

B R U C E B R O O K S

WHAT HEARTS

Sometimes
the hurt
eclipses the
heart . . .



What Hearts

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 HarperCollins e-books

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ONE

Asa was amazed that he left first grade with so much stuff. As he ran down the winding tar path that led through the woods to the street, he took a quick inventory: his knapsack, straining at its straps, held a blank blue composition book and three unsharpened yellow pencils (for a summer journal everyone had gotten these), a battered hardback copy of a book called *The Little Prince* (no one else had received this; the librarian had slipped it in secret to “my best little reader”), a mimeographed copy of the school handbook complete with all kinds of forms to be brought in on the first day of second grade in September (everyone, of course), six certificates stamped with foil medallions (one for completing the dumb first-grade reader with its “See Spot jump!” stories, one for being able to print the alphabet in upper and lower case, one for being able to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” all of which everyone got, even Gordon Firestone, who never got the words right to the latter song and still couldn’t tell the difference between small “d” and “b,” “g” and “q” the other three were from gym class, for being able to run and jump and roll (some boys had gotten more than the three, but they were show-offs); a big, glossy black-and-white photograph of the whole class (for everyone, even the two lads who had missed school on the day the picture was taken; Asa had been sick with a bad cold himself, but his parents had made him come for the picture, which he was the only child wearing a jacket and tie); and, finally, a report card. Everyone had gotten a report card too, even Ronnie Wells, though the word was that he would have to repeat the year. Everyone had gotten one, a sky-blue cardboard report card with six boxes on it for final grades written in heavy black ink, grades for the whole year, grades summing up everything the kid had done *everything*—but only Asa’s card held an A in each box, sharply drawn, lined up like six pointed missiles blasting off into a perfect future. Perfect! He was perfect, and he was the only one. Subtly, under the guise of friendly interest, he had checked: he had seen everyone else’s card except Ronnie’s (poor Ronnie could be fairly disregarded), and they all had at least one B. Rita Pennington had been the closest; only her crinkly left-handed handwriting had kept her from sharing the pinnacle with Asa. He had a crush on Rita, but he was glad she had gotten a B in Penmanship. This made him ashamed, but there it was. Besides, she had won the lottery for the class hamster, so no one should feel too sorry for her.

In addition to the treasures in his pack Asa clutched one more in his right hand: a bunch of fresh hand-planted, hand-watered, hand-weeded, hand-picked radishes. He looked at them quickly; they were not believable. Nothing could become that color underground. Such a red had to be made by craft; surely it would take scientists, geniuses, to design the proper chemical sequence! Asa had chosen to plant radishes in the class garden when the first graders had pored over seed packets in February, simply because he did not believe they would come true. Today, just this morning, everyone had been allowed to undo all the work that had gone into keeping the vegetables hidden in the ground.

they ripped their things out, shook the brown clods off them, and almost cried with revelation. Really, everyone, not just Asa, almost cried. The long orange carrots had been a hit, but the radishes stole the show. No one else had wanted to plant them, because they had all been thinking about *eating* what they grew. Asa had been thinking about *growing* what he grew, as an end in itself. But tonight he and his dad and his mom would all eat this wonderful redness. He was triumphant.

As he approached the crosswalk, he worked one of his thirty-one radishes free from the tangle of greens and knobs, so that he could give it to Nadine, the policewoman whom he had seen twice a day through kindergarten and first grade, who had given him his first nickname (“Well hey, Ace—how do you do this morning?”), who allowed him his first joke of pretend mockery (“Fine, Captain—you caught any criminals yet?”). He stepped into the crosswalk.

Before Nadine could greet him, he held out a radish to her. She drew her chin back to focus on him and shook her head. “No, I don’t love a radish. Thank you all the same, Ace.” She looked beyond him, wheeling her arm at a slowpoke. Asa was perplexed by the idea of not loving a radish, but he went on as he walked, turning backward so he could face her: “I got straight A’s, Captain. For the *year*.”

“You have a nice summer,” she said, and went to help a kindergartner who was about to cry pick up a splaying fan of papers he had dropped. Asa hesitated, then turned back around toward home and kept walking.

Well, maybe Bobby Levy would be more interested in what Asa had to share. In two minutes he would pass beneath the balcony on which Bobby always perched, only two feet off the uphill-slanting sidewalk but high enough to look down from. Bobby’s private school dismissed a half hour earlier than the public school, and Bobby spent that extra time watching TV. He made a point of waiting for Asa every afternoon with the blue-silver rectangle of a television set shining deep in the dark room behind him, implying pointedly the thirty minutes of fun Asa had missed by being so unwise and unprivate. During the thirty seconds in which Asa, walking resignedly uphill, was within the range of Bobby’s voice, Bobby, glib as a squirrel, always managed to chatter out a snappy summary of the rerun of *I Love Lucy* or *The Real McCoys* just for him. The summaries were remarkably clear, and Asa silently admired them even as he reminded himself that he disliked television comedies.

In fact, Asa never spoke to Bobby at all. It was not part of the relationship. Bobby had something to say, and Asa was the listener; he received, and passed by. Once, in the fall, he had tried to turn the TV report into a conversation, but Bobby had glared at him, cranky and affronted; in the middle of Asa’s second sentence he snapped, “*Father Knows Best* is on *right now!*” and huffed through the sliding glass doors, pulling the curtains closed behind him. But today would be different. Asa had something to talk about, today. A radish, but more, too: those triangular black-ink A’s were poised tensely in his awareness like the heads of arrows on a bowstring, and he might have to let them fly.

He looked ahead. Bobby, perched alertly on his balcony, was ready with his clipped, slightly bored tone, to begin: “So, Fred and Ethel win a trip to Cuba in a contest, but they entered under Ricky’s name because they thought it would help them...” or something like that. Asa’s heartbeats got quick. He knew he had to time this just right. If he let Bobby start his monologue, he would never be able to break in. He watched Bobby’s rabbit teeth against his lower lip, and he walked, closer and closer. When he was within ten feet, the top teeth lifted. Asa shouted, “Bobby, I grew some radishes. And I got a book, about a prince, and I got straight A’s!” He came to a stop beneath the balcony, and he motioned that he wanted to toss Bobby the radish Nadine had refused.

Bobby stared down at him. He made no move to receive the offered radish. At last, after lifting his teeth a couple of times, he frowned and said, “I’m afraid there will be no more afternoon TV for you in the fall. You see, I’m starting piano. I *am* sorry for you.” Then he turned and went inside. This time

he did not bother with the curtains.

Asa stood for a moment. He held up his right hand and looked at the radishes. It was true that the greens were wilting pretty severely. But the red was fine. So were the grades in his knapsack; so was the prince in his book. He shrugged his shoulders in case Bobby was looking, and turned toward home. He knew his mother was there. She was waiting for him. But—just imagine!—she had no idea about all this that was coming. It was as if the marvels he held right here in his hand and knapsack were not already certain—but they were, they were. She was in for some surprises, she and his father—especially his father: *there* was a guy who would know how to appreciate a radish. Asa stepped up his pace for home, full of the generous superiority of knowing exactly what you were about to give.

TWO

His mother was wearing a coat. This he could see, as he turned the corner and glanced ahead down the narrow sidewalk that ran in front of the apartments. She was sitting on something on the small stoop, looking straight ahead into the patios of the apartments across the green. Why wasn't she looking in the direction she knew he would be coming from? Why was she wearing a coat? It was cool under the dense leaves of the high trees, but a coat was not right, not in Maryland in June. A coat was not right. As if to protest, Asa shivered. And as he closed in on her, he recognized the object she was sitting on. It was a large suitcase of black pebbled imitation leather. It looked new.

She heard him and turned her head. He met her eyes. She stood up, her hands squeezed together in front of her. He looked at the suitcase briefly, then watched as she stared down at it and moved a step away, as if she expected something to open it from within now, and climb out.

"Asa," she said, looking up. "I have something to tell you." She was shaking her hands up and down, clenched together. He would not have been surprised if she had suddenly opened them on a downstroke and dice had shot out and rolled onto the sidewalk. She often rolled off the board on board games, because she threw too hard, as if serious effort would turn up better numbers.

"Asa," she said, "son." Her face was moving in pieces; as he watched, the mouth twisted with one hard emotion, the eyes bulged with another that was softer, and the forehead twitched away from a third of these feelings. "Listen," she said.

But he did not. He leaped nimbly past her onto the porch, pulled and pushed his way through the screen door and the wooden door, and then found himself in nobody's living room. That is how it had been for him: when he had left for school that morning, the room had been his family's, full of sofas and rugs and tables that belonged to him—but now it was empty, and it was nobody's room. The sunlight slanted in through the windows across from him and made a weird shiny rhombus on the bare floor.

Behind him, through the screen door, he heard his mother still talking. He was not listening, but he heard her. As he stared around the room—floor as spiffy as a pond with new ice, walls that looked forcefully flat, as if they were pulling away from him in four directions at once—he assembled the fragments of sound that joined him in the room, and made them into a summary of the facts, reciting them to himself in a dull but clear voice that he barely recognized as his own: your mother and father do not love each other anymore. There is to be something called a divorce. It is for your sake. Your father is gone, and soon you will be, too.

He walked away from the voice and made a complete circuit of the empty place. Nobody was

home, throughout.

THREE

On the way to the airport in the taxi, Asa asked no questions, yet his mother continued to talk. She had talked the whole time they waited on the stoop, until a taxi had come—called in advance, the boy realized, to arrive just ten minutes after his return from school. The taxi driver was from India, and the colors of his skin and hair would normally have fascinated Asa, but not now.

The man politely loaded the suitcase and knapsack into the taxi's trunk, then held the door for Asa's mother. But instead of getting in, she stood straight, facing the man, and pulled Asa to stand beside her. With her arm around him, she smiled down, gave him a shake, then looked at the taxi driver and said, "This little boy's parents are getting a divorce. So we have to go to the airport and fly away to the beach." She smiled at the driver as if the next move were his. Asa watched as the man tried to acknowledge the cheer of her smile yet register an appropriately sober concern for her new situation. Somehow he managed to pull it off. Asa admired his dexterity.

His mother continued to stand and smile. Asa pulled away and got into the car.

As they drove through Washington Asa looked out at the city. This was his city, his and his father's—this had been their city. Perhaps it would continue to be his father's—he did not know. He knew that he and his mother were moving to her childhood home in North Carolina, after an overnight visit to the beach on the way. He had been to North Carolina on visits, and did not much like it. It was full of white people who seemed to him overconfident and overfriendly, and black people who seemed to fake those same qualities and then hide. He liked Washington.

"The whole world is in this town," his father used to tell him as they drove through the streets, pointing out the Venezuelan embassy or a Japanese grocery or a parade of Pakistanis holding banners. His father sold things to physicians and pharmacists. Once every couple of months he had to call on every doctor and druggist in town. He took Asa with him a lot in the years before school, and they went during the summer following kindergarten. They drove around, saw things, discovered nifty little parks where they played a quick bit of catch or newsstands where they bought unusual comics. They went to the zoo or aquarium in between drugstores, they ate odd brown sandwiches in small restaurants where all the other customers were Middle Eastern or Portuguese. Not a downtown day went by in which he did not hear at least four languages spoken around him.

Now, in the taxi, his mother was speaking her own language, bringing him up to date with her ongoing explanation: He would see his father sometimes. His father still loved him. She still respected his father. She didn't love him, but she respected him. He was not a bad man.

Then Asa's mother said something that made him sit up and look at her sharply. She said someone was going to meet them at the beach. A man was going to meet them there. His name was Dave. She said Asa would like Dave very much.

Asa stared. His mother repeated her last sentence, about how he would like Dave very much. Then she stopped again, looking frightened by Asa's stare.

"You will like Dave," she tried a third time.

Asa said nothing. He stared her down. The cab made a left turn, then a right. The city bumped by. Finally, as they slipped over the banks of the Potomac onto the 14th Street bridge and left D. C.

behind, Asa spoke. "Yes," he said, "maybe so. Maybe I will like him. But the question is—will respect him?"

His mother said; "Oh!" and slapped him across the mouth, and lunged across his lap in a head-chuckling out sobs that seemed to come from someone he didn't know. He patted her hair as faintly as possible while her back heaved up and down. Heat came from her scalp. Asa looked up and met the pained eyes of the driver in the rearview mirror.

"It is all right, sir?" asked the driver.

"No," said the boy. "It is not all right at all."

FOUR

Dave was nearly bald. This surprised Asa, and right away he felt sorry for the man, as if thinning hair were a crippling strike of fate to be borne with bravery. The boy found himself feeling it was too easy to dislike someone who was bald, so he also found himself making a fabulous effort in the other direction, toward fondness. As they walked through the small airport and across a hot parking lot toward Dave's old car, Asa gabbed straight to him with startling chipperness—about the flight, about Washington, about the taxi drive, and, in the greatest detail, about a school play that had ended the first grade in triumph that very afternoon, a play in which he had brilliantly played the lead part of *The Prince*—a play that in fact had not, as he was perfectly aware, taken place at all.

Dave seemed a little perplexed at the boy's zippy attack of goodwill; he pulled himself askance a bit, nodding or grunting without comment, unencouraging but mildly congenial. But Asa's mother watched her son with glowing beatitude, as if she had always known the two would get along just *fine*.

A couple of times, in the car, Dave had to interrupt Asa's chatter to say something about the destination. Whenever this happened, Asa, who was standing on the hump in the floor just behind the middle of the front seat, jounced up and down and resumed his narrative at the earliest verbal opening. In a way, he wasn't involved with this frantic speech; his intelligence seemed to be standing back watching the show and wondering when it would stop. His mother, whose bliss had begun to lose its glow fast, held her hands to her temples, then brought them down sharply and turned on him. She remembered to smile, barely. Asa was in the middle of a description of his last season as the center fielder for a D. C. Little League team called the Jaguars, telling Dave with keen detail how he had caught a would-be last-inning grand-slam home run by toppling over the fence, then trotted dejectedly as if with an empty glove into the infield as if the game were over—and then touched second and first with the ball revealed in his mitt, for the world's only unassisted triple play by an outfielder. Considering he did not even own a baseball glove, it was an excellent bit of storytelling.

"Honey," his mother said. Asa went into his jiggling pause. "Honey, Dave is tired." She looked at Dave as if for confirmation.

But Dave grinned straight ahead and said, "Oh, I don't know. I'm feeling pretty fresh, actually. Love to hear if maybe the kid ever hit a big home run, or maybe starred in a movie. I bet he has. I bet he could remember if he thinks back. *Love* to hear that one." He grinned even harder, and flicked a glance at Asa's mother. Asa caught an edge of the glance. He was surprised to see that it was completely, unmistakably, mean. In that instant all of Asa's energy swooped away from him, and he was left silent, calm and relieved. He was free to hate Dave now. He sat back.

Dave made a couple of comments to goad him into stretching out again, but Asa looked out the window. They were passing a beach. He stared at the ocean, and when a motel interposed itself between him and the ocean he tried to keep his eyes focused on the distance, so that when the ocean came back into view it would be clear. It was a strange game, and he could do it, but he couldn't figure out how he did it.

Dave scolded his mother for messing up a great friendship just when it was starting to get going. His mother said nothing. Dave laughed. He certainly laughed a lot. He did not seem to notice that he was bald.

By now it was early evening. There was no question about going to the beach; without ceremony or pretense, the three of them had dropped the idea that they had come here so that Asa could splash away his newfound sadness beneath the coppery sunshine, surrounded by sand castles and chortling kids eating bright Popsicles and the whole bit. It had been an idea, and Asa appreciated it as such. His mother was always kind in her ideas. When her plans never really made it off the paper into 3-D, Asa had learned to let the thought stand for something, and pass on.

Dave pulled up in front of a small square bungalow about the same size as his car. It was posing as a miniature house painted dark red, with a tiny window and shutters and a window box containing pink plastic geranium blossoms but no plastic greenery on the plastic stems. Asa thought perhaps birds had yanked the leaves off for use in their nest building; at home he had watched many songbird species binding their little baskets with leaves, and others using pieces of plastic bags or fishing line found in the trashy nooks people forgot about when they threw things away. Dave heaved his mother's suitcase and his knapsack out of the car's trunk, put them onto the macadam that went right up to the bungalow's front doorjamb, and handed his mother a key on a green plastic triangle.

She looked at it as if it were something utterly out of place here, a rubber tomahawk, perhaps, or a handful of snails. She appeared to be lost. "But where are you?"

Dave pointed to the next bungalow. "Number 10."

"Is ours 9, or 11?" asked Asa.

Dave shrugged. "Beats me. Lady just gave me my lucky number and the one next door. Ask her if you like." He leaned closer and pointed up the macadam drive, past other bungalows lined up like Monopoly houses. "You can find her in the bigger one at the end. She'd love to hear about you being king and all, I'm sure. After that, you could tell her about the baseball."

"David," said Asa's mother.

"Just thought maybe the boy could chat for thirty or forty minutes while we got a basket of fried oysters," he said. "No harm." Then he went to his bungalow and opened the door without a key.

Asa and his mother stood there a minute. The light around them was turning quickly from orange to twilight blue. Some swallows cut through the air above the driveway like tiny scythes. Asa's mother sighed.

"David and I went to high school together," she said. "Back before your father and I met. He's known me a long time. He's *liked* me for a long time. Sometimes that makes him a little possessive. She smiled in Asa's direction; her teeth looked luminous in the blue dusk. "A girl likes that sometimes." She held her smile, then took a step toward him and held out her hand. "I believe you understand, don't you?"

Asa plucked the key from the hand reaching out, and went for the door. "Of course not," he said.

FIVE

After dinner the three of them walked along the boardwalk. To Asa, it was as if he had stepped inside a movie about some kind of carnival: he could smell the roasted popcorn and caramel and cotton candy and cigar smoke, he could hear the squeals of teenagers and the constant thumping of bare heels on the boardwalk; but somehow nothing touched him. He could see bellies protruding over Bermuda-short belt lines, with a carrot light seeping through pale Banlon shirts from the sunburned skin beneath and thick faces full of laughter. But none of the whirling faces looked at him. He was just as glad. He was content just to walk, secure in the growing and marvelous conviction that nothing around him could break through.

But then Dave stopped and pointed off above their heads. "Now there's something for the boy," he said. "Come on." And he struck off in a new direction, leaving them to follow. Asa could not really see where they were heading, but as they left the main stream of the boardwalk behind them, he noticed a new noise. It was a ratchety rumble that came in surges, curving in and out of loudness. They were moving toward whatever was making it.

And then they were there. Set off from the boardwalk a bit was a small wooden pier, built of straight black pilings that disappeared into the tilting black water. Underneath, everything was very dark, and although he was up amid the noise, Asa could tell it was silent down there.

On top of the pier, there were six or ten or fifty different rides, with big metal spheres and cabins and cars spinning and jerking in space, all run by chugging machinery. People were being spun and jerked in the brightly painted cars and spheres; their eyes rolled, their hands waved, their throats convulsed and their mouths stretched open as if to take bites of something just out of reach of the night air, but Asa could hear nothing from them. Only the machinery had a voice.

They entered the area by stepping through an arch made of pocked tin sheeting painted white, with a couple of hundred small round red light bulbs standing out along its outer edge like hair on end. "Here we go," said Dave. Now he stayed closer, even sliding an arm around Asa's shoulders and pulling him along. They wound between the veering armatures and cars of many rides, bearing out toward the end of the pier, where it grew darker, and much quieter. Finally, they arrived at a small platform where a man leaned against a rail, chewing on a piece of pencil as if it were a toothpick, his arms crossed showing a purple tattoo on each that said FIGHT above a monochrome stars and stripes. There were a few steps. Dave pushed Asa up them.

"Got a boy here," said Dave, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet. The man did not say anything. Dave pulled out a bill and handed it to him. The man took it and dropped it into a cigar box from which the lid had been torn, sitting on a greasy flat surface among the cogged wheels and oily struts. Without turning toward Asa, he gave a small backhanded wave that Asa knew what it meant for him: he had been admitted, he could ride.

But what was he to ride? He took a look. Up against the edge of the platform stood a train of four cars with thick leather seats inside. They were open on the top, and their sides were cut away in sweeping curves edged with nickel. They looked like the bodies of extremely heavy sleighs, without runners, without winter. Asa looked ahead of the front car. Two rails stretched a short distance, then banked sharply to the right and dipped out of sight. Beyond, where they would have gone had they not fallen away, was the ocean, looking like tar.

He turned back toward Dave and his mother and the man. Dave smiled and gestured at the cars. "Come ahead," he said. "Have yourself a ball." He smiled and gestured, once, twice, three times. Asa did not

get in. Dave looked at him straight, took a step toward him, and said in a softer voice, man to man, "Don't worry. Go on. It's just for you." He paused. "You *deserve* it."

Asa got in the third car. Immediately the tattooed man sprang up the steps. He leaned into Asa's car to lower a chrome bar in front of Asa's ribs, then he snap-locked a flimsy chain across the flash curve of the side's cutaway.

He hopped off the platform and reached his hand into the darkness of the machinery. Asa saw something move, something upright, surprisingly tall, and his car moved forward six inches with a jolt as something latched onto it just below Asa's tailbone. The man had hold of a huge wooden lever perhaps seven feet tall. It looked like a giant oar with its fat end wedged somewhere deep in the cogged wheels. The man held the lever solemnly, looked briefly at Asa, and pulled it, with a precise, decisive yank. Asa's car bolted forward.

He could not keep up with any sort of sequence after that. He was flying at the ocean one second then he was pinned beneath the chrome bar and a thousand pounds of air the next, then he was hurled upward and outward to the left, his thighs straining against the bar, then something as large as the ocean but invisible and dry was pulling him down and to the right, squeezing his face sideways in the leather and nickel. Nothing lasted for more than an instant, and nothing stopped.

It was too big and irresistible to be frightening; there was no point to being scared. Instead, he tried to see things. If he could see a few quick things, even in flickers, he could understand, and if he could understand, he could figure out what he could do and what he could not. He saw the ocean, tilted right, tilted left. He saw the car in front of him, always going in a different direction from the way he was moving. He saw the sky, and when he was thrown toward it he felt he was falling upward. Once, twice, three times he saw heads, arms, and clothes, and he assembled the flashes of them into his mother, Dave, and the tattooed man.

He wanted to see them more clearly, so he worked at it. He found his body had roughly learned the sequence of thrusts and twists and drops, and he figured out which slingshots preceded the glimpse of the three people. He began to prepare for, the instant when he flashed by them, aligning his body with the movements so his head would stay upright, his vision level. Four, five, six times he whizzed by seeing them longer each time. He was getting a decent look now—he could see three forms, he could see their heads turned toward him. It was okay.

But then on one whiz-by, the forms had changed. There were only two. On the next he saw the two were Dave and the tattooed man. On the next he saw Dave gesturing, his hand hanging between the two men, still as if in a photograph; on the next he saw only the tattooed man, putting something in his pocket.

Asa heard himself shriek. He could do it now, he could stay upright enough to keep the column of air open from his gut to his mouth, and he called up shriek after shriek and launched them into the air. He was not looking anywhere but up, and he realized that to someone far away he too would seem to be trying to bite something out of the sky, like the people whom he had been unable to hear. But he knew he was being heard. He kept it up.

And then it was over. The train of cars slowed; everything stopped. He was sitting in the seat, the chrome bar against his ribs. His mouth was open but silent. His mother was grabbing at him from the platform. She grabbed him beneath the arms and tried to pull him out, but the bar kept him in; she was weeping and calling him as if he were not right there. He said nothing. He had not yet adjusted to being free of the grip of the big ride, or perhaps he would have told her, quietly, that it was all right, at least for now.

He and Dave stood outside a telephone booth on a silent street a few blocks inland from the boardwalk. His mother was inside the booth, speaking with his father. She looked a bit raw, and the light inside the booth seemed to fall sharply on her, like an astringent for skinned knees. The boy and the man said nothing as they watched her.

Asa held a string that led to a pale red balloon. It had been a lustrous ruby color when he had picked it out uninflated, but when the helium expanded it, the color faded. The balloon was a treat bought for him by Dave, but Dave had not especially wanted to give it. Asa's mother had insisted. Dave had gotten very angry at him for stopping the roller coaster. He had yelled at Asa, called him a sissy and other things, spun him around by the shoulders, and pushed him back into the roller coaster car, saying he would damn well get right back on the horse. Asa's mother had intervened, grabbing Dave by the shirt front and telling him a few things. Dave stomped off, first retrieving some money from the tattooed man. They followed, but his mother caught up to Dave and talked to him fiercely, matching him step for step. After a few minutes they bought the balloon.

Now his mother was talking to his father. Asa waited. There was nothing to say to Dave. He was not certain there was anything to say to his father either, but he would have liked at least to listen to him. He waited for his mother to look up and motion him into the booth, but he did not really expect to be called. He knew there were things he could not be trusted to keep quiet about. It was complicated. It would not just be a boy talking to his father; it would never be just that anymore.

At some point the balloon simply burst. The string dropped and coiled on his hand, and a red flap of rubber plopped on top of it. Dave looked up. So did his mother, and he saw her mouth slacken for a second, then resume speaking. Asa continued to hold the string and rubber; he liked the color better this way.

His mother hung up the phone and came out of the booth. She gave a quick smile to Dave, raising her eyebrows, and a longer smile to Asa. She said, "Your father says he knows now that what we've done is best, because that's the first time a balloon of yours has popped and you haven't cried. He says he knows now you have grown up a lot today." She regarded him proudly, as if everything in the world had been suddenly settled.

They went back to the bungalows. Dave saw them to their door, and as Asa was stepping through the doorway, he stuck out his hand, to shake. Asa paused, then moved his string and rubber to his left hand and shook. Dave said, "Never mind getting back on the horse, Sport," and went to his own bungalow. He did not say good night to Asa's mother.

There were two beds. Asa fell asleep in one of them before his mother had even turned out the light. He slept hard and did not dream. Some time later, he woke up.

It was dark in the bungalow, except for a thin line of light on one edge of the curtain over the small window. Asa listened for his mother's breathing. He heard only his own. No one else was there.

His eyes adjusted to the dark, and he got up. The sheet on his mother's bed was turned down. In the middle of the mattress on the side near Asa's bed was a round depression, where he supposed she had sat and watched him sleep. Asa found his clothes and got dressed in the dark. He found his mother's purse and felt around inside for a couple of bills, which he put in his pocket.

He peeked past the edge of the curtain. The porch light was on. The macadam in front of the bungalow was clear. Quietly he opened the door and slipped out, closing it after him. Without a glance at number 10, he trotted off down the drive.

He found his way by working toward the glow of lights hanging out over the ocean. The streets were quiet, but the boardwalk still held a stream of people. They were different people this time: slower without so many prizes and desserts, walking straighter, as if they were looking for something. He thought the aimless people he had seen earlier were all in bed now.

As he passed through the arch at the pier's entrance he noticed the red coating was flaking off the surfaces of the small bulbs, and something stirred in his memory, but he did not stop to think. He ran between the rides, most of which were motionless now, out to the end of the pier and the platform for the roller coaster. The man with the tattoos was still there, still leaning. His pencil was gone; he smoked a cigarette instead.

He arched his eyebrows when Asa stepped up and held out his bills. The man watched him for a second, then said, "What the hell," and took them, putting them in a pants pocket. He made the same backhanded wave as before, and Asa followed it.

He took the same car. He pulled the bar down himself this time, and clicked the chain across the cutaway, before the man could even jump up onto the platform. This time he did not watch the man reach into the dark machine and extract the huge lever; he knew what was happening, there was nothing new to see. He stared straight ahead at the sky and the slanting black water, which looked exactly the same as it had before. And as the engine kicked into gear and his car shot forward, he realized the peeling red light bulbs reminded him of radishes, and he had to try to remember that there had been some radishes that were *his* radishes. Had that been only *today*? As the car banked hard in the first turn, he realized the things he had left behind were already hiding inside him; now, for the first time, his life had a past, a past that would not get any bigger, that would always be shrinking but would never disappear. Something else: he had always assumed there was only one way for his life to happen. Now he realized there were alternatives. A feeling, an object, a person could seem like one thing but be another; an action could seem as if it were taking one turn, but veer off another way. Anything could happen at any time. He was not on tracks.

He pushed the chrome bar off his lap. The car swayed out over the edge of the pier, staying on its course by the tightest of tensions. Asa stood up straight into the warm wind and gathered his strength as if to jump, as if to fly, as if, as if, as if.

ONE

Standing in the doorway, looking in past the principal waiting to introduce him, Asa could see that his new fourth-grade class was just starting Rome. On one side of the room the boys were waving cardboard swords and wooden spears with tinfoil points; on the other side, the girls were wrapping themselves in white bedsheets. It had to be Rome. In his previous school they had already whipped through this part of history. But glancing around the room, he sensed a big difference here, a difference that gave him a little boost of excitement. The spears and togas, the number of fat books on the bookcases, the radiant messiness of wild drawings on the art bulletin board, the absence of the cardboard flashcards showing how the alphabet was formed in cursive—these were all good signs. Asa could tell about a classroom's spirit almost by sniffing the air. Mrs. Brock, a short, plump, young woman who had waved at the principal and finished fastening a spearpoint before coming over, was going to be fine.

In his previous fourth grade the teacher had not been very good. She would not have dared to split the class up this way into groups. And swords? Never. They had spent two days sitting in their five rows of six desks, talking only about the splendor of Roman banquets, as if the entire civilization had been based on eating a lot while lying down. The other teacher had also been pretty bad at bringing Asa into the class, though he had arrived only four days after the beginning of the school year. She sagged when he came to the door, shaking her head at the rows of neatly occupied desks. He knew she did not dislike him; she was just not up to the task of stirring a new kid into her stew. That's how it usually was: Two teachers in the second grade, two in the third, and now he was on his second in the fourth: he felt sorry for them all. He wanted to reassure them, the first time he appeared at the doors of their classrooms in the middle of a lesson—he wanted to tell them it was okay if they just let him be. He would find a way in all by himself, just far enough in to satisfy everyone, and then before long he would be gone.

Mrs. Brock glanced a quick smile at him, then gave her attention to the principal. It was a good smile that said *Let's get this official guy out of the way and well have plenty of time to get together*. Asa exhaled silently with relief.

As soon as the principal withdrew, Mrs. Brock pulled Asa into the room and guided him over to the huddle of boys. A waft of soft perfume rose warmly from the arm that lay across his shoulders. "All right," she said, handing him a sword, "you'll be—let's see—oh, Antonius. Thursday you and the three senators will present a report to the tribunal on the prospects for war with Carthage. You be the one to talk about the elephants, okay? Okay, guys?"

"I was going to do the elephants," said a large boy with a thick shirt, eyeing Asa.

"Then you do the weapons of Carthage now, Mark," said Mrs. Brock. "You're the wicked type, so that ought to keep you happy. Do pikes and hooks and scimitars and whatever else the Carthaginians

planned on sticking into your flabby pink Roman rib cage. Have you," she said, turning to Asa with what he could only recognize as brilliant intuition, "ever seen an elephant?"

"African or Indian?" he said. He blushed, ashamed of showing off, for he had seen both in the National Zoo.

"Lord help us, a smarty-pants," she said, turning away to go rewrap the girls in togas.

"So," said Mark, pointing at Asa with his sword and bringing him across the threshold of the class with the easy nature of the threat, "you better give us a good idea what we should use to *kill* those suckers."

He did. His report a few days later stunned them all. Oh, Asa knew how to make the most of an opportunity for debut. He was aware that every time he came to a new class he had the chance to create himself in the eyes of the strangers with whom he would spend the next little while—a chance the hometown kids never got, being familiar with each other since the beginning of kindergarten or earlier. Asa, by now, knew what land of attention would be aimed at him, knew which aspects of his curiosity to exploit and which to deflect. He was good. He could put on a show.

In the middle of the tribunal presentation he unfurled huge drawings done on the floor of his bedroom on sheets of manila paper, taped together to twelve times the usual size—strangely colored drawings of grotesque exaggerations of elephants as they might have been imagined by Romans who had, after all, never seen one. He struck a senatorial tone that vacillated between military bravado and fascinated fear, emphasizing with wonder the fabulous violence that could be wrought by these wild things driven by wild men. He finished with a roaring challenge to the citizens to "see to our defenses lest we be torn, gored, and rent asunder by the ravaging fury of unknown forces not so distant in time and place!" The boys rose spontaneously to their feet with a roar, shaking their weapons defiantly and devotedly. The girls stared, impressed; they could appreciate a good report. One girl later asked Asa soberly where he had acquired the archaic language. He confessed it was from the Bible. She nodded thoughtfully.

Even before his debut Asa had found ways into and out of the needs and enthusiasms of quite a few of his classmates. Steve was afraid of being stupid; so when talking to Steve, he used words that were long but common, and left sentences unfinished, groping for a word Steve could leap to provide. Cheryl liked to laugh at things no one else would find funny, so Asa dotted their talks with quirky details and reacted with a surprised thrill when she cackled. Lee was a comic-book freak who mystified other kids by comparing the subject of every conversation to some obscure subplot from a superhero tale, which he related with awkward, rushed specificity. Asa, who knew all the subplots, brightened Lee's eyes by providing a detail here and there (and a crisp translation, for Lee's confused listeners).

Everyone had an opening. Finding it only took alertness. As for slipping through the openings—well, it just seemed to happen. Asa was not being artificial or even artful. He did not pretend or duplicate. With Steve, for example, it seemed he really *couldn't* think of that missing word, though at another time he had words by the hundreds to fill every blank. It was all managed above anyone's notice. That gave the illusion of naturalness, even, sometimes, to Asa himself.

After Rome was finished, he imagined he had made up for the weeks lost at the beginning of the year, if not for the years lost from kindergarten on. He had roles; he could be counted on for certain things. On the playground he had shown what he could do with the various tops, yo-yos, pocketknives, and harmonicas that demanded demonstrations of proficiency from every boy, in every school. Though he had never been anywhere long enough to learn team sports, when it came to portable skills he could *play*. In the classroom his strengths had come out clearly, too, as he was called on for the

and that. He could be counted on to whip through big-number multiplications and divisions in his head with an arrogant immediacy. And his long sentences—which filled themselves in as they wound the way around the subject of a question, opening impossible challenges of tense and sense in their early clauses but always, always coming to a brilliant conclusion—became a kind of group exercise in suspense and release as everyone felt the momentum pick up, heard the possibilities for error accrue, kept track of the bits that would be required for final resolution, and applauded with laughter as he boisterously provided them. He would have bet that his classmates, if asked about him, would not have recalled in their first thought, or even their fifth, that he had been inserted into the class several weeks into the year.

So it was something of a shock when Mrs. Brock clapped her hands one afternoon early in his third week and said, “All right, my little prima donnas, we’ve been taking it easy, but now it’s time to rehearse for Show Night,” and everyone separated into configurations he had never seen, twos, five boys with girls, singletons. He stood at his desk, blinking, uncertain. Right away Mrs. Brock noticed him, and put her hands on her cheeks in mock horror.

“Asa, what a chucklehead I am,” she said. “I completely forgot.”

She explained that every year the PTA kicked off its membership drive in the late fall with a variety show put on by a single class. This year was the fourth grade’s turn. During the second week of school each child had chosen something to do for the show. Six of them together were enacting a play they had written about the first Thanksgiving. Two others were putting together a clown act, in which, she suspected, they planned to throw a few of the pies used as props by the earlier pilgrims. One girl was dressing up as Robert E. Lee and giving short speeches about how the South actually had won the Civil War. What, she asked, did Asa want to do?

What *did* Asa want to do? Well, his project had been making friends, his concentration so keen that at this moment, he was unable to think of himself doing something alone.

It did not take Mrs. Brock long to sense that he was at a loss. She motioned to the three solo acts: two boys and the girl who would be Robert E. Lee. They came over. “Okay,” she said. “Who wants a partner? Amy Louise?”

“Mrs. Brock I cannot possibly,” said the girl, clearly offended, perhaps by the implication that Robert E. Lee could be joined as an equal by anyone, or perhaps by the implication that she herself could.

“Fine. Generals can be very difficult colleagues anyway, Asa,” said Mrs. Brock. “How about you, Harold?”

Harold looked confused. He often did. “It ain’t nothing but radio,” he said.

“Of course, of course.” Mrs. Brock patted his shoulder. “Harold is a ham radio nut. His performance is to set up his receiver and pull in a broadcast from Russia. Very exciting, but not the sort of thing that invites collaboration. Well, Joel?”

Joel was a tall boy with fuzzy hair and a red face, all the parts of which seemed to be straining outward in a parody of aggressive friendliness toward all: his eyes popped, his nose arched, his cheeks bulged, even his teeth seemed to reach. He had spoken to Asa often, especially in his first days in the class; he had even invited the new boy over to play at his house after school two or three times. Asa had not been much interested; he had more challenging conquests to mount. Now, at the prospect of sharing, Joel was about to burst with goodwill.

“Mrs. Brock, Asa would be welcome to recite with me.” He shifted his grin to Asa and held out a very old book.

“Joel is going to recite a poem,” she explained. As Asa made no move, she took the book herself.

and thumbed through it. “Something by Eugene Field, wasn’t it?”

Joel nodded. “‘Little Boy Blue,’” he said. “Not the nursery rhyme with the ‘come blow your horn’ stuff. *This* is a really neat poem. We can say it together, if you like. That would be fun. We can practice so we match. Like the Everly Brothers.”

Mrs. Brock winced slightly. “That might, well, be a little *much*, boys. I mean, two voices in unison would sort of draw attention away from the—the lonesome sadness of the single child passing away, you see. Break up the effect. But maybe you could alternate stanzas....” She held the book out to Asa. He had no choice but to take it.

“Sure!” said Joel.

Asa frowned into the text. “Well,” he heard himself say, “okay. Thanks.”

At home, in his room alone, he thought of a dozen things he would rather do for the show than recite a poem called “Little Boy Blue” with Joel. Each inspired him to get up and go to the telephone. He even looked up Mrs. Brock’s number. *Look*, he would tell her, *I want to juggle large chrome rings*, or *I want to present the calls of twenty birds*, or *I want to play my guitar*. He would make a point of sounding very simply excited, as if Joel did not enter into it at all, as if his own sheer creativity were driving him to nix the deal he had made that afternoon.

The only thing that made Asa pause before dialing Mrs. Brock’s number was the fact that he could not juggle, he could not imitate the calls of birds, he owned no guitar. There was no doubt in his mind that he could scramble and master one of these tasks by the time he needed to perform; he could do anything he thought of doing, he was certain. But Joel had told him Mrs. Brock asked the other students to give a quick demonstration of their tricks so that she could approve or redirect the showmanship. In fact, she had suggested that two of them make changes: Susan, a haughty, religious girl, had wanted to sing three Baptist hymns; but she could not carry a tune, so she was now slated to recite three psalms; and Peter, whose voice-and-gesture impressions of John Wayne, President Eisenhower, and Ed Sullivan had all seemed exactly alike, was now going to sing “The Yellow Rose of Texas” and “The Streets of Laredo” while dressed as a cowboy. *However*, Joel reported with ecstacy, *however*, Asa was approved without audition to recite “Little Boy Blue.” Imagine! Well, Asa, who had a feeling Mrs. Brock knew she was taking a pretty slim risk in letting him mumble a few lines unapproved, did not want to test that faith. He had a feeling it would not extend to juggling and birdcalls.

He sat in his room looking out the window. Outside, the moon sat high and round and white in the dense, dark sky. The moon was isolated, touching nothing, having no effect on the darkness around it; it seemed as if any minute the vastly greater darkness would simply take over, and the moon would be no more. Yet down in his backyard a small apple tree was casting a thick shadow on the lawn. The shadow was there because the tree was standing in the way of the moonlight, which shone brightly like lightning on everything in sight. How could this be? How could the moonlight get all the way here through the sky without leaving some silver trace? Asa felt his curiosity and intelligence quicken, and he knew he could figure it out in time, and after he did, he would love moonlight. From insight to love was not a big step.

This is what he was good at, he realized. *This* is what he *did*. He placed himself in the world, and the world drew his thoughts outside himself, where they multiplied and spiraled and led him in silently thrilling flights. And as he expanded into the world, he expanded inside. At these moments an endlessness beyond thought opened inside him. Outside, his mind was whizzing through things, but inside, he was silent, still; sometimes, he knew he was not even breathing.

How do you put on a show of *that*? Asa felt that these abilities and experiences must appear

somehow, in everything he did, in what he was; but how could anyone be expected to know what I was? He was alone. That was it, really. Even when he was scurrying around figuring the angles and openings of other people, he was operating alone. He was a singleton, not a showman.

He got up from the window and found Joel's book. He thought of taking it back to the window and reading it by the moonlight, but he could not do it—not a poem called "Little Boy Blue." The ghost of Eugene Field was probably hovering somewhere *begging* him to read it in the moonlight, then come with silver tears. He switched on his overhead light.

He found the poem and read it. When he finished, he stared at the wall. It was difficult to believe that someone had written this. He read it again, and this time, he found it difficult to believe that someone else, even a kid, had chosen it to recite, on a stage, in front of other people. A sweet little boy pats his stuffed animals and drops dead in the night, and oh what a sad, sad world it is. Asa tried to laugh, but found that despite his scorn, he could not easily shake the heavy sadness the poem labored so shamelessly to create. This made him furious.

A few months ago, he and his mother and stepfather had been at a restaurant. While they were waiting for their food, Dave had gotten up and gone to the jukebox. He studied the selections for a moment, dropped in a coin, and pressed two buttons. A song bloomed from the small speaker over their booth, a song his mother apparently recognized, for as Dave sat down again next to Asa, she looked across at him and said, "Oh, honey, thanks."

The song was sung by a man with a high, rather nasal voice. It was a personal narrative about his darling young wife. She had come to him one spring, they had been in love for a year, then for some reason—something woeful that happened between the second chorus and the third verse, during the violin solo—she died. In the last verse, he was looking at a tree in the yard and noticing that it had grown. She, of course, being dead, had not, which (Asa thought) must be what made his mother so sad. For she was crying by the time the violins—hundreds of them by now—faded back into the speaker.

They sat in silence, except for his mother's snufflings. Asa said nothing. The air at the table was suddenly very tense; there was danger popping like ions. Asa would not have spoken for a hundred dollars. He held his breath and hoped the food would come. He saw the waitress emerge from the kitchen, carrying a tray with three plates. He let his breath out as she approached. He had made it.

But then, just before she arrived, Dave held up a hand to stop her. He turned his head slightly and looked sideways at Asa with a thin, amused smile. "Well?" he said.

Asa stared at the waitress. She stood, holding the heavy tray. "Well what?" the boy said, innocently.

Dave lifted his chin in a little nod at him. The smile held. "Well, what did you think of the song?"

Asa looked at his stepfather. Across the table, his mother had sniffed to a halt, and was wiping her eyes with a napkin. "I'm hungry," the boy said. "Please let's just eat."

The waitress made a move to put the tray down, but Dave held his hand out again and stopped her. "Now, I think it's a fair question to ask a boy, don't you? Just a simple question. And a boy ought to answer when he's spoken to." He lifted his chin again, and the smile tightened. "So answer me, unless you want to be reminded of your manners when we get home."

Asa took a deep breath and tried to hold it. He couldn't hold it forever. "All right," he burst out louder than he wanted to be. "Okay. It's a stupid song designed to suck the easy stupid sad feelings out of people who have plenty of other things to feel sad about, and it's about as real as the sunshine in cigarette commercials, and I hate *every stinking word*."

He sat, breathing hard and quaking, his eyes bulging hard against the insides of his eyelids with every pounding heartbeat, making the restaurant disappear in flashes of white, white, white. His mother exploded into sobs once more, but worse this time: real. Dave apparently gave the waitress

signal, for she now began to place the food in front of them. Asa stared down at his plate of spaghetti and said, "I have to get up. I'm going to be sick." Dave did not move to let him out of the booth, but leisurely stuck his fork into his own spaghetti, and twirled until a large mass hung on the end. This he raised until it was just in front of his face. He studied it. Asa's mother wailed across the table.

Dave said, "Well, yes. I guess—I guess you have to have a *heart* to like that song. Not just a brain."

Now, it seemed, Asa would once again have to make public his heartlessness: he hated every word of "Little Boy Blue," which, probably, all other human beings on the planet adored, and unless he wanted to recite "And that was the time when our Little Boy Blue/Kissed them and put them there" about a toy dog and a tin soldier, he would have to say so.

Before he knew it, he was standing on his bed. He bounced up and came down, hard. This was forbidden; Dave and his mother could hear in their bedroom below. It was sure to bring Dave up scowling and storming. " 'Now don't you go till I come,'" Asa recited loudly, bouncing again, " 'And don't you make any *noise!*'" He bounced one, two, three times, found a comfortable rhythm, *bowm, bowm, bowm, bowm*.

" 'And toddling off to his trundle bed,'" Asa shouted, " 'He dreamt of the pretty toys.' Hoo boy! Are those poor little toys in for a big *surprise!*" He cackled and lifted his knees, dropping even deeper into the mattress, *whong!*, springing even higher. Again he laughed, louder and wilder, and as long as his mouth was open and his voice sounded good, why not go ahead and holler this stupid poem that seemed to have stuck in his memory after only two readings? So he launched into a full-blown recitation, emphasizing the special moments of pathos with hoots or moans; except for a line or two (which he filled in by singing "Blue-d'dee blue-d'dee" *bowm, bowm, bowm*) he had the whole thing by heart. He built up to a big finish by bouncing higher, shouting louder, higher, louder, higher...until he arrived at the end and sprang spread-eagled off his bed out into the air of his room, singing "What has become of our Little Boy Blue?" in falsetto as he soared. Then his heels hit the floor with a stunning jolt, and he sprawled. He lay there, panting, waiting.

From below there was no sound. That was odd. He sat up, still panting. What was the matter down there? Perhaps they were weeping with the sadness of it all. Poor Little Boy Blue! Maybe they'd like to hear it again. He got up and found the book, intending to brush up on the couple of lines he'd blown. He snatched it open and scratched roughly through the pages, looking for the poem, intending to recite it aloud with volume and sarcasm. He held the text up close to his face.

It was not "Little Boy Blue" he was on the wrong page. But before he could flip it, he had read a line or two, and he stopped. The lines were "And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable wicket creaked/Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked."

Asa read the lines again. He didn't know what an ostler was. He didn't even know what a stable wicket was. But he knew they were better than toy dogs and tin soldiers, and he knew above all that when an ostler with a white, peaked face listened by a creaking wicket dark in a dark old inn-yard something was afoot. He read the next lines: "His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like moldered hay/But he loved the landlord's daughter/The landlord's red-lipped daughter,/Dumb as a dog he listened,/And he heard the robber say..."

Now, thought Asa, springing up with the book in his hand and shaking a fist, *now* by God we are *onto* something. Just ahead of his thoughts he saw a solution to his problem, he saw poor Little Boy Blue dying alone and unsung in the darkness far from voice and stage, but at the moment he did not want to think it through. To heck with Little Boy Blue. He wanted to *read*. So, quietly, he turned off his overhead light, and quietly pulled a chair into the moonlight coming through his window.

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