

## BROTHERHOOD

It was a whitish-gray November day, cardinals darting in and out of the dry, rattling cornstalks. The game was hide and seek. Which meant knees in the mud, chill behind his neck, hands hurting from the cold since you couldn't bring your mittens or they'd ask whether you wanted to go home to your mommy. As if his brother could read Jon's hesitation, Stevie turned on him that new metallic and distant look, hard as their father's black Ford. Ever since they'd moved to Ohio, Stevie and Jon were no longer Batman and Robin, Lone Ranger and Tonto, an automatic pair. Sometimes he was allowed to tag along and sometimes he wasn't. Jon zipped his jacket against the chill and shut his mouth quickly, as if he could swallow the white breath hanging in front of him, the hesitation he had not actually—fortunately—put into words.

Brian, the lead kid—the pale one who had freckles on his freckles, but who was unquestionably the hardest and coolest—was repeating the local rules. "All right. One to a hiding place. 'It' counts to fifty. If you're spotted you have to run and touch this stump before the 'It' team tags you. If you're tagged you become a search-and-destroy zombie on the 'It' team. Call teams!" There were only two to a team and Jon held his breath, but after Brian picked the fat kid who lived next door to him, Stevie grunted and pushed his chin in Jon's direction. The four team leaders took turns doing rock paper scissors. When Brian lost, he and the fat kid immediately put their heads in their folded arms on the stump, yelling out, One! Two! Three!

How long was Jon crouching by the tiny creek that eked through the cornfield, building his little dam out of stones and broken cement pieces of culvert? Long enough to block the trickling creek so that water was coming over his dam—well, not exactly over, more like through, so that he kept patching the holes with mud. Long enough to forget about the game as the wind muttered through the corn, as the soft occasional cow groans in the next field became almost indistinguishable from the intermittent highway hiss of cars, as a squadron from the nearby Air Force base zoomed so low that the ground beneath his knees shuddered. His own hands became a squadron and attacked

his own dam: ack-ack-ack, knocking down bridges, flooding peasant villages, fields on fire, screaming Viet Cong!

Then he saw the sneaker toes. For a chilly white second, he froze. By the time he looked up the fat boy's hot yellow stream of piss was trickling down Jon's pants, into his socks, into his sneakers. Jon's mouth actually fell open, which he wouldn't have noticed except that, as the other boys had unzipped and started pissing on his leg too, the fat boy pissed into Jon's mouth.

Which is when he saw his brother, Stevie, staring at him.

What was that look, exactly? For years Jon would wake up from nightmares in which Stevie was staring at him with that—that what?—that sense of joined horror that quickly turned away into recoil, into rejection and fury at him for being such a pathetic runt. That scathing look held him still, for a minute. Then he was finally up and running and all of them were laughing, chasing him, flinging mudballs at him. He didn't look back to see if Stevie was too.

This was the part he could never have explained to his wife—his loaner wife, he sometimes called her bitterly, after the divorce—many years later: how and why a group of boys could suddenly and for no reason, with no words, turn him into a urinal. It was certainly no worse than any of the other things that had happened in junior high and high school as he trailed haplessly after his brainy athletic brother—the obvious things that happen to the school weakling, the jello poured down the back of his shirt, the head flushed into a toilet, the broken tooth. Except that it *was* worse. That look from his brother: that was worse, worse than any of what happened after.

As he passed the stump he saw some other kid standing on it, Home Free, pounding his chest and howling. He raced on by, his legs chafing with piss and the scratchy invasions of cornstalks and crumbled cow patties and mud sliding down his left buttock to the back of his knee. He managed to slam the garage door behind him, but it burst open again and there was Stevie.

They stared at each other from opposite sides of the door. A wedge of oil-stained cement floor widened between them, dizzyingly, like an expanding galaxy.

Jon gripped the garage door lintel, as if to keep open a view of his betrayal, and—as if he was still a little kid—yelled, “Mom!”

Stevie hurled forward and tackled Jon. Jon reached backward to break his fall. Before he realized that his hand had hit the cement floor, he was blackened by a sudden nausea of pain, a tidal wall of pain.

That night at dinner, as Jon stared at his mother's knife and fork cutting his flank steak into pieces—because the bones of the fingers and wrist are exceptionally delicate and complicated, the orthopedist had explained, the cast would stay on for twelve weeks—he heard their father saying, “Not even a girl would run and fall like this. Can you believe this? How the hell does he ever expect to make his way in life if he can't even walk through a door? A klutz, I'm telling you, a good for nothing, since he was born he's been this way.”

“Harvey—” Their mother's voice was almost too pale to be heard. Stevie himself was silent, staring into his food. He had sat by Jon in the emergency room while their mother kept asking puzzled questions, which neither would answer. Only when the surgeon asked what happened did Jon say he had accidentally slipped on the oily garage floor and landed on his hand. Stevie looked at him, then, and it was a look Jon could hang onto: not gratitude, exactly, not even understanding, but a friendless companionship: as if they were exiled together in a place no one else could ever reach.

At dinner, their father was asking Jon to pass the salt—“What's the matter? Afraid it might hurt?” Their older sister, Karen—long and thin and pale, as gawky as a shepherd's crook—held one hand up covering her eyes, as always, while she forked in her food with the other, as if this way no one could see her, until she bolted from the table and went upstairs to her room above the garage. Up in her bedroom and bathroom, which were the only rooms on the second floor, she had hung a ten-foot-wide mercator projection of the world. She would sit on the toilet for hours absorbed in book after book about various climates and topographies and geologies. She would stay up nights memorizing new grammars and vocabularies in the same obsessive way that her brother Steve did mathematical brainteasers. She always pretended that the family didn't exist. It was easier that way.