drawer, Tommy got a towel and began rolling them in it. A swim after the game would feel great.

The ballpark was near the swimming pool, high on a steep hill. He could feel sweat dripping between his shoulder blades as he pedaled his bike up the incline. His uniform would be soaked before he even started playing. There were about a dozen bikes already parked in the narrow strip of shade near the low wooden fence surrounding the field. Tommy eased his leg over the seat and stood on the left pedal, gliding the bike to a stop. He pulled his glove from the handlebar basket and joined the rest of the Cardinals team.

“What’s going on?” he asked Mark Veer.

“It might be a forfeit.”

“Crap. I biked all this way and up that stupid hill for nothing.”

The coaches and the umpire stood around home plate, discussing something. Mr. Smith, their coach, came over to their bench.

“Listen up, guys. The Cubs are short two people. Twelve of our guys showed up. Your choice, now, guys. They can either forfeit the game to us and we’ll go home, or we can let them have two men to play on their side and we’ll have a game. Raise your hands. Who wants to forfeit? Who wants to play?” He counted hands. “O.k. We play.” He left to consult with the other team’s coach. When he returned, he pointed at Tommy and Jimmy Grinneman. “Ryan, you play first base, Jimmy, you play right field.”

The game was short and boring, full of quick easy outs, as if everybody just wanted to get it over with and get out of the hot sun. The Cardinals scored a run in the seventh inning, and the Cubs scored two in the eighth.

At the top of the ninth inning, Steve Caldwell and Eddie Brasovich both struck out. Mark Veer, who was left-handed, was the next batter. Tommy bent over, his hands resting on his knees, knowing that if the pitch was decent, Mark would send it fast and low into right field, where it would fall to ground between the fielder and the baseline. He called it right, and Mark reached first base, but Jimmy picked up the ball on the run and held it high in warning to keep Mark off second. Renfrew Harper was up next.

Renfrew fouled the first pitch. He tried to burn the second pitch.

“Strike!” the umpire called again.

Even from first base, Tommy could see the furious red beneath Renfrew’s freckles. Each time Renfrew swung, Mark had made false-start sprints toward second base. Mark exhaled loudly through his nose, like an impatient horse. He stood crouched and ready to run. The ball touched wood on the third pitch, low down on the bat, and then it popped high in the air. He extended his glove, and the ball fell softly into the webbing as if drawn by a magnet.

“What a doofus,” Mark said under his breath.

Tommy pulled his glove off and wiped his sweaty hand on his shirt as he walked to the Cardinals bench. The Cubs were cheering.

“Way to go, Ryan,” Renfrew said. “You lost the game for us. Whose side are you on?”

“Go to hell,” Tommy said, under his breath.

Mr. Smith was nearby and heard him. “You watch your language, young man.”

Tommy grabbed his bike and started pedaling fast.

“Wait up, man,” Mark called behind him. When he caught up to Tommy, he said, “Don’t worry about it. Harper’s a jerk.”

“My sister’s playing at the softball field. I’m supposed to wait up for her.”

“I’ll go with you.”

They parked their bikes and climbed up the bleachers to the highest seats, where there was some shade provided by the overhang. A weak breeze moved around them.

Mark fanned himself with his cap. “It’s not as hot up here.”

Tommy said nothing.

“Boy, you’re in a crummy mood. Don’t let Harper get you down. Everybody knows he’s the one who blew the game. Steve and I packed up our train stuff and left a little after you did yesterday. Steve’s mad at Renfrew for breaking the axle on one of his cars. I think I can fix it, though.”

Tommy hoped it wasn’t the boxcar with the giraffe. He felt a little better, but he was more interested in watching Jenny Jamison in center field than talking right now.

“I wish we just had t-shirts for uniforms and could wear shorts like the girls. These uniforms are miserable.” Mark pulled his uniform shirt out of his pants and unbuttoned it. “Hey, did you bring your suit? Let’s go swimming.”

A big girl at bat knocked the ball far into center field. Jenny was running backward and caught it only a few feet before the back fence. She threw it all the way to Mary Fran at shortstop, who threw it to the catcher in time to tag out a runner headed for home. The teams exchanged places.

“Wow,” Tommy said. “You see that?”

“You’re sister’s kind of cute. A little chunky. Too bad we can’t have her for shortstop on our team.

“Did you see how far Jenny threw the ball from center field?”

“Pretty decent for a girl. But this is a dinky field. The little kids play T-ball on this field.”

His eyes were on Jenny’s back on the home team bench. Mary Fran nudged Jenny, and she turned around. She smiled and waved. He waved back, and then he saw that Renfrew Harper was in the bleachers.

Renfrew’s face was split by a wide grin, full of silver braces.

Mark said, “Hey, Ryan. Did you bring your swimsuit? Let’s go swimming.”

“I can’t stay long. I got to deliver papers and do some chores for my mom.”

“We won’t stay long. Just long enough to cool off.”

“Oh, shoot. I forgot. I’m supposed to take my sister home.”

“She’s a big girl. She can get home by herself.”

The game was over and people started to leave. Mary Fran and Jenny climbed the bleachers to join them.

“Good game,” Tommy said to Jenny.

“Thanks,” Mary Fran said.

“Hey,” Mark said. “Why don’t we all go swimming? Did you have your swim suits with you?”

“I got mine,” Jenny said. “Suzy Baxter and I were going to go swimming after the ball game, but she skinned up her knee sliding into base and wanted to go home instead.

“I don’t have mine,” said Mary Fran.

Renfrew Harper had joined them. “Me, neither.”

“That’s o.k.,” Mark said. “They got suits at the pool to let you use sometimes from when people go off and leave them the dressing room.”

“I don’t have any money.” Mary Fran looked dejected.

Tommy said, “I’ll pay your way.” He was about to tell her that she could pay him back later, but the way Jenny smiled at him made him change his mind.

#

The house seemed empty when they got home. He opened the fridge and pulled out a pitcher of Kool-Aid.

“That was a lot of fun,” Mary Fran said. “I’m sure glad they had a swimsuit I could use. Too bad there wasn’t one to fit Renfrew. I wish he’d been able to go swimming with us.”

Kate came through the back door, carrying a HyVee grocery sack. “Where you guys been? Mom’s been looking for you.”

“Where is she?”

“Maybe she’s taking a nap,” Kate said. “She wasn’t feeling good. She said her stomach was hurting. She sent me to get some hot dogs and buns for supper.”

“Listen.” Tommy said.

“What?”

“Hear that?” He went toward the basement door. “Maggie? What’re you doing down there?”

Maggie was afraid of the basement.

Halfway down the steps, the wicker clothesbasket was overturned, wet sheets spilling out. Below, Mom was sprawled on the basement floor, her legs spread over the bottom stairs. Maggie squatted besides her, whimpering.

“Mary Fran, go wake Dad up. Quick.”

He rushed down stairs. “Mom, Mom? Are you all right?”

She groaned and moved. “Help me up.” Her voice was weak. She stood, with his help, and swayed. “Katie, take Maggie upstairs. No, no. Don’t try to carry her. Take her hand and help her walk up the stairs.”

Tommy brought the backless chair, which was still in the coal bin from the last windstorm, and helped her sit down. She cradled her left arm in her lap with her other hand.

“Mom, should we call the ambulance?”

“No.” She hunched over, and rocked her shoulders back and forth.

There were smudges on her clothes and legs. She moaned when he brushed dirt from her shoulder.”

“Does it hurt bad?”

“It hurts bad enough. Maybe it’s broke.” She looked up at him. “Something inside’s hurts, too. I hit the floor pretty hard..”

There were hurried footsteps above them.

“It’s my fault. I should have come back home right after the game and carried the wash out to the clothesline for you, but I went swimming instead.” He started to cry. “I’m sorry, Mom. It’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

“Sh, sh.” She cupped her hand around his face. “Maggie saw a granddaddy longlegs on the stairs and started screaming and grabbed me around the legs. I had my hands full with the laundry basket. It’s not her fault and it’s not your fault. It was just an accident. It wouldn’t have made any difference if you or Mary Fran had been here carrying laundry and Maggie saw a spider. One of you could have fallen and got hurt bad.”

He looked at her, wiping his nose on the shoulder of his striped uniform shirt.

She hunched over suddenly, and moaned as she held her arms close to her stomach.

“Tommy?”

“Yes?”

Her eyes were big and shiny with tears in a pale face. Tiny droplets of blood dotted her cheek where she had scraped it on the cement. “Have you said anything to your sisters? About what we talked about this morning?”

“No.”

“Don’t say anything to them about it.”

Dad hurried down the steps, Mary Fran trailing behind him. He was barefoot, and his T-shirt was on backwards. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“I was going to take the sheets out to the clothesline, and Maggie saw a spider and grabbed me and we fell down the stairs. She isn’t hurt, is she?”

Dad hugged her, gently. “She’s fine. Kate’s got her. Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I’ve meant to put those rubber treads on the stairs, like you wanted, but I just had to get some

more sleep before I went in to work tonight.” He looked her over carefully. “You need to see a doctor?”

“Yeah, we better go to the hospital. I think my arm might be broke..”

He helped her stand up, and guided her toward the steps. “Take it easy. There’s no rush. Mary Fran, get my shoes and the car keys.

“I got them already, Daddy,” she answered.

“Tommy?” Mom stopped before the back door.

“Yes, Mom?”

“Call Patty to come get Maggie. You take care of the girls.”

“Yes, Mom.”

#

Tommy leaned his bike against the three-foot high cement terrace wall in front of the Harpers’ house and tucked the *Saturday Tribune*, his collection bag, and receipts clipboard under his arm. He went up the terrace steps into the raised yard, and across the short front walk. After the third time he rang the doorbell, he could hear footsteps in the house, but no one came to the door. He hoisted a foot onto one of the brick ledges flanking the Harpers’ front steps. The right-side ledge tilted away from the steps at a precarious angle, threatening to topple the concrete urn perched on top. He fought an urge to knock it over. One hard nudge with his foot could topple the whole thing over. There were no flowers in the moss-coated planters, only a couple lipstick tinged cigarette butts lying at broken angles on the hard-packed dirt. He thought of his mother’s large clay geranium pots, the ones that she made him haul from the basement every spring and soak

and scrub in a washtub until they suited her enough to transplant the flowers she had wintered over in coffee cans. He rang the Harper doorbell again.

The door opened, and Mrs. Harper crossed the screen porch. She was wearing a black bathing suit and a dark orange beach shirt. Her mouth looked like a child had drawn a scowl on it with orange crayon. "What do you want?"

"Collect," Tommy said, holding up the green zipper case printed with *The Des Moines Register and Tribune* in white Gothic letters. "Remember? You said yesterday to come back again."

"This is a bad time. We're just about ready to leave for the club." She went inside the house. Barely two minutes later, she reappeared with a bamboo handled purse. She fished around in it, gathering tissues and lipstick and car keys before finding a wallet. She opened it and peered in, pulling out a bill. "Have you got change for a fifty?"

"No."

"Why don't you come by tomorrow? Between four and five, that might be good. I'll try to have the right change, then. I've got to go now. There's a swim party at the club and we're running late."

He turned around and stood on the step. Across the street, Mr. Peevey sat on his porch and waved at Tommy. Crazy old Mr. Peevey, he thought, who still managed to pay for his papers every Friday, counting out nickel and pennies.

"Well?" said Mrs. Harper.

He turned back to her. "Yes?"

"What's wrong with you? What are you staring at?"

"Nothing."

“Aren’t you going to give me my paper?”

She opened the screen door and he placed the Saturday *Tribune* in her orange-nailed hand. She spun around and walked across the screen porch, her sandals slapping against the soles of her feet until she disappeared inside the house.

He stared at the closed door, wanting to scream every swear word he could think of, but anger gripped his throat like a hand, choking back the words.

Chapter Five

Sunday, July 20, 1969

“POISED FOR MOON LANDING”

The astronauts were picking their spot to touch down. If he read every page in every section of the *Sunday Register and Tribune*, except for the want ads, it would kill about two hours, but Tommy was not interested. He was stretched out on the sofa, the paper on the braided rug where he had dropped it. He had been awake long before the newspaper was delivered. He glanced at the date on the masthead.

July twentieth. His birthday.

He wished he were on the moon, a million miles away from everything and everybody.

Kate came downstairs, padding softly on bare feet. She sat down on the edge of the sofa and he scrunched back to make room for her.

“I woke up cause Maggie wasn’t in my bed this morning.”

“You can always crawl in with Mary Fran until Aunt Patty brings her back.” He tried to sound funny, but knew it didn’t work.

She hugged him. “Happy birthday, Tommy.”

“Thanks.”

“Some birthday. Mom’s in the hospital. I didn’t know they’d keep you in the hospital just for a broken arm.”

“They probably want to make sure she didn’t hurt something else when she fell. She’ll be home tonight.”

Heavy footsteps pounded above.

“Godzilla’s awake,” they both said in unison, and laughed.

“Should we go to church, today?” she said. “Without Mom?”

“You want to go listen to Father Heinrich?”

“No,” she said. “He scares me, the way his hands shake. The last time I went to communion, he almost dropped the host on the floor”

“Eddie Brasovich says the alter boys can smell whiskey on his breath every Sunday.”

“I don’t feel much like going to church without Mom. Do you?”

“I think it’ll be just fine with God if we just stay home and pray.”

#

At four o'clock, Dad said, "It's time to go pick up Mom." He pulled his car keys from his pocket. "Aren't you coming with us, Tommy?"

"Mrs. Harper said to come for the paper money about now."

"O.k. We'll see you in a little while." He rubbed his hand over Tommy's hair. "Come right home as soon as you're done, though. The radio said there's a chance of severe thunderstorms and it's starting to darken up in the west. If it starts raining hard, we'll stay at the hospital and wait 'til it lets up."

Tommy didn't feel right, collecting newspaper money on a Sunday near suppertime. The weather didn't feel right, the air hotter than ever and thick with the promise of withheld rain. His chest felt weighted down and compressed, like he was treading water forever to keep from drowning. The whole world didn't feel right.

He heard someone calling as he was about to cross Main Street.

"Ryan. Young Ryan."

"Yes, Mr. Peevey?"

When Mr. Peevey leaned over his porch rail, one of his undershirt straps fell over his shoulder. "What're you doing outside? Didn't you hear there's a storm watch? You get on home now."

"I will. Soon."

"Didn't I tell you all hell would bust loose when they started messing around on the moon?" Mr. Peevey went inside his house.

Tommy nodded and kept walking. He looked for traffic before crossing Main Street, but there was not a car to be seen in either direction. He crossed the street and marched up the steps into the Harpers' terraced yard. As he reached the door and rang the

bell, the sky seemed to have turned a strange yellow-green, as if the entire world were suddenly wrapped in colored Cellophane. He pressed the button again. The treetops began to swirl. He pounded the door as hard as he could, and yelled, "Anybody home?" He pulled on the screen porch door, but it was latched.

The roar of the wind rose in crescendo with the rising wail of the town emergency siren. The treetops bowed over and slapped each other as if they had pulled up their roots and could dance.

Tommy turned and ran, wanting only to race home to Kate and Mary Fran and the welcome cave-smell of the old coal bin in the basement. He made it to the terrace steps when he heard a loud crash. The Chinese elm in the yard next to Mr. Peevey's split in two, half of the tree falling toward Mr. Peevey's house, and the other half falling across Main Street, snapping a power line. Tommy dropped down into the stairwell of the terrace wall.

He hugged his knees close, ducking his head below the terrace wall and balling himself up as small as he could.

Where's the ditch they always tell you to lie in during a tornado if you can't find shelter?

He lifted his head a bit and squinted through the grit swirling through the air and stinging his face. He could see part of his own backyard, and the sheets that Mary Fran and his dad had washed that morning were billowing high above the clothesline before taking flight and crumpling to earth like wounded birds. Behind him, the Harpers' screen door flew open and stuck against the house with a sound like a gun shot. The downed

power line in the street jumped and spat white sparks, then lay twisted and coiled back on itself like a dead snake.

“Hail Mary,” he began, and stopped. He couldn’t remember the rest.

He wondered if this really was the end of the world, like Mr. Peevey said. Had the astronauts just set foot on the moon?

A calm spread over him like sinking over his head in deep water.

It occurred to him that he would probably die in the windstorm, and that praying wouldn’t stop the wind or unbreak Mom’s arm or make anything back the way it used to be. Please, God, he prayed, just let everyone in my family be all right. I’m not afraid. Just let Mom and Dad and Kate and Mary Fran and Maggie and Mr. Peevey and all my friends and even Renfrew Harper be all right, thank you, Amen.

The wind died suddenly, as if it had never raised itself above an angel’s breath. Tommy became aware of the sound of rain, large fat drops plopping onto the sidewalk with satisfying smacks, before he felt the wetness striking his back and shoulders. The scattered drops turned to a downpour, and he tilted his face to the rain, closing his eyes and letting it wash over him.

Tommy stood up and surveyed the street. Several trees had lost large branches, but the only tree that had completely fallen down was the half-rotted Chinese elm that had taken down the power line. A branch covered Mr. Peevey’s porch. One by one, people opened doors, extending tentative hands out to the rain. Two men approached the downed power line and walked around the fallen tree, their wives standing nervously on the porches, motioning them to come back.

“Are you all right?” A man behind him spoke.

He turned and looked blankly at the Harpers, knotted together on their screen porch.

“You o.k., Ryan?”

Renfrew’s voice sounded small, and far away.

“Are you hurt?” Mrs. Harper asked. Her eyes were wide, and there were mascara smudges underneath them, as if she may have been crying. “We’re sorry. We didn’t know anybody was out here.”

He didn’t hear anything they said. He did not even realize that the voice he did hear was his own, it seemed to be coming from another being.

“You owe me for three weeks of newspapers, Mrs. Harper. I’m not bringing you another one until you pay up. Call Mr. Peterson at the paper office and take it up with him. I’m going home.

#

He was toweling his hair dry when the phone rang.

“Tommy?” Dad said. “Are you o.k. You didn’t get caught out in the storm, did you?”

“No, I’m fine. Is everybody o.k.? How’s Mom?”

“We’re fine. The power went off for a few minutes, then the emergency generator must have come on. The girls and I were worried about you. Your mother said you’d be fine, but she’s still a little out of it with whatever they gave her.” He hesitated a moment.

“Any damage at the house?”

“We’re o.k. Some branches came down from the oak tree between our house and the Gahlens’, but nothing big. Our street still has power, but I don’t know about the next one. There’s a big tree down on Main Street that knocked a corner off Mr. Peevey’s porch.”

“We’ll go over and help him tomorrow when I get home from work.”

“Aren’t you going to work at the Shamrock tomorrow night?”

“No, I’m not going to work there so much anymore. Just every now and then on Saturdays.”

“Oh.”

“It’ll be alright, Tommy. It will just take some time for your mom to—” his father began, than hesitated. “To get over things.”

#

It was almost eight o’clock, and although he should have been hungry, he wasn’t. He hadn’t eaten anything since the bologna sandwiches and soup he and Mary Fran made for lunch. Tommy stood before the screen door, listening to the sounds of summer—the clang of pots and his sisters’ arguing from the kitchen, the deep murmur of his father’s voice settling their dispute, and outside, the crickets’ serenade. The crickets sounded happier tonight, as if they, too, enjoyed the cooler air the storm brought and the fresh after-rain smell like the world begun anew. The western sky was a wash of rose pink, fading to purple black.

Behind him, his mother moaned softly as she moved in the recliner.

He picked up the bed pillow from where it had fallen, plumped it up, and placed it carefully over the chair arm. As she settled her arm on the pillow, he brushed the back of his hand against the plaster cast that covered her wrist and part of her hand. The plaster felt rock hard, and body warm. The only light in the room was the dim TV lamp, across the room. Her eyes were lost in deep shadows. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, afraid that even touching her that much might hurt.

“You want me to get your pain pills?”

“No. I’m o.k.,” she said. She held his hand. “What a day. Here it is your twelfth birthday, and with the storm, and,” she paused, “and everything, you must think we forgot.”

“You don’t need to make a big deal over me.”

“At least we didn’t lose power on our street. Mary Fran and Kate are going to try to make some cupcakes after supper. That should be interesting.” She pointed to the dining room. “There’s something for you in there.”

On top of the nearly finished jigsaw puzzle was a small box with a clear plastic lid. Inside was a Timex watch with a black leather strap. “Gee, thanks, Mom.”

“I ordered it from the Green Stamp catalog. Sorry, I didn’t get around to wrapping it.”

“That’s o.k. This is great.” He tried to fasten it onto his wrist, struggling with the buckle.

“Can you get it? I can’t help much with only one hand.”

“I got it. See?”

“It looks nice. I hope you like it.” She grasped his wrist, studying the watch, then looked up at him. “A man’s watch. You’re growing up.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

He waited a moment before speaking. “Are you still going to have a baby?”

“No.” Her voice sounded as if she was choking back a sob. “It was God’s will.”

He could see her eyes getting shiny, even in the dim light of the TV lamp.

“Don’t tell the your sisters, Tommy. They’ll learn about life soon enough. Let them stay little girls a while longer. Promise you won’t tell them? Ever?”

“I promise.”

She squeezed his hand.

#

Tommy looked at his watch. It was ten fifty-one p.m. Several times over the last hour, CBS replayed the recording of Neil Armstrong’s voice, “One small step for man...”

“I wish they’d hurry up and do it if they’re going to show them really walking on the moon,” Mary Fran said as she peeled the paper from a cupcake. “There’s been nothing but moon walk, moon walk, moon walk on TV and they still haven’t shown us anything.”

‘Quiet. There they are.’ He leaned forward.

An astronaut in a bulky suit stepped back from an American flag, and turned around toward the camera. Walter Cronkite sounded like the voice of God as he described what was happening onscreen while the astronaut walked in front of the lunar

module. The module's legs were as fragile as a spider's. It was hard to believe that they could hold up something capable of dropping to the moon and rocketing back up.

Jenny Jamison was sitting on the floor, between him and Mary Fran. She was gripping his wrist.

It was over too soon.

"Is that all there is?" Mary Fran said, unaware of a blob of white frosting on the tip of her nose. "Is that what the big deal's been about all this time? All that fuss, and all they do is walk around in a some pile of dirt and rocks."

Tommy and Jenny exchanged looks. She shook her head, and he rolled his eyes.

Dad got out of the recliner and stretched. "I'm glad I watched it, but I can't keep my eyes open any longer. Tommy, you see Jenny gets home all right, and come on back. Good night, everybody."

They didn't say anything as they crossed the street. The closer they came to Jenny's house, the slower they walked.

She stopped next to the large oak tree at the edge of her yard. He could barely see her at first, so completely did the tree block out the light from the street lamp, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

She moved closer. "Do you feel different, now that you're twelve?"

"Sort of. I don't know." He looked away, in the direction of Renfrew's and Mr. Peevey's houses on Main Street. Most of the houses had lights on. Mr. Peevey's house and the one next to it were dark. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to feel."

"Hard to imagine how one birthday can make such a big difference. Now we'll have to start paying adult price at the movies and the swimming pool." Her tone of voice

changed. “You know, there’ll be skating parties and dances to go to, now that we’ll be in junior high.”

“I never thought of that.”

“Don’t you feel any older?”

He felt ancient, and for a moment, wished that he could go back to the way everything was five days ago, when he was still eleven.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” he said. “But sometimes it seems like big things can happen and nothing else ever changes. Look how the sun came out right after the storm? Like a windstorm never ripped through here. In a few days, all the downed trees and everything will be cleaned up. It’ll be like all it never happened”

“Oh, windstorms and tornadoes. They happen all the time. It wouldn’t be Iowa if a town didn’t get blown away every summer. That’s not what I mean. Look at the moon.” She pointed. “It still looks the same, but we’ll never look at it the same, ever again. A person walked on it.”

She moved closer, and felt for his hand in the dark.

He said, “I’ll never forget my twelfth birthday.”

He felt her grasp his hand in the dark.

“Happy birthday, Tommy.”

Jenny kissed him quickly, and ran into the house.

He stood under the tree for a moment, rubbing his finger lightly over his mouth, then began walking home. In the middle of the street, the reflection of the moon floated on a puddle of dark water.

Tommy Ryan looked up at the moon, silent and secretive in its innocent sky.

THE END

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