

IN THE
CHERRY TREE

DAN POPE

PICADOR

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APPLE HILL ROAD

Summer days began without a plan. You got up. You had a bowl of cereal. You went outside. A lawnmower hummed. Ducks passed overhead in perfect V formation like World War Two bombers. A dog barked, and another dog barked back. Somebody was hammering nails into a roof. Somebody was bouncing a basketball two streets away. You heard the sound, then the echo. A cat crept across the grass and disappeared beneath a hedge. It was hot. The sun was strong. The crickets made a seething noise. A sprinkler came on and made a quiet rain sound when the water hit the grass and then a loud rain sound when the water hit the street.

“Let’s do something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Crab apple fight?”

“Nah.”

We thought it over. After a while someone got an idea, and we did something.

* * *

Our street before it was a street used to be an apple orchard. The apple trees were planted in neat rows that went up the hill as far as you could see. The Dad told us about the apple trees. He remembered them from when he was a boy. He used to come out to the country for picnics with his family in his father’s car, which was called a Graham Paige, and they would get a drink of apple cider at the farmhouse and walk around the apple orchards.

That was a long time ago.

When they built our street the builders cut down most of the apple trees and sawed up the logs and dragged the branches away. The builders left some of the apple trees for looks. Every house had one in the front yard, giving off shade and dropping crab apples into the grass. Everyone kicked or swept the crab apples into the street, where they got smashed and worm-eaten and smelled like rot. The crab apples were not good to eat. They were sour. Mik Cosgrove ate them but no one else did. We threw the crab apples at cars and squirrels, at telephone poles and each other. Once I nailed Albert in the middle of his forehead with a rotten crab apple, which exploded. The Dad saw it from the kitchen window and came outside and said, “That’s a good way to take someone’s eye out.”

All the houses on our street looked the same except for the farmhouse. The houses were white split-level houses with flat roofs. Some of the front doors were painted different colors. On every stoop was a gray milk box. Each house had a sign above the front door that said something like “Welcome,” or “Home Sweet Home,” or “Bless This House.” The sign above our door said “35.”

We lived at number thirty-five. Stev lived directly across the street from us. Tiger lived next to

Stev. Mik Cosgrove lived next to Tiger. Franky DiLorenzo lived across the street from Mik Cosgrove. The Estabrooks lived next to us. At night Diana Estabrook kissed boys on her porch swing while Albert and I watched from our bedroom window. All the boys liked to kiss Diana Estabrook.

The farmhouse was located at the bottom of the street. The farmhouse was built in 1805, according to the little sign on the front door. A brook ran through the backyard of the farmhouse. There was a well in the yard with a pump and a bucket which no one used anymore. The well was for looks. It had no water. The sign on the farmhouse mailbox said "Geo. W. Sage," but nobody by that name lived in the farmhouse. An old lady lived there, but the lights were always off. The old lady had never been seen. She lived her whole life in the farmhouse and never came out. She was like a rare butterfly. If you could just catch a glimpse of her with your binoculars, your life would be special. But it never happened, not once.

THE GROUNDHOG ARRIVES

That summer, a groundhog invaded our backyard. The groundhog arrived in the middle of June, after school had ended. The groundhog made a tunnel in the backyard that went around and around, making ridges in the grass like a pencil doodle. The tunnel ended underneath the back porch.

The Mom said, "I'll call the humane society. They'll know what to do."

The Dad said, "Don't bother. I'll take care of it. Come on, Timmy."

The Mom said, "What are you going to do?"

He got into the Mark IV, drove very slowly onto the lawn and steered around to the backyard, making tread marks in the grass. He stopped next to the back porch and got out. The car looked strange sitting on the lawn.

The Mom came out onto the back porch. She said, "What in God's name are you doing?"

"Watch and learn," said The Dad.

He taped the black garden hose with duct tape to the exhaust pipe, then stuck the other end of the hose down the groundhog hole and filled in the hole with dirt. Then he got back into the car and gunned the motor. Approximately five seconds later smoke started pouring out of three separate holes in the backyard.

The Dad said to me, "You see him?"

"No. You?"

"No."

"Maybe we got him."

"Maybe. Or maybe he's got some holes that we don't know about. Maybe there's more than one groundhog. Maybe there's a bunch of them."

"What's a bunch of groundhogs called?"

"I don't know. A family?"

After a couple of minutes of gunning the motor, the backyard smelled like car exhaust.

The Mom said, "Stop that this instant. What are the neighbors going to think? I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life." She went inside and slammed the door.

The Dad said, "Okay. That's enough."

He unwrapped the hose, and we drove around the side of the house and parked in the garage.

* * *

The Dad looked like Rock Hudson with a gob of Brylcreem in his hair, which was black and thick and low on his forehead. The Mark IV was his pride and joy. He used to own a Mark III, but he traded it in for the Mark IV the day the new model came out. The Mark IV was dark blue and had a V-8 engine with maximum horsepower. The Dad washed and simonized the Mark IV regularly, rubbing an

buffing it with a terry cloth. He had a special compound to take out scratches. As soon as he was done washing and waxing he immediately put the car in the garage and closed the overhead door. The Dad acted like a big shot when operating the Mark IV. He'd wheel into a restaurant parking lot, push down the tinted windows and tell the car jockey, "Park it in a safe spot, kid. I'll make it worth your while." Or he'd tell the package store clerk, "Get me a case of your best champagne. I don't care what it costs. Put it in the trunk of my car. The Mark IV." The Dad disliked foreign cars. He often told Stev's Dad, "Do yourself a favor. Get rid of that German car before it burns a hole in your pocket. Get yourself a Continental."

Sometimes The Dad let Albert drive the Mark IV around the driveway. Albert would recline the seat as far as it would go, so that he was practically lying down. He'd drive to the end of the driveway and back, switching the gearshift lever from *D* for Drive to *R* for Reverse. Sometimes he backed into Stev's driveway or went all the way around the block, but generally he stayed in our driveway, going back and forth. I would sit in the passenger seat, adjusting the dials on the radio. I did not drive because my feet did not touch the pedals, even with the seat pushed all the way forward.

* * *

Tiger's Brother was standing at the end of our driveway. He said, "What's going on?"

The Dad said, "Got a groundhog here."

I said, "We're smoking him out."

Tiger's Brother said, "You think that'll work?"

The Dad said, "Should."

Tiger's Brother said, "Bob. I got one for you. Listen to this."

Tiger's Brother stood very close to The Dad. Tiger's Brother always stood close to you when he talked, sometimes within inches of your face, so that you could smell his cabbage breath. He talked a tone of voice like someone telling you a secret. He said to The Dad in his secretive voice: "Three guys go into a bar. A Jew. A guinea. And a Polack."

I couldn't hear the rest of the joke.

The Dad said, "Heh."

Tiger's Brother said, "Did you like that one?"

The Dad said, "Heh heh."

We went inside. The Mom looked up from the kitchen sink, where she was cleaning dishes. She said, "What did he want?"

The Dad said, "Who?"

"You know very well who."

"He told me a joke. I've never known anyone who knows so many jokes. He must write them down."

"Did he see you driving on the lawn?"

"No."

I said, "Yes, he did."

The Dad said to me, "Don't be a squeal."

"Don't yell at him for telling the truth. He's not a liar like his father."

"You call me a liar in front of the kids?"

"You know what that person is like. He'll tell his mother. She'll tell everyone in town."

"Tell them what? What is there to tell, for Christ's sake? That we got a groundhog?"

"Do you think it's normal driving on the lawn in the middle of the day with everyone watching?
that what you call normal behavior?"

"Who the hell cares what they think."

"I wanted to call the humane society, but no, you had to do it your way. That's what I get for
marrying a Front Street wop."

"Don't start that wop business."

"I'll start any business I like."

"Call the boys wops while you're calling names."

"These boys are Scottish through and through."

"They're half Italian. That makes 'em half wops. Isn't that right, Timmy?"

I said, "I'm a wop. Wop wop wop."

The Mom said, "Don't say that. You're no such thing. You take after me. Anyone can see that."

The Dad said, "Sure, he does. He's a perfect little Scotsman with his black hair and brown eyes."

"Have you been drinking? Is that why you drove the car on the lawn?"

Albert walked into the kitchen and said, "Could you shut up, please?"

The Dad said, "Don't tell your mother to shut up."

Albert said, "Why not?"

The Dad said, "Because I say so, that's why."

The Mom said, "Leave him alone."

I said, "I have hazel eyes. Not brown."

The Dad said, "You hear that? Hazel eyes. Goddamn right you do, just like me. What color are
your mother's eyes?"

I said, "I don't know."

The Dad said, "She's got gray eyes like an owl and thin lips. Never get involved with a thin-lipped
woman. You boys remember that when you get older."

I said, "Why?"

The Dad said, "Nothing as cold as a thin-lipped woman."

The Mom said, "I wish you would die. I really do."

The Dad said, "Keep wishing."

The next day there were new groundhog tracks in the backyard.

CHERRIES

Stev was my best friend. He and I grew up together. There were family pictures of Stev and Albert and me in each other's playpens, wearing diapers. Stev was always smiling, sitting next to us. His real name was Steve but we called him Stev because we had a rule against having an *e* at the end of your first name. *E*'s were not allowed. Therefore we called Steve Stev and Mike Cosgrove Mik Cosgrove. Stev was fourteen, two years older than me and one year older than Albert. He was going into the tenth grade in the fall. He went to a different school. He and I were the same height even though Stev was older. I was fast but Stev was faster. He could run faster than anyone we knew.

Stev and I liked the same things. We liked badminton, which we played in his backyard in games that lasted up to 500. We liked eating cherries off the tree. We liked asking each other TV questions. I would ask, "Where does Joe Friday live?" and Stev would answer, "At home with his mother," and I would say, "Correct." We liked keeping lists of our favorite movies and records and TV shows. We liked listening to WDRC's "Top 30 Songs of the Week Based on Sales and Requests in Big D Country." We liked Chicago and Todd Rundgren and Harry Chapin and last but definitely not least Elton John whose real name was Reg Dwight. Stev and I had every Elton John album ever made. If Elton John came on TV, I would immediately telephone Stev and tell him: "Turn on the Wolfman. Quick. Elton's on." Sometimes the phone was busy when I called Stev because he was trying to call me and tell me the same thing.

* * *

The cherry tree was located on the high side of our front lawn. Some of the branches hung over the driveway approximately twenty feet in the air. That did not bother Stev. Stev was fearless. He climbed to the highest branch, which bent slightly when he sat on it. A crow landed on a branch next to Stev and squawked. A crow was a despicable creature that liked cherries. Stev spat three cherry pits at the crow and it looked at him and pecked a cherry and flew away. We counted the cherries as we ate them. The final tally was not available until approximately two hours later. The results were as follows: Stev ate 308 cherries. I ate 251. Taken together, it was the single greatest day of cherry eating in history.

Tiger walked up the driveway while we were picking cherries. Stev and I sat silently watching him. He had no clue that we were on the branches above his head. Stev spat a cherry pit at Tiger. The cherry pit landed on the driveway and made a sound. Tiger stopped and looked behind and saw nothing and scratched his head. He went up the steps to the front door and knocked the knocker and asked The Mom, "Is Timmy home?"

The Mom said, "They're in the tree, Anthony."

Stev and I yelled, "Hi, I'm Tony the Tiger and I've got a purple splotch on my neck. Hi, I'm Tony the Tiger and I'm a spaz. Hi, I'm Tony the Tiger and I'm number two on the all-time-spaz list behind

Mik Cosgrove.”

The Mom said, “Don’t eat too many cherries boys or you’ll get sick.”

Tiger said, “Can I have some?” He stepped on the precious lower branch and tried to climb the sacred route.

Stev told him, “You’re not allowed until you pass the test.”

“What test?”

We climbed down and went into the backyard. The test took place underneath the back porch.

Stev said, “Pull down your pants.”

Tiger got on the ground and pulled down his shorts. “Don’t give me a wedgie,” he said.

Stev got behind Tiger and sat on his legs and stuck the end of the little green garden hose in his butt. He dropped three pebbles one by one into the hose. The pebbles rattled and clanked. He poured a handful of dirt into the hose. The dirt sifted and slid.

Tiger yelled, “Hey, cut it out, Steve. That hurts.”

Stev said, “Demerit.”

“Confirmed,” said I.

Tiger got up and went into the corner and bent over and made a face.

Stev said, “The greatest line from *Night Gallery* is ‘You got my Charlie flat out on a slab.’”

I said, “‘As ye rip, ye shall be ripped.’”

Stev said, “*Hawaii Five-O*.”

“Correct,” said I.

Tiger said, “Why did I get a demerit?”

Stev told Tiger, “You said Steve. Steve is wrong. The name is Stev. No one calls me Steve.”

Tiger said, “Why not?”

Stev said, “Rule number one. Never have an *e* at the end of your name.”

Tiger said, “Can I go up the tree now?”

Stev told him, “You got a demerit. A demerit means you have to pass test number two.”

“What’s test number two?”

“Do you know what the best song is?”

“No.”

“The best song is ‘The Night Chicago Died.’”

“So?”

“Do you know what the best movie is?”

“No.”

“The best movie is *Killdozer*.”

“So?”

Stev picked up the bicycle pump that we kept underneath the back porch and showed it to Tiger.

“Do you know what this is?”

Tiger said, “Bicycle pump.”

Stev said, "Wrong. This is the most unbelievable farting machine ever created."

I said, "You won't believe it."

Stev said, "This is the best."

I said, "It's unbelievable."

Stev said, "Bend over."

Tiger pulled down his pants and bent over. Stev took the end of the bicycle pump and stuck it in his butt.

"Stay still," I said.

I started pumping. I pumped and Tiger started giggling and I pumped and he grabbed his stomach and giggled and I pumped and Tiger said, "That's enough," and I pumped until it got hard to push down the lever and Tiger reached around and pulled out the end of the bicycle pump and cut the string. It was the greatest fart in the history of farting. He farted one long fart that didn't change in pitch or volume but just kept going and going and Tiger held his stomach, which was puffed up, and said, "Make it go down." Stev and I hit the dirt. We rolled in the dirt and laughed the soundless laugh.

* * *

Stev and I wrote everything down. Our records were meticulous. If someone dropped a neutron bomb on Apple Hill Road and killed all the people but left the houses intact, the knowledge would survive. Future generations would not be mystified by our existence. Everything you needed to know was contained in seven bright blue spiral-bound notebooks, which were located in my room in the bottom drawer of my desk.

Stev said, "Quiz me."

I said, "What subject?"

"*Big Valley.*"

I turned to the page of the notebook entitled "The Big Valley" and asked Stev the following questions:

"What is the name of the Barkleys' youngest son who is always away at college? Which of the Barkleys is a counselor-at-law? What is the name of Victoria Barkley's husband, who is now deceased? Which Barkley don't take nothing from nobody? What is the nearest town to the Barkley Ranch?"

Stev answered all the questions correctly except for the first, which was Eugene.

After I told him, Stev said, "I knew that. I just couldn't remember it."

I said, "Tough luck." I waited for a moment then said in my cowboy voice, "You Barkleys think you're so high and mighty."

Stev said, "Give me another."

"*Happy Days.* Are you ready?"

"Begin. I dare you to begin."

I said, "What is Potsie's real name, first and last? Who is the basketball star of the Cunningham

family? What is the name of the head waitress at Arnold's? Richie goes to what high school? What musical instrument does Ralph Malph play?"

Stev said, "Difficult. But not difficult enough."

He answered every question correctly, and I recorded his score in "The TV Testament" and made notation of the time and date.

I said, "What do you want to do?"

Stev said, "Watch TV."

We went into the den and turned on the TV. *It Takes a Thief* was playing, starring Robert Wagner as Alexander Munday. We watched the episode entitled "The Day of the Duchess." After the show was over we ruled that "The Day of the Duchess" was the third greatest *It Takes a Thief* episode of all time, behind "Project X" and "The Beautiful People." Stev said that the best line was: "Call Ryker. Tell him the world ends in twenty minutes."

"Confirmed," said I.

We began to watch *The Andromeda Strain* but did not finish because Stev got the runs and had to go home.

* * *

After dinner, I went to Stev's house. The Myra was sitting on the couch in the den smoking a Pall Mall and watching the CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. She said, "Hello, Timothy."

I said, "Hi, I'm Walter Cronkite and I have bad breath. Hi, I'm Walter Cronkite and that's the way it was June 15, 1974. Hi, I'm Walter Cronkite and the big story tonight is, Where's Stev?"

The Myra said, "He's lying down. He's nauseous. His tongue was bright red when he came home and he made in his pants because he couldn't help it. I want you to promise me to stay out of the cherry tree for two days. Promise me, Timmy. Promise me that you won't let Steven go up the cherry tree."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because he might climb the tree when I'm not around. He might pick cherries in the morning when I'm sleeping. I'd never know unless he told me."

"Are you being precious?"

"I'm answering your question."

"I'm serious. Steven is as sick as a dog. Go up and see him if you don't believe me."

I went upstairs and opened the door to Stev's room. Stev was lying on his bed listening with headphones to Elton John's double album, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, which was number one on the list of the All-Time Top 100 Albums. There was no noise except for Stev's breathing and the faint strains of "Funeral for a Friend," which sounded tinny and far away. Stev nodded when he saw me. I sat on the bed across from his bed. Stev said very loudly although he thought he was speaking normally, "Call Ryker. Tell him the world ends in twenty minutes."

There was a plate on the night table filled with orange peels. I opened the side window and tossed one of the orange peels toward Tony the Tiger's house. The orange peel landed in the bushes. I wound up and threw another. It bounced off the side of the house. Stev removed the headphones and picked up an orange peel and hurled it. The orange peel bounced off Tony the Tiger's den window. I whipped an orange peel and it landed in the bushes. Stev threw an orange peel and it hit the window. I threw an orange peel and it hit the window. There were no more orange peels.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang and we looked out the front window and saw Tony the Tiger's Mother standing on the doorstep with a pile of orange peels in her hand.

We went into Stev's closet and closed the door and pulled the rope to make the ladder come down and climbed the ladder into the attic and crawled into the crawl space beside the attic window where no one I repeat absolutely no one could possibly find us no matter how long they looked, especially not Tony the Tiger's Fat Ass Mother and her stinky orange peels.

Stev said, "I got the runs but it was worth it. Three hundred and eight cherries, a new all-time record."

* * *

Later that night a raccoon went up the cherry tree. The raccoon climbed to the top of the tree and went onto the branch that leaned out over the driveway and held on with its sharp fingers and ate tons of cherries that we had seen and wanted but could not reach. The raccoon ran away when I shined the flashlight in its rotten eyes.

ORANGE PEELS

The next morning the doorbell woke me. I got dressed and went down to the kitchen. This was a serious mistake. Simultaneously The Mom and Tiger's Mother got up from the kitchen table and looked at me. The Mom said, "Mrs. Papadakis wants to speak to you."

Tiger's Mother opened her purse and took out a brown paper bag and emptied it onto the kitchen table. The bag was filled with orange peels. She spread the orange peels on the table like magic cards. She said, "I would like an explanation."

I stared at the orange peels.

The Mom said, "Answer her, Timothy."

I said, "We threw them out the window."

"Do you know that you scared me half to death?" said Tiger's Mother. "That I nearly called the police? Do you know what that means? That means they would have arrested you and taken you to jail."

The Mom said, "I can't imagine they would have done that."

Tiger's Mother said, "I thought someone was trying to break in. I thought a burglar was trying to smash the window. That's what I thought."

The Mom said, "Gracious."

Tiger's Mother said, "Why not throw rocks? Why not batteries? Why not just break the window with a hammer?"

She leaned her face close to mine. I had never been so close to her face before. Her eyebrows were black and thick. She had a double chin that wobbled while she scolded me. She said, "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

I said, "No."

She said, "No?"

I said, "I'm sorry."

She said, "Sorry's not good enough. Anyone can say I'm sorry."

She loaded the orange peels back into the brown paper bag and stuffed the bag into her purse.

"I'm going to keep these," she said.

* * *

Tiger's house was always being painted. They had ladders, paint cans, scraping tools, brushes, drop cloths. Tiger's Brother did the work himself, up the ladder. By the time he painted the back of the house it was time to start the front again, like the Golden Gate Bridge. He didn't work very often. Usually the ladder stood against the house with no one on it. Tiger's Brother was older. He had a thick beard and wore gym shorts and flip-flops all the time, even when it was cold. He spent most of his

time in the driveway, working on hot rods. He could fix any car in the world. People came from all over to bring their cars to Tiger's Brother. That was his job, along with painting the house. The Mom said the ladders were just an excuse to keep watch. Watching was his hobby. Whenever anyone walked or drove by, he stopped what he was doing and watched. Simultaneously, Tiger's Mother pulled aside the curtain from the bay window in their living room and watched. The whole family watched. There was nothing that went on that they didn't know. They talked to everyone. They asked questions. They told people what they learned. According to The Mom, they were gossips.

* * *

The Mom showed Tiger's Mother to the door. She said, "Thank you for coming over, Stella."

Tiger's Mother said, "You should keep an eye on him."

"I'm sure that's my affair."

"Of course it is."

"Yes. It is," said The Mom.

Tiger's Mother looked around the hallway like the lady in the commercial with the white gloves, checking to see that everything was spic-and-span. She said, "They should play nicely."

The Mom said, "They will. From now on, they will. I promise you that."

"Anthony's not like them. He's a sensitive boy."

"I'm sure he is."

"They shouldn't call him that name. Tiger."

"They don't mean anything by it."

"I don't like it."

Tiger's Mother stepped outside. The Mom waited a long moment. Then she closed the door and said to me, "Go to your room."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Don't ask why. Just go to your room and wait for your father to come home. Just you wait."

I went to my room and waited.

* * *

The Mom called herself a WASP. She disliked anyone who was rude or talked dirty or said "ain't" or ate with his mouth open or was nosy, like Tiger's Mother. The Mom was born on a farm in Nova Scotia. She was the baby of the family, like me. She had many brothers and sisters. One of her brothers died before she was born. The other brothers lived in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and Ontario. Canada was a long way away. We went to visit once in the Station Wagon. We drove a long time and stayed in motels and visited The Mom's brothers and their families. We kept driving and visiting new relatives, all of whom had red hair and liked to shake hands. The air was fresh and clean and then the air smelled very bad. "That's the paper factory," said The Mom. "That means we're

getting close to Pictou.” Pictou was a town by the sea near the farm where The Mom grew up. Some of her relatives still lived in the town, but no one lived on the farm anymore. We stopped by the side of the road and walked around the property where the farmhouse used to be. The field had soft grassy spots where deer slept. The farmhouse had burned down a long time ago. There was nothing left except a stone foundation and a barn without a roof. “None of us girls wanted to spend our life on the farm,” said The Mom. Her sisters moved to America as soon as they turned eighteen. Aunt Mable went to Boston. Aunt Sadie went to Seattle. Aunt Ethel went to Cranston, Rhode Island. The Mom went to Springfield, Massachusetts. She studied to be a secretary at a junior college and taught people how to dance the rumba, the fox-trot, and the samba at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio. After two months of living in Springfield, Massachusetts, The Mom went to a friend’s wedding and met The Dad. The Mom had never met anyone like The Dad before. The Dad was an Italian. There were no Italians in Nova Scotia, only Scottish people. Before The Mom got married, she’d had suitors. One of the suitors was a man named Donald Grant, who was a pilot for TWA. Whenever The Dad did something that aggravated The Mom she would say, “To think I could have married Donald Grant. A perfect gentleman. A man who carried a handkerchief in his breast pocket and placed it on the park bench before I sat down.” The Dad would say, “I wish to God you had.” The Mom would say, “Instead I married a bricklayer, a peasant.”

* * *

When The Dad came home I tiptoed into the hallway and listened.

The Mom said, “Take off your belt. You have to discipline Timothy.”

The Dad said, “For what?”

“For throwing orange peels at the Papadakis house.”

“For doing what?”

“You heard me.”

“Did he break anything?”

“He scared Stella Papadakis half to death. She went outside in her nightdress to see what was going on.”

“That must have been a sight.”

“It’s no joking matter. She nearly called the police.”

“Call the police on my son? Are you serious?”

“That’s what she said.”

“To hell with her.”

“You have to set an example.”

“I won’t hit him for that.”

There was a silence followed by the sound of ice cubes landing in a glass, a splash of water and the uncorking of the half gallon of J&B. The Dad kept the bottle of J&B in the lower cabinet next to the refrigerator. The J&B had a twist-off cap, but The Dad always discarded the cap after opening the

bottle and thereafter used a cork to stop up the opening, for quick and easy access. The cork made a musical sound when being pulled out of the bottle.

The Mom said, "I don't want that woman coming over and talking to me like that. I don't want her in my house."

"Who says you have to talk to her?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Give her the bum's rush, that's what."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. Grab her by the ass and throw her out the door."

"I can't very well do that."

"Why not? They're Greek. They're used to it."

The Mom made a short laugh, which was a good sign.

THE AMMO BOX

The Dad was a construction engineer and general contractor. He had big fingers with cracked skin from using hammers, trowels, chisels and pinch bars. He and Uncle Sal owned a construction company that built industrial warehouses on a street called Locust Street in the City of Hartford. The buildings they built were square-shaped with few windows. That was the only design they used. Whenever The Dad left for work in the morning he said either, "I'm going to the job on Locust Street," or "I'm going to the office."

The office was located in the center of town. The sign on the door read "Madison Realty." The Dad and Uncle Sal rented the first floor of a small house set back from the street, surrounded by shrubs and flowers. A foot doctor occupied the second floor. Uncle Sal drove a red Mark III. The Dad drove a blue Mark IV. They parked their cars in the rear parking lot, always in the same slots. The slots had signs in front of them that read "Reserved for Madison Realty."

Whenever Albert and I rode our bikes to the center of town we would stop to visit him. We'd barged in and find The Dad and Uncle Sal sitting side by side at their identical white Formica desks. If they were talking on the phone we had to be quiet. Talking on the phone was the only work they ever did. Usually they just sat in their swivel chairs with their feet up on their desks, discussing stocks they should have bought and property they shouldn't have sold.

Uncle Sal was ten years older than The Dad. He had an extremely large, bald head. For that reason Albert and I called him The Head, which was the name of the evil mastermind in the Dick Tracy cartoon. Uncle Sal liked giving us math problems involving sums of money. He would ask: "Which would you boys rather have, a million dollars or a penny that doubled in value every day for a month? Don't give me your answer now. Go home and figure out what's better. The million dollars or the magic penny. Then come back next time and tell me."

Every once in a while, on rainy weekend afternoons, The Dad would drive Albert and me to his office for the purpose of taking naps. He'd wink at us and say, "We've got to finish up that job we started last weekend," and The Mom would say, "What job?" and Albert and I would say, "Construction job." The office had a kitchenette, a bathroom and a back room that looked like someone's den, with two easy chairs and the saggy couch that used to be in our living room before we got a new one. The only sounds you heard were faraway voices of people going by on the sidewalk or the motor of some passing car. We'd lie down on the couch and easy chairs and listen to the rain and go immediately to sleep. After a while we'd wake up and The Dad would yawn and say, "Come on, boys, or else your mother will have the cops after us."

Before long The Mom found out about our naps. Albert squealed. He sang like a canary. You couldn't blame him, though, because The Mom had Kreskin-like ways of getting information once she realized you were trying to keep a secret. According to The Mom, weekends were for chores around

the house, not slumber parties. After that she didn't let The Dad out of her sight on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. She'd follow him from room to room, making sure he was doing what she'd told him to do, which usually involved mowing the lawn, cleaning out the garage, sweeping the driveway, clearing the gutters and so forth. If she found him hiding in the boiler room listening to a baseball game on the transistor radio, she'd say something like, "Do you expect me to cut the grass in addition to everything else?"

* * *

The Dad came into my room and handed me an old green wooden box with a leather strap attached to the top. He said, "Here's to you, jellybean."

I said, "What is it?"

"It's a World War Two ammo box. Do you see how it's shaped? That's because the bullets come out the top like a conveyor belt to the guy with the machine gun. Thirty-caliber bullets. Big ones. Bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu. Like that."

"What's it for?"

"It's for you to keep stuff. Your mother doesn't have to know. It'll be our secret. Do whatever you want with it. Hide it. Bury it in the ground if you like. This box is watertight. It's solid. See?" The Dad knocked on the side of the ammo box with his knuckles. "I've had this box since 1942. You take care of it."

"Sure, Dad."

The Dad went to the door. He said, "Your mother tells me you were throwing orange peels at the Greeks. Is that true?"

I shrugged.

"Gave the old witch a scare, huh?"

"I guess."

The Dad nodded. He said, "Do me a favor. If you're going to do something stupid like that, don't get caught. Then it doesn't matter."

"Okay."

After The Dad left, I looked inside the ammo box, which was empty. I cleaned and polished it and put it under my bed.

* * *

The Dad had nightmares. When he took naps, Albert and I sometimes went into his bedroom to watch him twitch and jerk. If you woke him out of a deep sleep, he would yell in a high voice and punch the air with his right hand. The Dad was a lieutenant in World War Two. He had a photo album filled with black-and-white pictures. In most of the pictures he was standing beside a bridge over a river. The bridges were called pontoon bridges, Bailey bridges and fixed bridges. The Dad was a combat engineer. His job was building bridges. His other job was clearing mines called Bouncing Bettys. The

Germans laid minefields everywhere. You couldn't step ten feet off the road without entering a minefield in Italy. One time The Dad stepped on a Bouncing Betty in a grass field near the place where his father was born. The mine shot up into the air and fizzled and smoked, but it didn't go off. Therefore The Dad didn't get killed. A lot of guys stepped on mines and blew their legs off. When that happened, The Dad had to write a letter to the guy's family telling them that the guy was dead. Other guys got shot with machine-gun bullets or run over by trucks or died of fever but not The Dad. The Dad made it. He was a Lucky Bastard. He came home after the war to the City of Hartford and started a construction business with his brother and met The Mom at somebody's wedding and married her and moved to Apple Hill Road and built our house and had three babies who grew up to be Daphne, Albert and, last but not least, me.

* * *

I said, "How many Germans did you kill? As many as this?"

We were playing Stratego. The Dad was blue. I was red. I moved my marshall recklessly and mowed down everything in its path. The marshall was invincible. Only two things could kill the marshall: the spy and a bomb. I mowed down the blue soldiers and piled the dead in a heap: a major, two captains, two sergeants, a miner, three scouts.

The Dad said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"It's nothing to be proud of."

"Did they scream when you shot 'em?"

"Didn't I just tell you I don't want to talk about it?"

"I bet they screamed and cried like babies. Stinking Krauts."

"Do you want to play or not?"

Before long, The Dad stumbled upon my line of defense. He said, "Scout."

I said, "Bomb."

He said, "Miner."

I said, "Bomb."

He said, "Miner."

I said, "Flag."

The Dad threw up his hands. "You put your flag in the second row? What kind of strategy is that?"

I said, "Want to play again?"

He pushed the board away. "All you do is hang around and watch TV. Why don't you go to the movies?"

"What movie?"

"Any movie. Just get out of the house for one night."

I thought it over. "*The Poseidon Adventure's* pretty good. That's still playing."

The Dad said, "I'll call Mrs. Mandelbaum. She'll take you and Albert and Steven in the station."

wagon. It'll be fun. Right?"

"Sure, Dad. Real fun."

* * *

We went to the Elm Theater to see *The Poseidon Adventure* starring Gene Hackman, Ernest Borgnine, Red Buttons, Shelley Winters, Stella Stevens, Roddy McDowall, Carol Lynley, Pamela Sue Martin and featuring Leslie Nielsen as the captain. Stev's Mom, otherwise known as Mrs. Mandelbaum henceforth called The Myra, drove us. She pointed her long red fingernails at the back door of the Elm Theater and said, "I'll meet you right there after the movie. Don't go anywhere else."

We piled out of the Station Wagon and went inside. Each of us had seen *The Poseidon Adventure* at least once. Stev had seen it three times. *The Poseidon Adventure* was about a cruise ship that gets capsized by a tidal wave. Everything is upside down. The passengers try to escape to the bottom of the ship, while all around them the water rises.

Our favorite character was Mike Rogo, the loudmouthed cop played by Ernest Borgnine, who had a face like a Halloween mask. You could imitate the Ernest Borgnine face by bulging your eyes and contorting your features like a hurricane wind was blowing directly at you.

Our favorite line, which we said as often as possible, was: "We're following the purser."

We waited in line and doled out our coins. The lady behind the counter said, "Down the hall to your right."

Stev said, "Where?"

The lady said, "Down the hall to your right."

Stev said, "We're following the purser."

The lady said, "You're following who?"

Stev said, "The purser."

The lady said, "Who's he?"

Stev ordered popcorn. I ordered popcorn. Albert ordered popcorn. The guy behind the popcorn counter said, "Do you want to get all that stuff for free? All you have to do is stay afterward and clean up popcorn boxes and paper cups and bubble gum wrappers and jujubes. That's not asking much for three free popcorns, is it? Meet me right here, okay?"

We said, "Okay."

Stev said to me, "The guy is a total sex maniac."

"Confirmed," said I.

At the end of the movie we went out the back door. He was waiting for us in the parking lot. He said, "You ready to work?"

Stev said, "We're following the purser."

The guy said, "What?"

I said, "The steel hull is two inches thick in the bow but only one inch thick in the stern. Nowhere else is the hull thinner. Don't you understand?"

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