

A summer of first-love, adventure and baseball is made possible for four young people by a man who knows some exotic stories.

Overview:

Danny, the narrator, his friend Fred and two next door playmates, Nancy and Janet find adventure and exuberance through the days of one particular summer. Innocent first-love and the challenge of growing up take place amid the joys and games of summertime. If baseball is a child's metaphor for the season, it also serves as a goal of potential measurement in the core of this story.

The catalyst is a warm man of considerable maturity, 'Doc' Ludlow, whose advice and stories form a center for the action that takes place around them. He also forms a bulwark against the gentle forces of anarchy and excitement that sometimes invade this particular time of year.

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THE SUMMER OF DOC LUDLOW'S STORIES

Many years ago my grandmother owned a big house near the seashore. She rented out many of the rooms and the bungalow above the garage to people who came down for the summer. We always came down for the summer --me, my mom and cousin Beth. We had two rooms on the third floor. Mine was small with just enough space to get out of bed. We shared half a refrigerator with the Showbucks, who were retired people like my grandparents, and took our meals at one of the many tables in the large dining room.

It may be hard to remember everything that happened in all our summers at the shore. But this summer I will never forget. It was the summer that Freddy and I got into the most trouble, that I fell in love for the first time and learned a little about baseball and was told some things that no one else can ever know. And all of this was made possible by a man we knew as Doc Ludlow.

We knew nothing about him other than he was a boarder who liked to read his newspaper on the back porch while most of the other guests talked on the front porch. This bothered me, because Freddy and I practiced hitting grounders in the back yard and neither of us were very good at it.

I saw him watching after I missed batting the ball. "I guess I'm not doing well," I admitted, hoping that he would go away, or at least get back to his newspaper.

"At what?" Mr. Ludlow asked.

"Hitting the ball," I said.

"Yeah, he's pretty lousy," Freddy said, waiting with his glove on his knee.

"You're not so good yourself, Fred," I said.

Mr. Ludlow left the porch and came down to join us in the backyard. "I didn't know you were trying to hit the ball. I thought you were just dropping it on the weeds and trying to

swat bugs in the air," he said.

If my gym teacher had said that to me I would have hated him for life. But the way he said it sounded so funny that Freddy and I laughed.

Mr. Ludlow picked up our baseball. He hefted it a few times. "A hardball, huh?"

"Yeah," Freddy said.

"Are you allowed to play hardball?" Mr. Ludlow asked.

"Sure," I said.

Mr. Ludlow pointed at the bungalows in the backyards behind our house. "See, I didn't think fellas would want to hit hardballs back here. In case you really connected and sent one flying."

Freddy laughed. "No possibility of that!" he shouted.

"You see, Mr. Ludlow, we're just getting started with hardball," I said.

"Call me Doc. Mr. Ludlow was my father's name and he's not here now." He thought over what we had just told him.

"If you were learning to drive would you start with a race car going 200 miles an hour and then figure out how to turn a corner?" Doc asked.

"I guess not..."

Doc took my bat and hefting our ball lightly into the air he batted a gentle roller toward Freddy who missed it and had to run to the garage wall in order to pick it up.

"I could teach you how to hit grounders or pop flies..." Doc began.

Freddy threw the baseball back toward Doc. But the throw was so wild it sailed over our heads and crashed into a window next to the porch. It was practically the only window we had that wasn't covered by a screen.

"But," Doc winced as the glass shattered, "You have got to learn how to walk before you can run."

My grandmother screamed and came racing out of the back door.

"It's alright Mrs. Major. It was my fault and I will pay for the window, and see to its installation," Doc said.

Grandma glowered at me, but didn't scold.

When she left the backyard Freddy told Doc, "I'll pay you back Mr. Ludlow, I promise. As soon as I get my next allowance."

"You'll pay me back now, boys. By helping me remove the broken glass, measure the

window, get the new glass and install it. And you'll do it carefully," Doc warned --before Freddy could do something stupid like grab bunches of jagged slivers and cut his hand off.

The three of us walked to Main Street to get the new glass and we talked easily to Doc as if he were some old friend that we knew forever. Mostly he listened, especially as Freddy listed all the sports he thought he could play great.

"Yeah, and I'm real good at football. And basketball too. In football I do the blocking. Sometimes I'm a tackler. But mostly I block. Baseball I'm just learning."

"Uh huh..." Doc said. We were about to pass the corner store where kites and beach rafts were sold. Doc stopped.

"You need a newspaper or something, Mr. Ludlow?" Freddy asked.

Doc lifted a wiffle bat with three attached wiffle balls in a cardboard holder from a bin. He nodded. "This might be the ticket, boys."

"Wiffle ball? That's for babies," Freddy said.

"Babies?" Doc asked. "I might have seen a baby suck on one of these things, but I don't believe I've ever seen babies play wiffle ball. No, wiffle ball is for anybody other than babies. It's a nice little way to practice hitting, catching and throwing which some people actually consider to be important to the game."

"Without busting everybody's windows," I said.

"Without busting windows," Doc repeated. He shook the wiffle bat. "Do you think the guys who sell glass know about this? It could really hurt their business in the summertime."

The three of us walked back from Main Street. Doc had the new glass wrapped in brown paper under his arm. I carried a tube of caulking he had purchased, and Freddy had a small bag of little metal things that Doc said would help hold the new pane in. He also carried the wiffle bat with the three balls.

I was walking next to Doc as we turned the corner to my grandmother's house and a funny thing happened, a girl of my age walked out from behind the bushes near the curb and watched me pass. I don't why but my heart thumped as if I had seen a ghost. I looked into her eyes and turned red. Her girlfriend ran over to her and whispered something in her ear, but she didn't seem to move till we were by.

"Goofy girls," Fred complained.

"Do you know them?" Doc asked.

"Uh-uh..." I managed, almost losing my voice.

"Thought you knew them from school," Doc said.

"They're down for the summer. We've seen them before," Fred told Doc. "The blond one is always whispering things to the other one with brown hair."

"Do you know their names?" Doc asked.

"Are you kidding?" Freddy said, swinging the wiffle bat with one hand.

--Nancy, I thought to myself. And the other one doing the whispering was Janet or Janice. It was something I didn't believe I would want to know. But I did, and couldn't tell anybody I knew it.

It did not look easy putting the new window pane in. But Doc worked slowly and talked to us the entire time.

"Did you ever think what people did before they had windows?" Doc asked.

"They had bugs in their house," Freddy said.

"And they lived in caves during the winter," I added.

"Could be," Doc admitted, "The Keneem had some old stories about people who lived in caves. They called them giants, probably because of their big muscles. That was a long time ago," Doc said.

"Who were they; the Keneem?" Freddy asked.

"They were an ancient people who roamed the southern wilderness. They might settle for awhile if the land was good and their enemies were weak. Do you know the best thing about them?" Doc asked.

We didn't know.

"They had great stories. About themselves, animals, any number of things."

"Do you know any of their stories?" Freddy asked.

"Oh yeah." Doc said. "I've made it my life's work to learn as many of their ancient stories as I can." Doc smiled and we didn't know if he was kidding or not.

My cousin Beth came running down the hall in her bathing suit. "Danny, your Mom wants you to eat lunch and change for the beach. And tell Fred to go home."

"We're busy," I told Beth.

"Go to the beach. Go on. Wiffle ball will wait," Doc urged.

"But we got to finish helping you with the window," Freddy said, sitting cross legged on the floor.

"I'll manage the rest of the job," Doc said.

I found it hard to leave. "Doc, do you ever go to the beach?" I asked.

"In the late afternoon, if the tide's not too rough I might go for a swim," Doc said.

"Maybe we'll see you there," I said.

"Maybe."

*

Freddy stayed in the bungalow above the garage with his grandparents. His parents came down for weekends and usually brought him all sorts of games and toys because they felt bad about not seeing him during the week. Freddy didn't seem to care, after all, his grandparents spoiled him all week long. And because they were renting the bungalow for the entire summer my grandmother never scolded him for making noise or getting wild. She only scolded me. Even my grandfather scolded me and he usually slept all day, having worked nights most of his life.

Freddy's grandmother loved to talk. I guess you would call it gossip and I suppose she was good at it, because my mother enjoyed listening to her. We all trekked down to the beach together, Freddy, me, the adults and Beth who also loved gossip even if she didn't know what it was about. --This much I knew, the good parts were all hushed up. Beach chairs and umbrellas along with rafts and almost everything else went into a battered old baby stroller my mom pushed.

When that old baby stroller wasn't holding beach chairs it could hold Freddy or I as a go-cart, jet fighter, tank or anything else you wanted to play at. We had survived some great crashes in that stroller hitting mailboxes and even flipping over once.

When the water was too rough, or stained with sludge, we played in the sand, building forts or game arcades that could be played with a ball. When the water was good we were commandoes or salvage divers.

After the beach it was showers and supper. And after supper it was back to play.

The adults would usually gab on the porch till they decided to watch TV, and then some of them would drift in and fill the chairs and couches before my grandmother's large television set. She had the TV under the mantle of the fireplace they never used, with glass and porcelain things lined up above.

We didn't see Doc around that night and supposed that our wiffle ball lessons would have to wait till the next morning. It was one of those long summer evenings that took forever to get dark. We used the cover of the rose trellises to sneak up on the bungalows two houses down that were owned by the 'Mean Mrs. Green.' There were many secret approaches to getting into her yard unseen. It involved climbing three sets of fences from behind our own garage-bungalow and using all the bushes for cover.

We didn't really do anything once we got there, but we were excited and whispered orders to one another. Freddy was on the edge of getting wild. I could tell because he no longer seemed to play at the same thing. He started peeking into the windows of Mrs. Green's second bungalow. Then he crawled across the rear end of her driveway to where I

was hiding and burst into laughter as he told me he had seen somebody undressing and a fat-man rubbing Jell-O on his head.

I knew he had made it up but I laughed anyway. In two seconds Mrs. Green came storming out of her backdoor waving her arms and yelling. We never minded getting caught on the way out. My Grandmother didn't like Mrs. Green because of her habit of trying to steal away other renter's customers and Mrs. Green's complaints about us never resulted in any punishment. We usually waited till Mrs. Green was almost on us before jumping over the fence and making faces at her.

"I'll kill you rotten kids!" She shrieked at us.

We stopped laughing when we saw who was watching us from the yard we had just jumped into. It was the two girls. They had been playing some sort of game with a tennis ball. The four of us were frozen. Only Mrs. Green continued to make noise as she threatened to call the police and the fire department and have us locked up for the rest of our lives.

I couldn't look away from the one I knew was Nancy. She had a pink hair-band, and a white blouse with plaid shorts. I almost felt like surrendering to Mrs. Green and facing the death penalty.

Finally Freddy said something to Mrs. Green. "Go ahead, call the FBI. Tell them you found somebody laughing on your property."

Nancy was watching us. Janet or Janice leaned over to whisper something to her. I didn't like Janet. But Nancy pushed her back, gently and then she bounced the ball to her. Was that the game, bouncing a tennis ball to one another?

"Do you want to play?" Nancy asked us.

I couldn't believe it, but, Freddy was out of control. He said, "Sure, babes..." and ran from behind me to steal their ball right after the bounce and jumped the fence into our yard. It was the best catch he ever made. I didn't know what to do but look away and run after him.

Freddy ran two loops around my grandmother's house. He bounced the ball wildly on the sidewalk and sang a song I knew he hadn't made up. "A my name is Alice, and I'm full of Malice. M my name is Mandy and all I do is eat Candy..."

I laughed so hard I couldn't catch up to him. At last, he stopped running and played a weird game of stoop ball off of the cinderblock wall next to our driveway.

"We better give the ball back," I said.

"Why? Let's play like they were." And he bounced the ball hard off of the pavement and caught the bounce with his head. "OOO what a wonderful game for goofy girls..."

I tried to catch the rebound but he snatched it back and ran up the back porch into the house. I followed as he bounced the ball along the linoleum floor.

The adults turned from the TV set to quiet us down but it was too late, Freddy let go with a terrific bounce that sent the ball up to the ceiling. I reached for the ball only to knock it into the living room. The ball arched across the living room, hit the mantle above the fireplace knocking a porcelain bulldog down which hit Mr. Showbuck's shoes on the hassock and bounced into the television set exploding.

"YIPES! Do it again, Danny!" Freddy yelled.

The TV screen cracked, went dark and spit out a hiss of smoke. Adults were running for their lives.

"I gotta go," Freddy said and bolted out of the back door.

My grandmother began advancing at me. And who was marching up our front porch to ring the doorbell? Nancy with Janet one step behind her.

"I was just trying to get Freddy to stop bouncing the ball in the house, Grandma..."

The bell ding-donged. The adults who weren't killed by the sudden loss of TV began closing in on me. I turned and ran up the three flights of stairs to my tiny room. I turned the lights off and closed the windows waiting for the worst of what was to come.

The next five minutes took hours. Finally I heard footsteps coming slowly up in my direction. The steps were uncertain. It couldn't have been my grandmother who could not step as lightly as this footstep. The only one it could have been was Beth. Which meant my mother was back from the boardwalk already. I sat up and watched for Beth's head to appear at the top of the steps. Instead I saw a pink hairband. It was Nancy. Nancy with no Janet.

She stopped two steps from the landing. "Is this where you're staying?" She asked.

"Yeah. My grandmother owns the house. We get the attic for free."

She advanced an additional step. "Do you have my ball?"

"I think it was destroyed with the television set."

"Did you do that... downstairs?" She asked.

"Sort of. It was really..."

"The other boy. His name is Freddy, right?" She asked.

"Yeah."

"And your name is Danny. Your grandmother told me. My name is Nancy." She was on our landing. On the third floor. The floor where I slept. Practically in my room. She stepped closer to my open door. I couldn't move.

"Are you being punished?" She asked. She stepped into my doorway. Her face was hidden in the dark shadows.

"Not yet. But it's coming," I said.

She laughed. Not like Freddy does, like a sick hyena, but like...like I don't know.

"I know the feeling. You seem to be pretty calm about it."

Only because I was temporarily paralyzed. I shrugged. Finally I thought of something to say. "What's going on down there? Have they called out the National Guard?"

She laughed again, and in spite of everything I thought I believed in, I thought I could listen to her laugh the rest of my life.

"I've got to get back..." She said.

I pushed myself off of the bed and reached into the bottom of my closet. Next to my baseball glove and bat, my cap pistol and water guns were a pile of soft balls. I pulled three of them out. One dropped and rolled under my bed. I offered her the other two. "Here, Nancy. Till I can find your tennis ball..."

She took one of the balls from my hand. "I'm only taking it for tonight, so Janet won't complain. You can have it back."

"It's okay, really," I said.

She nodded, pushed hair from the side of her face and left my room. She stopped by the stairs, though, and looked back. "I'll see you tomorrow, won't I?" She asked.

"Sure."

She slowly went down the steps from my room. I wanted to lean over the railing and watch her. To see if she would look to see if I was watching her, but I couldn't go that far. I slunk onto my bed again. The punishment that awaited no longer seemed as frightening. My head became sleepy with dreams of Nancy. But before I drifted off I fixed in mind the need to give Freddy a good beating for getting me into deep trouble and then deserting me.

The next morning I had to go downstairs. What I wanted to do was climb down a rope from the attic and run away. I had to pass everybody on the steps and in the kitchen. I was scowled at. Everybody was mad at me except the TV repairman who was hauling the guts of the set onto a hand-truck to be carted away.

"Hiya Sonny," he said, "Are you the one who did this?"

I didn't say anything. He whistled happily as he moved the set onto the front porch.

My grandfather stopped me on the way up to bed for one of his naps. "You were a bad boy," he said.

"I didn't do anything, Grandpa!"

My mom and Beth were already eating breakfast. I joined them. "I didn't do anything,

Mom. Freddy snatched this girl's tennis ball and was throwing it. I ran after him..."

"Yes, we know. The little girl next door told your Grandmother that," My mother said.

It almost sounded like I was out of deep trouble.

"But you were still bad," Beth said above her spoon of soggy cereal.

"It will cost your grandmother a lot of money to fix the television." My mom said like it meant that my allowance would be gone for the next ten years.

"All I did was try to get the ball away from Freddy. You know how he gets..."

"Your grandmother swore that you will not be able to watch television for the rest of the summer," my mother said.

"Yeah. You we're really bad," Beth said again.

"What! Mom, that's completely unfair. Freddy gets to watch. They have their own television in the bungalow. And..."

"And Freddy's grandparents have rented the bungalow for the entire summer," Mom said.

"Well, put the TV on their bill!" I said.

"We can't do that. Freddy's grandparents have been coming here for years. We can't do that," Mom said.

"All summer?" I moaned.

"Relax. How much television do you watch during the summer anyway?" Mom asked.

"When it rains we watch..." I said.

My mother shrugged. "You have to take your medicine."

"And don't break the new television, either." Beth warned.

"Right." I got up to go into the backyard.

"Aren't you having any breakfast?" My mom asked.

"I'm not hungry now."

I went out the back porch. Doc was there reading his paper. The wiffle bat was next to him. "Good morning."

"Hi Doc," I said.

"Where's your friend?" Doc asked.

"I'm gonna get him right now." I marched upstairs to Freddy's place above the garage and rang the doorbell. His grandmother answered.

"Hello Danny."

"Hi. Is Freddy here?" I asked.

"Freddy isn't feeling very well, dear. Maybe come back later."

I was almost burning up. "Okay."

I ran down the stairs and behind the garage. I climbed the maple tree half way up till I could see into his room. He was sitting on his bed playing with a million games.

"Freddy!" I hissed.

"What?" He saw me in the maple tree.

"Come on downstairs, Freddy," I said.

"I uh... Uh...My Grandmother wants me to run some errands, later...I..."

"Downstairs," I said.

"No."

"You chicken!"

"You're just going to hit me," he said.

"No I'm not." I lied, thinking it wasn't really a lie because I wasn't going to just hit him. I was going to stomp him. "If you don't come downstairs now I won't play with you ever again, and when I do catch you I'm gonna cremate you."

He thought about it. "Alright..."

I waited out front for him to tell his Grandmother how fine he suddenly felt. I opened the garage door and thought I should push him in there before beating him up.

He came downstairs slowly holding a big chocolate chip cookie out. "Here Danny. This is for you..."

I took the cookie. "Freddy, if you ever get crazy in my Grandmother's house again, I'll murder you."

"Okay."

"It's gonna cost my Grandmother two hundred dollars to fix the TV. I can't ever watch it again. I'm banned from TV the rest of my life."

"You can watch it with me," He offered. "Whenever you like."

I bit into the cookie. It sure tasted good. "And you ran off and let me face everything by myself," I said.

"I'm sorry Danny."

I finished the cookie. I guess I wasn't going to beat him to an inch of his life after all.

Something soft sailed out and landed at our feet. It was the wiffle ball.

"You guys ready to play?" Doc called out, ready to bat another of the light, plastic balls.

"Sure," I said.

"Oh, by the way, there are two little girls here. Do you mind if they play too?" Doc asked.

"We don't want any goofy girls!" Freddy blurted out. Doc looked away for a moment, studying the clouds or watching some seagulls and I turned and punched Danny on the arm --hard.

"Sure," I shouted, "Anybody can play, accept babies."

Janet climbed the fence into our yard, but Nancy walked around to the front of the house and along the walk beside the rose trellises. She said 'hi' to me and I said 'hi' to her. Freddy and Janet already hated one another. Janet was not friendly toward me either.

Doc asked the two girls their names and told them who he was.

"Are you a Doctor?" Nancy asked.

"Oh no. Just Doc."

He gave all of us a little practice hitting easy pitches with the wiffle ball and then made up a simple game with two bases and a few rules. Next, he put us on teams. Freddy and Janet naturally wanted to play the girls against the boys, but Doc put Nancy and I on the same team against Freddy and Janet.

At first our teams were real awkward with one another. I had trouble speaking to Nancy without getting tongue-tied and Freddy and Janet just glared at one another. They had first bat so they could only argue about which one would go first. Doc settled it with a flip of the coin.

"So, who's going to play infield and pitch, and whose going to play the outfield?" Doc asked Nancy and me.

We looked at each other. "Do you want to..." We both asked one another at the same time and then we both smiled.

"Nancy would you like to pitch?" Doc asked. She said yes and Doc said, "Who ever the next batter is can act as catcher. If a runner is on base then the batter will have to return the pitch. Okay everybody?"

Janet wanted Doc to go over the hitting rules again. "What's a home run?"

"Don't worry about it. You'll never get close." Fred said to his new team-mate.

"A direct hit onto the balcony above the garage is a home run. A line drive off of the

garage wall is good for two bases. Anything to the sides of the garage-bungalow is foul," Doc told everyone again.

Then we began to play and got into the game so much we didn't even notice that Doc had left.

Freddy struck out his first time up, and felt real bad about it. Janet tried to give him some advice about hitting. "Watch the way I do it," she said.

She fouled the first pitch and whacked the second one. I ran for it but couldn't catch it. The wiffle ball smacked off the garage door for a two-baser. Then it was up to Freddy to hit her home.

"Come on hit the ball!" Janet pleaded from second base --which was where third base would be in regular baseball.

"I will, I will," Freddy said without seeming to believe it.

He swung and missed Nancy's first pitch.

"Hey Danny it's not fair. She's pitching harder to me than to her girlfriend," Freddy complained.

Nancy turned and looked at me to shake her head that it wasn't true. I knew it wasn't true. She was pitching easy to both of them. That's the way Doc had started us out.

"Just watch the ball and take your time," I told him, feeling confused about who I wanted to help.

He swung and missed a second time. "It's this light weight bat. I'm just not used to it," he complained again.

"Keep your eye on the ball!" Janet told him.

I could tell how miserable he was, and actually felt bad for him.

Finally he popped it up. It came right to me and I put my hands up and before I knew it I had caught it, but Janet tagged and ran for home. I threw the ball to Nancy and she raced toward home to tag Janet before she was safe.

Janet slid and knocked Nancy over. I couldn't believe it.

"You're out!" Freddy said.

"I'm out? Whose team are you on, bird-brain?" Janet yelled into his face.

"Shut up, fish-breath."

She grabbed Freddy and wrestled him down onto the grass just as Nancy was getting up. The two of them fought on the ground, though Janet managed to get on top of him. "I got you pinned!" she shouted.

"No you don't!" Freddy shouted.

Nancy and I lifted Janet off and the fighting stopped. They ignored the two of us as they continued arguing.

"Don't ever take the other team's side against me again, you hear! This way you get a sacrifice-run-batted-in instead of a dumb out. Understand?" Janet shouted at Freddy, then she turned to Nancy and I.

"Was I safe or out?"

We looked at one another. "I don't know," Nancy said.

"Okay they got one run. I'm sure we'll catch up," I said.

"Alright, I'm up now. If I get on base, hit me home, but try to keep it on the ground, that way I can run without tagging, okay?" Janet asked Freddy.

"Okay," he said.

The game went on for many innings. Eventually Nancy and I changed field position. At times we got confused, especially if one team got two members on base and the lead runner stayed so the second runner could bat again. Sometimes we forgot the force-play on the invisible runner from first. Janet and Freddy became a pretty good team, to the point that Freddy --after a hit, would root Janet on and actually taunt me from first base.

We got our hits too and the score was close at 7 - 6 with us trailing when Beth called me for lunch. I had forgotten how hungry I was, and yet wanted the game to go on. But Freddy's grandmother told him to come upstairs too.

"You want to play this on the beach?" Janet asked.

I hadn't seen them at the beach and guessed that they used a different street beach than we did.

"It's too hard to run in the sand," Nancy said.

"Alright, we'll finish this game after supper, okay?" Janet said.

"Okay." I picked up the wiffle bat.

Janet was already out of our yard. "C'mon, Nance," she called.

"Okay, coming... What beach do you go usually go to?" She asked me.

"Brinley and LaReine." I said, "And you?" I asked.

"Usually Fourth Avenue," she said.

"All the way down there? Why?" I asked.

"My mother thinks it's a better beach. It's more quiet."

"Uh huh. Maybe we'll take a walk down there," I said.

"Nance!" Janet called.

"Okay, coming," Nancy shouted back.

"She's tough," I said.

Nancy smiled. "See you later."

"You in love?" Freddy asked after Nancy left our yard.

"She's nice. Her girlfriend's something else," I said.

"She's okay," Freddy said, trying to juggle two of the extra wiffle balls. Which he must have lost because we never saw them again.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah. She's okay, for a girl, I mean," Freddy said.

"Fred, did I make your lunch to sit on the table all afternoon?" His Grandmother asked from the balcony.

"No Gra'm. I'm coming up." Freddy ran up the stairs.

"I see you have some nice new friends," his grandmother said to me.

"Yeah."

"It's so nice to see boys and girls playing nicely together."

"Yeah," I said smiling. She must have been watching television while Janet was rolling her grandson in the dirt.

Once on the beach we had to quick-step over the hot sand to get to the cooler area nearer the water. We set up all of the beach chairs and went for our first swim. We made it the shortest first swim ever. And then Freddy and I hiked to Fourth Avenue Beach.

The girls were waiting for us. Actually looking for us. Janet had written some new, additional rules for our wiffle ball game. They were set down with neat penmanship on small pieces of white paper decorated with hearts, flowers and blue ribbons.

I can't remember exactly what the four of us did that first afternoon on the beach together. We played in the water, searched for seashells. Looked under the boardwalk for lost change. Talked and threw pebbles against the jetties and watched fishermen reel in lines that were mostly snagged with seaweed.

It was a great afternoon. As the sun began to grow cooler in the sky we had to race back to our beach and help carry all our stuff up to the boardwalk and home again. Then take our turns in the shower and wait for dinner.

Afterwards we got together again to finish our game. By the time it was dark Nancy and I had won by 10 - 9. Doc was there to see the last play of our game --a force against an imaginary runner advancing to second with a double play on Fred at first and three out so the last runner home, Janet, couldn't score.

"Very good," Doc said. "Amazing transformation."

We sat on the porch near his chair.

"What do you guys want to do now?" Freddy asked.

"We could go inside and watch television," Janet said.

I tried not to moan.

"Is it too late to go to the boardwalk?" Freddy asked.

"It's almost nine o'clock," Doc told us.

"Yeah, it's too late," I said.

"Let's tell ghost stories," Freddy suggested.

"Doc knows some stories. About giants and stuff," I said.

"Yeah, from an ancient people. You want to tell us some, Mr. Ludlow?" Fred asked.

"I don't know that you would like them," Doc said.

"Are they educational?" Janet asked.

"In a way," Doc said.

"Tell one of them to us," Nancy asked.

"Yeah, try one on us," I said.

The summer night darkened around us as we sat in a semi-circle before Doc Ludlow. He leaned forward in his chair, "Alright. I'll try one of them," he said.

"It's called," Doc began, " 'The Bull and the Lions' and before I begin let me set the stage for this story. In ancient times and some remote places even today you have herds of animals migrating --that means moving from one place to another. They might move from a summer grassland to an area of streams and lakes when the grasslands get too dry.

"In this story the Bull is the strongest leader of the wild buffalo. He's the brother, father, husband and cousin of almost all the other buffalo. And opposing the buffalo in the journey are?"

"The lions." I said.

"That's right. The lions, and other things. Hyenas, leopards, packs of wild dogs, drought,

prairie fires, lakes full of crocodiles. It's not easy being a buffalo. But there are other animals moving in herds on these grasslands. There are giraffes, smaller animals like antelope, zebras..."

"Elephants?" Janet asked.

"Yes there are elephants but they are separate from the other animals. The way they eat and their needs for water keep them apart. Should I continue?" Doc asked.

"Oh yeah," We all said, imagining a grassland as big as all the outdoors with only these animals on them.

"For as long as the Bull could remember the buffalo had always moved along a familiar course from the high plains under the mountains to the summer grasslands and back. And all along the way animals had been hunted by predators such as the lions.

"A single lion would not attack a full grown bull. He was too big and strong. He weighed too much. Why, if the buffalo stepped on the lion he might kill it. In fact the largest lions, the big male lions didn't do very much hunting. The female lions, the mothers of the lion pride did the normal hunting for food."

Janet whispered something to Nancy.

"The female lions always coordinated their attacks. Some would chase the herd, others would pick out a likely target for supper. Then one made the kill to be assisted by two or three others.

"If they didn't attack the big bulls, who did they attack?" Doc asked us.

"The cows. The buffalo cows," Nancy said.

"Maybe... but mostly if the lions took interest in buffalo for supper it was the young calves. The babies. They were the most tender, and the best for eating. And they were the easiest to catch."

"OOOoo," The girls said.

"Didn't the mothers and fathers protect their babies?" Janet asked.

"The mother cows very definitely tried to protect their babies. But they didn't want to fall behind the herd, become surrounded and eaten themselves. And there are not many fathers in a herd. The Bull was the father. And he was trying to lead the herd and keep them together.

"Now if you read about something like this you will find that the attack on the weakest members of the herd keeps the herd fit."

"What's the difference between one baby calf who is unlucky and a lucky one?" Janet asked.

"Luck," Doc said. "Anyway, one spring as the herd rested under the nearby mountains,

just after the cows had given birth, the Bull had a dream of a spirit coming down from the mountain and covering him with a new strength."

"What kind of spirit?" Freddy asked.

"What is a spirit?" Nancy asked.

"A spirit can be anything. It could be a strong dream, or maybe a breeze that not everybody feels.

"From this spirit-dream the Bull began to think like a person. It could see all the migrations in his life mapped out as if suddenly he understood life's purpose.

"Instead of just being a bull while he was strong and then being pushed aside when he grew older he could become a king. But he could only become a king if he found a way to make the herd a people. And to become a people the buffalo would have to defeat their enemies.

"It would mean changing a way of life that had existed for so many years. The annual trek across the plains where the lions waited could not continue. They could no longer allow the lions to take so many of their calves; to surround and destroy the older animals, to surprise the foolish who wandered too far tasting the sweet grass nearer the trees.

"They would have to defeat the lions. The bull was uncertain how to do this, so he sought out his own father at the edge of the herd.

" ' Father,' he said, 'I need to talk to you about something.'

"His father was amazed to be spoken to. 'Why do you speak to me? You have never spoken to me since the day you became the leader and pushed me aside.'

" 'It's different now,' the Bull said, 'We are going to become a people. We will do things differently.'

"The old buffalo chewed the grass, 'How can this happen? How can we change?'

" 'We must defeat the lions who wait for us in the grasslands to the south. I want your support. If we all work together there will be a day when we fear no enemy.'

"The old buffalo laughed quietly. 'This will never happen,' he told his son, the Bull.

" 'Then it will be the end of your time on the plains. Because you are too old to run all day. The lions will come after you. It's your choice. Would you rather live one more season under the sky. Eat the sweet grass, and when your time comes lay down and sleep. Or do you want to be chased and eaten by the lions this next month when we begin our march through the plains?'

"The old buffalo shook his head. Tears fell to the ground. 'None of us want to be eaten by the lions. But we always think it won't happen to us. What you have told me could be true. Maybe it will happen to me this time. I have nothing to lose if I listen to you.'

"Next, the Bull spoke to his older sons. They were wild and only wanted to fight and play. He had to force them into a circle to get them to stand still and listen. 'Hey, Pops what do you want from us?' Said one.

" 'Yeah man, be cool and let us do our thing.' Said another.

" 'Listen to me for a moment. Would you like to become a mighty people with no enemies, or simply play all day?' The Bull asked.

" 'Definitely play.' Said one. 'What's in it for us?' asked the other.

" 'If we all make a kingdom, eventually one of you will rule it,' the Bull said.'

" 'Yeah, but who, me?' asked one. 'Not you, you're definitely too dumb,' said another.

" 'Who ever is the best would inherit the kingdom,' the Bull said.

"To decide who was best several of them began playing and fighting. Two of his many sons did not join the game. 'How do we become a kingdom?' One asked.

" 'By defeating our enemy the lions,' the Bull told them.

" 'The lions won't bother me.' The son said, 'I run too fast, and I'm already too strong for any one lion.'

" 'But think of the little ones and the grandmothers who go down every year from the lion's hunger,' the Bull said.

"They listened but said nothing. 'Think of the kingdom that one of you will inherit,' the Bull said. This made the two sons smile and look at one another. 'We are interested in this.' the two sons said, and will talk to our brothers about it when they get tired of playing.'

"Next the Bull called all of the cows and their calves together. He told them of his plan and they all applauded. They stamped their hooves on the ground and bellowed with approval. They truly liked the idea. But one cow who had many children and had lost more than a few to the lions told the Bull, 'You must show the way, because most of us with little ones are afraid of the lions.'

" 'I will show the way,' the Bull said, feeling confident at the time that the special spirit that came to him from the mountain would help show him the way.

"As the herd prepared to head for the summer grasslands a single lion was spotted walking in the distance. The youngster that spotted the lion was upset, 'I didn't think there were any lions this far north in the spring.'

The Bull ran to investigate this lion. Sure enough there was single, male lion walking slowly alongside the herd. He was some distance away and seemed to have no interest in the herd. The Bull had seen this before, an old lion moving through unknown territory, more afraid of other lions than chasing buffalo. The Bull called for the herd to move closer toward this lion and reluctantly they followed.

" 'Remember, you must show the way!' The cow reminded him as other buffalo searched nervously for additional lions.

"The lion saw the herd moving toward him slowly and he changed direction to avoid them. The Bull moved in front of the herd to study the lion more carefully. He could see that the lion was hungry, and panting from the heat. The lion seemed to limp slightly from a sore foot. This lion was not looking for buffalo, maybe for a lame antelope that hyena hadn't found, or even a lazy rabbit.

"The herd stopped behind him. The Bull closed his eyes and asked the spirit from the mountain what to do. Then he understood that he must show the way. The Bull had never done anything like this before and he was frightened also. But no one could see he was frightened. He ran slowly toward the lion, huffing breath out of his nostrils as if he were angry.

"The lion stopped and watched this huge, strong bull trotting toward him. The lion thought, this must be some mistake. Buffalos don't hunt lions. Lions hunt buffalo. So the lion continued on his way.

"The Bull became concerned when he saw that the lion was not frightened of him. The Bull looked back and saw the entire herd watching. He tossed his horns in the air and pawed the ground and then ran after the lion again.

"Finally the Bull was only twenty feet from the lion. The lion thought to himself, maybe this Bull thinks I want to hunt buffalo as lion sometimes do. But I'm an old lion on his own and I do not wish to hunt buffalo. So the lion changed direction, again, heading away from the herd.

"The Bull was getting annoyed by the lion's lack of interest in him. So the Bull ran around the lion to stand directly in the lion's path.

"Now, the lion was completely puzzled. Behind him was the herd and in front of him was this huge bull. Never before in his life had he ever heard or seen of such a thing.

" 'Go back to your herd, Bull. Enjoy life. Once I was the leader of a lion pride. Now I'm just passing through,' the lion said, revealing that many of his teeth were broken.

"The Bull felt sorry for the lion. He bellowed out in his loudest voice, 'This lion fears us!' But the herd could not hear him. The lion heard him, though, and shook from such a loud bellow.

"The lion paused and wondered, is this what happens to old lions on their own, they are attacked by their former prey? 'Please let me pass,' the lion pleaded. But the Bull stood his ground. He kicked dirt at the lion and moved very close.

"The lion sat down on the ground. He panted from the heat and waited for the Bull to charge. The Bull pawed the earth and bellowed his loudest, meanest threats. Then he charged the lion.

"The once mighty lion was like a piece of rag under the bull's hooves and horns. He lay

on his side, his coat torn, he could barely move. 'Why do you attack lions?' he gasped.

" 'So lions will no longer hunt buffalo,' the Bull answered.

" 'What will lions eat?' The old lion asked.

" 'Let them eat grass,' the Bull said, and rolled a clump of dry grass and dirt over the lion's back. This made the herd howl with laughter. The Bull, even the lion heard the laughter.

" 'This is what becomes of old lions on their own. They are mocked by buffalo, soon rabbits and mice will come to pull my whiskers, the lion cried. The Bull took pity on the lion, 'Don't move till I have rejoined my herd and led them away from here,' he told the lion.

" 'Don't move? I think my leg is broken. How can I move?' the lion cried. The Bull turned his back on the lion and kicked heaps of dirt on him, making the herd laugh again. Then the Bull ran to rejoin the herd.

"Several of his strong sons wanted to run down and trample the lion. But the Bull told them, 'Save your strength for the lions on the plain. There will be plenty of them and we can all have our fill trampling them together.'

"The herd moved from the high plains down toward the summer prairies which were rich with thick grass. Soon they noticed they were in lion country. A frightened zebra which had been clawed by a young lion ran around a nearby zebra herd telling her story over and over to anyone who would listen.

"It was early the next day when a pride of hunting lions were spotted on the outskirts of a herd of antelope. 'Those lions won't bother us, now,' an old buffalo said. 'That's right,' said the Bull, 'because we will destroy them.'

"The old buffalo was uncertain. 'Won't they know how strong you are?' she asked the Bull.

" 'Tell her, Father,' the Bull asked his father.

" 'He's right. Eventually the lions will get to us after the other game is gone. It's the way it's always been.'

"So the bull organized the herd into two groups. The larger group would guard the calves, the smaller group made up of the strongest animals would form a fierce wedge with the Bull at its center and would hunt down and destroy the lion pride.

" 'And if the lions change direction and try to get behind us, as lions do, we will simply reverse direction and the two wings of this wedge will turn and follow me again attacking in the opposite way,' the Bull told his war party, 'Does everyone understand?' the Bull asked. All nodded. 'Remember, we are larger than they with bigger muscles. We could pull a ton if we had to. Our horns can smash a dozen lions and our mighty hooves can kick holes in them. And they are smaller, female lions than the one who trembled before

me alone, and look how many more of us than there are of them!"

"They trotted toward the lions in the hunting pride getting their wedge perfectly in shape. The other animals got out of the way. Birds flew into the sky and made a great noise.

"The lions looked up from their hunting and were puzzled by the wedge of buffalo charging toward them. The buffalo had no young with them and lions had never seen anything like this.

"The sound of so many hooves echoed off of the nearby trees where the young, male lion of the pride waited in the shade. He too looked up and saw this puzzling thing.

"The Bull felt sure of his plan and began to add great speed to his charge. It would take little time, he thought, to finish off this pride of lions and soon they would destroy all the lions of the grassland. One day he would be king of a great herd of buffalo. A herd with no enemies, a herd that in fact would be a people. A people who would grow to the ends of the earth. A kingdom he would pass down to his most deserving son.

"The Bull wondered why the lions didn't turn to run. He decided they were not smart enough to understand what was happening, and this too was good, it would make their work easier.

"But then, the Bull noticed that all, but the one lion directly in his path, were smiling. Smiling with strong, yellow teeth. And the Bull only heard the pounding of his own footsteps. He glanced behind and saw the attack party of buffalo milling about some fifty yards away.

"His first thought was to turn and rejoin them in order to offer encouragement. Perhaps they had forgotten the plan. But his way was blocked by two lions of the hunting pride which had closed in behind him. The bull pawed the ground and tossed his mighty horns. He called upon the spirit of the mountain to show him the way. Then he realized that he could no longer see the mountain from the lowland prairies. And perhaps the spirit of the mountain was only near the mountain itself.

"The Bull was standing still in a slight hollow of ground with five hunting lions circling around him. He charged at one lion who got out of his way. The others moved closer to him. He tried to form a mighty bellow but only a shriek escaped his lungs. Behind him the young bulls fought among themselves for the new leadership of the herd. And behind them the rest of the herd spread out in the early sun in order to eat the best grass. Between the two groups the Bull saw his own father watching.

"He was big enough to fight. He might have even killed a lion or two, and perhaps he could have escaped them with some damage. But the Bull saw little reason to rejoin his herd even if he could. His dream was gone. His sons were strong, he saw no future for himself, so he simply stood there looking up as the lions attacked.

"He was a big Bull. And a really strong Bull and even though he would not struggle the lions had trouble bringing him down. At last they did, and the male lion watching from the shade roared in satisfaction. He had never seen anything quite like it, a huge bull

offering himself up like that to spare members of his herd for a few days.

"The Bull's father also watched from the distance. 'In the end, he was good son to me, a better son than I was to my father,' but he knew, that which ever of his grandsons became the new Bull, he would taunt and make fun of the old buffalo. A tear ran down his muzzle. 'It's just not the way for buffaloes, to hunt lions, it's just not the way,' the old buffalo said to himself, as more tears ran down and fell to the earth."

Freddy laughed, "Pretty dumb bull."

"And did the lions eat the baby calves, and the Bull's father?" Nancy asked.

"The story ends there," Doc said. "But I guess, in the end the lions ate everybody, and people came and hunted the lions for trophies and so on."

"But, like, how many calves would get eaten? Say, there were fifty calves, would the lions eat twenty-five?" Janet asked.

Doc shrugged, "The story doesn't say."

"Did you like that story?" Doc asked. I could tell he really wanted an honest answer.

"No. I mean it was interesting, but I don't like how it ended," Nancy said.

"I liked it!" Freddy said. "I'd root for the lions, anyway," Freddy said.

"That's because you don't understand the story!" Janet told him. "I liked it, Mr. Ludlow, but I'd like to know more about it. How about you?" Janet asked me.

"I'm still thinking about it," I said. "I guess I like it, but it's different than most animal stories..."

"Accept the Gingerbread-Man. He gets eaten too," Janet said.

"But he was cookie, and not a real thing," Nancy said.

Doc was smiling. "Why do you suppose that story is different?" He asked us.

"The hero of the story is dumb," Freddy said.

"Because it's not just a story made up for kids, you know, to show how cute everything is. If you ever went to a zoo you would know that none of these animals are really cute. Maybe the babies are, but the big ones smell bad." Janet said, holding her nose.

"That's good," Doc said, "And I think that it's also a story about people as well as about creatures."

Freddy's grandmother called for him from the balcony on the bungalow.

"I guess it's getting close to bedtime, kids." Doc Ludlow said, studying his watch by the dim, porch light.

That night I dreamed of buffalo and lions and hunting them with Nancy and Freddy and Janet. Late in the dream I heard a lot of clattering and imagined a herd of buffalo charging at us. When I awoke it was raining. It was the kind of rain that could ruin the beach even if the sky would clear up. Sheets of rain fell on all the houses I could see from my third floor window.

Downstairs, people milled around nervously waiting for the TV repairman to bring back the fixed inside of the set. I ate breakfast with Beth and ended up borrowing some of her paper and crayons to draw.

I drew a picture of the Bull surrounded by the hungry lions, but I felt ashamed by it for some reason and crumpled it up for the trash. An hour later the rain tapered off and Freddy and his grandmother came over from the bungalow.

Doc Ludlow had gotten a morning paper and was reading on the back porch when Freddy and I went back there. Freddy had something to show Doc. It was a picture of the Bull and the old lion from the middle of the story. It was a crude picture. You could see the bull's body from the side and his face and horns from the front as if he were half-turned and smiling at the artist.

"Very good," Doc said, "You drew this just as the Keneem did. It's like you had copied the scene from one of their vases or something."

Freddy beamed. I had drawn a much better picture but said nothing.

The sky began to brighten and Freddy and I decided to play something. We kept our beach carriage in the old garage, which was fairly spooky. We were going to use the carriage as a lion-hunting tank. We took the beach chairs out of it and stacked them next to the old ladder my grandfather had built.

"Do you love Nancy?" Freddy asked.

He might as well have punched me in the stomach. I didn't say anything.

"Well do ya?" He asked. "C'mon, I won't tell anyone," he said. Though, I didn't believe him.

"No. I just like her," I told him.

"Well I love her," Freddy told me.

"Who?" I asked.

"Nancy."

"I don't believe you," I said.

"It's true. I love her."

I sat down on the ladder and tried to think of something to say. "She's taller than you," I finally came up with.

He thought this over for a moment.

"You should like Janet," I told him.

He made a face, but not as weird a face as Freddy could make. "Janet?" He asked.

"Yeah. I think she likes you, sort-of." I told him.

"She's taller than me too," Freddy said.

"Not as much. And she likes to be a little taller. She's that way." I told him.

"Yeah?" He thought this over. "Okay," he announced, "I love Janet."

"Are you going to do something about it?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. It's you who's blurting stuff out," I told him.

"Let's get them to play wiffle ball," Freddy said.

"The ground's too wet, with big puddles everywhere," I said.

"So what do we do? See them on the beach, tomorrow?" He asked.

I stood up. "Here, get in the carriage, I'll race you down to their house."

Freddy climbed in. "At least we can talk to them today."

"Right." I heaved forward with all my strength and built up a rush of speed to push Freddy down the driveway and onto the sidewalk. We both shouted and cheered probably trying to make as much noise as possible in order to attract attention.

I got quiet, though, when we rounded the corner bushes and saw the TV repairman's truck parked at the curb. I saw my grandmother talking to him on the porch. Even Freddy got quiet for a second. But then we passed the house and the second set of bushes and rose trellises, and made more noise.

Janet was standing on the far side of Mrs. Watchel's house. Mrs. Watchel owned the house and two bungalows between my grandmother and Mrs. Green. I was curious where Nancy and Janet were actually staying.

Janet waved for us to stop, which we were going to do anyway. Freddy, surprising all of us, announced to Janet, "I love you."

I looked at him. Janet looked at him. She kind of twisted her body around to put most of her weight on one foot. She blushed, then she looked at me and for some reason I blushed too. Only Freddy had no reaction. "I do." He insisted, making Janet believe that she was being kidded. She bit her lower lip and announced to me, without really looking at me, "Nancy's not here. And I'm going to the movies with my mother."

"Where's Nancy?" I asked.

"He loves Nancy," Freddy said.

I resisted the urge to punch him and instead changed the subject. "Are you guys staying here at Mrs. Watchels?"

"We are. We have the far bungalow. Though we might leave. Some lady moved into the other bungalow this morning with a dog that barks all the time. My mother hates barking dogs," Janet said.

"Is Nancy staying with you?" I asked.

"Uh uh. They only came down for a few days. They left this morning when they saw all the rain. They had a room upstairs," She said, pointing to Mrs. Watchel's second floor. "My mom and her mom are best friends. So are we."

I didn't feel very good at that moment. I hadn't thought to ask Nancy how long she was going to stay at the shore.

"I got a note for you from Nancy." Janet continued, "It's in my room. I'll give it to you later," she promised, "after the movie."

Freddy began laughing from his perch in the carriage.

"Are you supposed to be an overgrown baby or something?" Janet asked him.

"No, this is a cross country truck. We're hunting lions," Freddy said.

"Oh, I see. Well, if you can't find any lions you can shoot that noisy dog next to us. I gotta go. Bye." She waved mostly to me.

I nodded and wheeled Freddy around to race him around the block. I really gave him a good ride, trying to burn off a lot of stuff that was bothering me.

The super ride got Freddy started. Or maybe he would have gotten started anyway, having spent the morning cooped up drawing pictures. He started getting wild. It wasn't long before he was climbing trees in the overgrown yard next to where the two weird sisters lived.

The sister's house was directly behind the bungalow my grandmother had rented to Freddy's grandmother. Their house hadn't been painted since the Civil War though the yard was so overgrown you couldn't see the house from the street. They were both retired school teachers who saved newspapers in their living room. I think they saved everything in their living room.

There was a vacant yard, a small forest really, behind the church on the corner next to the weird sister's house. This was part of the jungle we explored on our adventures around and through Mrs. Green's yard. Mrs. Green had super hearing and could be alerted by stepping on an acorn. The two sisters were pretty deaf and you practically had to throw rocks against their wall to get them going.

We both knew that Mrs. Green had the nature of a murderer, but we were uncertain of the two sisters. New kids were ready to believe that they were witches and if you had the courage and chanced a peek into the front window you would be certain that was true.

Freddy was swinging from branches and making animal noises. He snorted like a bull and growled like a lion but was acting like a chimp. We could hear Mrs. Green moving through her back yard getting ready to catch us should we dare come through.

"Hey, Freddy! Mrs. Green's after us." I tried to say in a forced whisper, trying to get him to calm down.

"You bet I am!" Mrs. Green said from behind her bushes. "You try to cut through my yard again and I'll hold you till the police come."

"Oh no! I don't want to go to jail for a hundred years! What did I do? I got caught laughing..." Then Freddy went through his entire list of crazy laughs. Soon he had himself laughing.

"You bad boys should be punished!" Mrs. Green hissed at us through the bushes.

"Come get me underpants-face," Freddy taunted.

"You should have your mouth washed out with soap. Where are your mothers! Probably playing cards in the police station."

When you got Mrs. Green cooking she began to sound insane. I didn't want to hear any more of her. Nor did I want to hang around Freddy when he was about to go off his deep end.

"I gotta bring the carriage back, Fred."

"Why, you think some junk dealer's gonna steal it, maybe sell it to dummies for a quarter. Probably afraid the trashmen will take it."

"See ya." I wheeled the carriage the long way home avoiding the shorter end of the block where Mrs. Green was and Janet was staying. I felt foolish wheeling a beat-up, empty carriage by myself but knew that Freddy was looking for trouble.

He shouted things at me, as I left. Some were encouragements to stay, others threats designed to get me to chase him.

Doc Ludlow was standing near my grandfather's grape vine when I returned the carriage to the garage. I put the beach chairs back in and closed the garage door.

We could still hear Freddy and Mrs. Green saying crazy things to one another. Neither of us said anything. I went over to the fence to listen better when something started growling and barking. It was a little Scottish Terrier dog tied by a leash to a tree in Mrs. Watchel's yard. It must have been the dog Janet was talking about.

"Looks like you woke him up," Doc said.

The argument between Mrs. Green and Freddy stopped. Then Mrs. Green shouted a bloodcurdling, "Don't you step foot in my yard!"

We could hear Freddy crashing through the bushes near her, probably going through the two sister's jungle to the back of Mrs. Watchel's. He should have continued behind the bungalows and over the fence in the back, instead he ran across the center of the yard as we both had the other night and before we could say anything was frozen by the dog which made a direct attack at him only to be caught short by its leash.

The owner, a heavyset woman with short, red hair came to the porch of the bungalow next to Janet's.

"He won't bite, sonny. Calm down Poochie. Easy boy."

The dog calmed down and wagged its tail, though it still yelped at Freddy.

Freddy had been caught as he approached his wildest phase. He had more courage at that point than he normally does.

"Hiya poochie." Freddy said to the dog.

"He won't bite. You can even pet him, sonny. He likes children." The lady said, stepping off her porch nearer to both of them.

Freddy put his hand out slowly to the dog. The dog sniffed Freddy's hand. "Good poochie." The owner said.

Then poochie snapped and sunk his teeth into Freddy's hand.

What happened next was a blur. Freddy yelled and Doc jumped over the fence. The dog made a quick turn toward Doc who grabbed the dog's leash and yanked him into the air for a moment while he grabbed Freddy with the other arm and dropping the choking dog carried Freddy out of Mrs. Watchel's yard.

From the next yard Mrs. Green cackled with glee. She had been watching the entire thing through the bushes. "Serves him right, the rotten kid. I hope he gets a poison in his system and goes to the hospital."

If I had a stone in my hand I probably would have thrown it at her.

Poochie was being comforted in between hoarse yelps by his owner who cuddled and petted him, "There, there, good doggie, that mean-man hurt you, did he?"

I couldn't believe it.

"He shouldn't have teased the dog," The lady said to me.

"He didn't. He teased that old witch over there, but not the dog," I said.

"There, there, poochie..." The lady said over and over to her dog, scratching its head and stroking its pointy ears.

Freddy's grandmother had been in the front house, on the porch, playing cards with my mother, my grandmother and Mrs. Showbuck. There was a crowd of adults trying to get a better look at Freddy's hand, which was bleeding. He was no longer being a show-off and was sobbing softly while sitting on Doc's knee.

Doc was able to get Freddy to open his hand but when everyone saw blood dripping they began to shriek and that made Freddy cry louder. I began to feel sick to my stomach and thought that the dog had eaten Freddy's hand.

Neighbors began to appear on the sidewalk. I was glad for Freddy's sake that Janet wasn't there.

Doc was able once again to pry Freddy's arm from his chest. He unwound all his fingers and found a few small punctures that were bleeding.

"We'd better get a clean handkerchief on this and take him to a doctor's office. Mrs. Major, do you think you could find out from the lady who owns the dog whether it's had all of it's shots?" Doc asked my grandmother.

Freddy's grandmother didn't know any child doctors in the area and they decided to call an ambulance. I went to the back window and watched my grandmother talk to the red-haired woman who owned the little dog.

"Excuse me, Misses, but could you tell me, maybe, that your little dog has had a shot for rabies?"

The woman became angry. She stood up and held the dog close to her. "My dog doesn't have rabies! You people are over-reacting. That boy was teasing Poochie and Poochie just snapped at him, it didn't even break the skin."

"The child is crying something awful and has bled all over his shirt. You don't have to tell me anything, you can tell the police. I'm calling them right now," My grandmother said, turning to come up the back porch.

The excitement was just beginning. First the ambulance came and took Doc, Freddy and his grandmother to the hospital. Then a police car pulled up and one of the officers talked to my grandmother. She even knew the officer's name. I walked up behind her to listen.

"--I don't know what happened, but the woman's little dog bit one of my tenants. They just took him to the emergency room," she told him.

"I know what happened, I was there," I announced, my heart beating fast.

"And what was that, sonny?" The officer asked.

"This is my grandson, Danny," My grandmother said.

"What happened, Danny?"

Suddenly, it was hard to talk. "Well... Freddy was in our neighbor's backyard playing. The dog was on a chain. But the lady said, 'don't be frightened, you can even pet him.'

Freddy stood still, was going to pet him slowly, but the dog bit him."

The Officer nodded, "Is the bite serious?"

My grandmother shrugged, "Who knows. He's a child, with a little hand."

"Has the dog had rabies shots?" The Officer asked.

"She won't tell me. The lady is not very forthcoming."

"Where is she staying?" The Officer asked.

"Right here, I'll show you." Grandma said.

The Officer swung out of his patrol car and he must have been seven feet tall. He carried a club and a flashlight and a gun in a holster along with a ton of other stuff.

I watched from our side of the fence as the Police Officer knocked on the red-haired woman's bungalow.

The woman came to the door clutching the little pet which barked and jumped in her arms like a mad-dog. Even the Officer stepped back a little.

"Hi I'm Officer Kendal from the Borough Police. I have to see the dog's most recent shot tag."

"The people are over-reacting. The little boy teased the dog. You can't tease a dog, you know. Here see the tag?"

The dog growled meanly at the Police Officer. "Could you remove the tag, please, Ma'am, so I can read it."

"All this excitement has the dog upset." She went back inside and removed his collar and handed it out to the Policeman.

He read it carefully and returned the collar to the woman.

"So is that the end of it?" She asked.

"I don't know Ma'am. If the animal hadn't been inoculated we'd have to remove it for testing. What ever happens next would be a civil complaint."

"The boy was teasing Poochie with a stick. I think he even hit the dog." The woman said.

"That's not true!" I blurted out. "You told Freddy he could pet him."

The Officer smiled, put his hands up in the air. "Hey, I'm not the judge, and I wasn't here at the time of the incident."

Officer Kendal returned to his patrol car. I wasn't far behind him. "I'm going to radio to our dispatcher to relay to the hospital that the dog probably isn't rabid," he told me.

Then he picked up the radio microphone, "I'll show you how we do it," he said to me.

Within a half an hour the excitement petered out. The sun was shining and the sidewalks were dry again. Mr. and Mrs. Showbuck turned on the television set to see if it was working. My Grandfather came downstairs from one of his naps.

"Works good as new, huh? But you shouldn't be watching it." He told me.

"Freddy got bit by a dog and went in the ambulance and the police were here," I told him.

"Oh?" He saw my grandmother standing on the porch and judging by her lack of alarm decided that nothing required his immediate attention.

"Did you hear what I said, Grandpa?"

"Yes I did. Maybe you should eat your lunch now."

My mom and Beth we're already eating in the dining room. They had their bathing suits on too.

"Beth and I are going to the boardwalk for awhile. We might even go down to the beach if the sand has dried out. How about you?" Mom asked.

"I really don't feel much like going," I said.

"Is Freddy gonna have to stay in the hospital for a week by himself?" Beth asked.

"No. He'll be home this afternoon." Mom said, fixing a sandwich for me.

"Did you want to wait for Freddy?" Mom asked me.

"Yeah."

"He might have a bandage on and won't be able to go to the beach for a few days."

Within an hour the house was deserted. The Showbucks went to the boardwalk shortly after my Mom and Beth. Freddy's grandfather worked part-time on Main Street and my grandfather went to talk to him. They would both end up talking to old cronies they knew at the bakery or in one of the stores.

The red-haired woman next door put Poochie back on his leash on her way to the beach. She wore a terry-cloth jacket over her bathing suit and had a lounge chair under her arm. "Now you be a good little doggie." She said, petting his head. She saw me watching from the window, "And you can bite those bad little boys who tease you."

That made me mad. After she left I went into our back yard and the little dog made such a fuss of barking and growling from the next yard that I couldn't take a step without him getting louder and louder. There didn't seem to be anybody left in the world except me and the dog separated by a short fence. My grandmother must have gone visiting or been on the phone. Either way she would be missing for a while.

I decided to do something very mean. I got out the water hose and unreeled it slowly. Then I turned on the spigot all the way up and brought the nozzle to the fence near the yapping, snarling little dog.

He wanted to chew me up too. But I opened the nozzle to its fullest power and let him have it right in the muzzle. He stopped barking and tried to hide from the water spray behind the tree he was chained to. But I just moved to the other side of the tree from our yard and soaked his kisser from that angle.

The dog backed up as far as he could but the hose spray still hit him dead on. He tried laying down but I pounded him with the water till it made a puddle all around him.

"Is that what you want to do?" Doc asked.

I was startled by the voice, but I continued hosing the dog. "Yes."

"What if you hurt the dog?" he asked.

"Good. Is Freddy all right?"

"Yeah. I took a cab back. They have to wait for some x-rays."

The dog began to whine and sneeze.

"Maybe that's enough," Doc suggested.

"A little bit more." In a moment I turned down the nozzle. The dog stood up and barked at me so I turned the nozzle back on and gave him some more. "This is like your story, Doc," I said.

"How so?" He asked.

"The dog is just a little dog no matter what his master says. And he's got to pay the price of doing something bad to a person who wants to be friendly. It's just the way it is," I said.

This time when I turned the water off the dog only coughed. The entire area under the tree was soaked and the dog was muddy from the whiskers on his cheeks to the bottom of his short tail.

"The lady who owns him will be angry about this," Doc said.

"Too bad. She can tell it to the lions," I said.

"I hope watering him like that won't make him grow," Doc said.

I knew he was kidding. I put the hose away and sat on one of the steps to the back porch.

"Want to catch some flies?" Doc asked.

I made a face, "What kind of flies?"

"Fly-ball, flies," Doc said.

"Wiffle ball fly balls?" I asked.

"Baseball."

"Where?" I asked.

"There's a big vacant yard about two blocks from here. I could ask your grandmother; I'm sure she would say yes."

I knew the place he was talking about. "There's this gang of bigger kids near there that try to take your stuff and..."

"They won't bother you," Doc said.

I knew they wouldn't come after me if I was with an adult, but they might watch and laugh, I thought. I saw myself fumbling easy catches and looking clumsy. Still, maybe I could learn to get better at baseball.

"For most of us, the difference between playing okay or playing lousy is learning the fundamentals and practice," Doc said.

"Sure. Let me tell Gra'm and get my stuff."

I was hoping the bigger kids would be gone, maybe at the beach, but as we took our place on the field I could hear a few of them joking with one another from the shadows of a nearby porch. Doc must have noticed I wasn't comfortable.

"Don't worry about the grandstands. Even if you make it to the major leagues the game is always between you the player and this little white ball," Doc said holding my baseball up. Of course my baseball was no longer white, mostly from rolling along the ground.

"Judging the ball while it's in the air, or bouncing on the grass, is the key to everything you will do as a hitter or fielder. The other half of the game is throwing this ball correctly."

For the next hour Doc threw balls in the air or into the dirt and coached me. We started standing six feet apart and after an hour I was at one end of the field and he at the other. That's when he began using my bat to get the balls to me.

Finally, he smacked what looked like a home-run into the air and I went back for it, like he had taught, kept my eye on the ball's descent, covered the fall with my glove and was amazed when Doc's home-run landed right in the web for an out. "Look, I caught it!" I shouted.

"Hey, kid, the Yankees want you!" One of the smart guys shouted from his porch.

"You fellows want to play, get a game up?" Doc asked them.

There were a few catcalls and jeers but no takers. Which I was glad about.

On the way back home I asked Doc if he was serious about playing with those rough kids.

"If the game is played right you have a glove to protect you. Just don't stand in the baseline when they're running," Doc said.

"But in real baseball you have to protect the base, right?"

"Real baseball is for grown-up kids who are paid to get knocked down every now and then," Doc said.

Freddy wasn't back from the hospital yet, but I could see the red-haired lady walking back from the beach. I ran upstairs and put my bat, glove and ball away and then ran downstairs to watch from the window as she walked into our neighbor's backyard.

I ducked down to peer over the window sill. Poochie cried when he saw her.

"Poochie, what's the matter, hon?" she asked.

Then she put her hand down to pet him and made a face. "What's all this sand on you?" Then she noticed the wet spot under the tree. The rest of the yard was already dry from the morning rain.

"Who did this to you?" she asked the dog, and looked at our house.

I hid against the wall and held my mouth to stop from laughing.

The red haired lady stormed over to our front door and rang the bell. I peeked out at her from the kitchen. My grandmother had been looking through the newspaper. She usually read the obituary page to see if anybody she knew had died.

"Yes, Misses, what can I do for you?"

"Somebody poured water on my dog. Trying to drown him."

One of my grandmother's faults was her dislike of animals, which she considered to be makers of mess or noise. In this case it was a good fault.

"That's too bad." Grandma said, as if the lady had complained about stepping on an ant.

"I see, you don't really care," The woman complained, her voice rising in anger.

"No. Maybe you should ask how the little child is doing; in the hospital all this time. He comes to the seashore to go to the beach and now he's in the hospital and maybe he can't play for a week. Maybe more. No, I don't care about your little doggie, but I wouldn't throw water on him. Water's too good to waste, and I'm here all by myself this whole afternoon. Now, I've got to make supper because the Mister is coming home and you have to excuse me."

My grandmother left the woman standing on the porch as she went back to reading the obituary page.

"I'll call the Police." The woman threatened.

"I'll give you the name of the Police Chief and the Mayor, I know them very well. I know the mayor since he was a real estate man. He sold me this house many years ago," my Grandmother said, from the couch.

"You people are not very nice." The red-haired woman said and as she left the porch.

"Danny?" My grandmother called after the woman slowly left our porch.

"Yes Grandma?"

"Did you pour water on that dog?" she asked.

"Uh... What dog?" I didn't want to lie to my grandmother.

"Leave him alone from now on. Okay? I don't think this lady will be staying too long anyway. I'm going to speak to Mrs. Watchel. Let her move to Mrs. Green's bungalow. Then she'll be in good company."

"But Mrs. Green doesn't like dogs," I said.

"Mrs. Green doesn't like dogs, she doesn't like children, she doesn't like people. Mrs. Green doesn't like anybody, but if the rent is right Mrs. Green will take anyone."

"How will you do that?" I asked.

"People talk. Mrs. Watchel has other tenants who don't like the barking. I can suggest someone who is also looking for a bungalow. We'll see what can be done."

By the time supper was over the red-haired lady was moving her dog and suitcases to Mrs. Green. I tried watching from the window but my grandmother pulled the shade down in front of me.

"It's not nice to make faces like that."

"I wasn't making faces, Gra'm!"

"Smiling. And this lady could be nasty. No use antagonizing her," Grandma said.

"What does 'antagonize' mean?" I asked.

"To ask for trouble. So, wait till she's out of the yard and then go play."

Freddy had gotten back from the hospital but he was taking a nap. His grandmother was on the porch giving my mom and some of the other people the complete story of what went on in the emergency room. When the red-haired woman passed our porch on her way from Mrs. Watchel's there was a complete silence except for the yapping of the little dog.

I went out the back door and examined the next door yard. It was almost empty. But, Janet was there.

"I heard all about it," she said.

"About what?" I asked.

"How the dog bit Freddy and the Lady had to move. Was he crying?"

I shrugged. I climbed to the top of the fence and sat on it.

"He was, I'll bet," Janet said.

"You'd cry too if the dog had bitten you."

"I never cry. Never," she said, shaking her head. "Are you the one who poured water on the dog?"

"How would you know about that?" I asked.

"My mother got all the details from our landlady, Mrs. Watchel. Someone poured water all over that bratty dog. I'll bet it was you."

"It was," I admitted

"Then you're my hero," Janet said.

I looked down into her face, upturned and smiling, with quite a bit of tan making her eyes big and blue and her teeth white. She had two pink berets in her blond hair which looked very clean. I wanted to jump over to our side of the fence and think of something to do. I wished that someone had called my name and demanded I do something, anything.

"It was a dumb thing to do," I said, about watering the dog. "I just wanted to do something."

"It worked. It got rid of him. Mrs. Watchel said she would take no more pets. That she usually never takes pets, but made an exception this once because the dog was so small and the lady insisted that he was well-behaved like a child. But no more; that's what Mrs. Watchel said."

"Uh huh. Hey, didn't you say you had a letter from Nancy?" I asked.

"Oh. Yeah. We'll get it later," Janet said.

"Why later?"

"Because. My mom's in there right now. Let's wait till she goes to the boardwalk."

"I'd better go see how Freddy's doing," I said, thinking it was a good enough excuse."

"Come back in an hour, okay?" Janet asked. "Then the coast will be clear."

"Sure."

I went into the bungalow but didn't go upstairs. I watched from the downstairs window

near the garage till Janet left her backyard. Then I sprinted across our yard and went into the house. Something was beginning to bother me, but I wasn't quite sure what it was.

It was a long hour to kill. Beth asked me to play cards with her, but she's not a very good player and neither am I. I went upstairs and turned the light on my room to read comic books. It was warm in my little room with no breeze coming through the window and a moth flew up the hallway to dodge at the light.

I tried to pretend that I was on a secret mission and put on my watch after matching the time exactly to the alarm clock's time. Then I went downstairs quickly and slid into the backyard. There, I remained hidden till my eyes adjusted to the light. I could see nothing moving in Mrs. Watchel's backyard. I tried to check my watch but there wasn't enough light by the side of the steps where I was waiting, so I leaned out into the dim glimmer of the back porch.

"You coming over, or what?"

"Huh?" I asked.

It was Janet sitting on her porch in the dark.

"Why are you hiding over there?" She asked.

"I'm not," I said, moving to the fence.

"You've been sitting there by the steps for five minutes. Why didn't you just come over?" she asked.

I climbed the short fence and walked to her porch. "I'm just checking to see if this watch still works. I got it last year but hardly use it. You said an hour, so..."

"Didn't you see me sitting here?" she asked.

"No. Why didn't you say hello or something?" I asked her.

She shrugged, and I wondered if her mood had changed.

"Are you going to come over to our beach tomorrow?" she asked.

I hadn't thought about it. "I don't know. You could come over to ours which is closer to here," I said.

"Is that an invitation?" she asked.

"You don't need an invitation, do you, I mean..." I didn't know what I meant.

"You boys would ignore me anyway and just play your 'guy' things," she said.

"Freddy might not go to the beach, depending on his hand," I said, unsure of what effect that would have, but feeling uncomfortable having said it.

She brightened, "that's true. He might have his arm in a sling or something. Why don't

you sit down?" She moved a chair next to her and I sat in it. The chair was lower than hers and felt foolish sitting in the dark trying to think of something to say.

"What subjects do you like best in school?" She asked.

"Lunch and three-o'clock," I answered.

She laughed, "I bet you're a good student!"

"I do alright."

"My final report card was all 'A's except for one B plus in math," she said.

"I don't get many 'A's."

"Do you like history?" she asked.

"Yeah, I suppose," I said.

"Are you in scouting?" she asked.

"No."

"How come, you don't like it?" she asked.

"I was a cub scout once. My mom works during the year and I couldn't get to all the meetings."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked me.

"I don't know. How about you?" I asked.

"I want to be a doctor. Come on, you must have an idea about something you'd like to do," she insisted.

"Maybe I'd like to work for the power company. Around those big generators," I said.

She laughed again, "Are you serious? Maybe you mean be an engineer."

"No. I think I'd like to fix those generators." And pilot rocket ships and submarines, but I didn't tell her that.

"Would you go to, like, a technical school?" she asked.

"I haven't thought about any of this. I really don't know what I want to do. Not really."

"Am I being a pain?" she asked, "Nancy says that I can be a real pain," she leaned around to see my expression.

"I just don't have answers to all your questions. Not yet."

She had a really big smile on her face.

"So Nancy and you are real good friends?" I asked.

She turned toward Mrs. Watchel's house so I couldn't see her face, "Uh huh. I know everything about her."

"What does she want to be when she grows up?" I asked.

Janet shrugged, "She has no idea. Somedays she says she wants to be a teacher, other days she'll say a movie star. She has no idea. I've always wanted to be a doctor."

There was a short silence which I broke a moment before she turned to speak again, "You said she wrote me a note?"

"Uh huh. Did you write her a note? I could pass it on," she said.

"I haven't yet. I could. I mean, once you give me her address I could send her a letter or something," I said.

"She has lots of boyfriends, you know," Janet said.

"Boyfriends?" I asked, my stomach forming a knot under my throat, "You mean she goes on dates?"

"No. There are just a lot of boys who like her," Janet said.

"Oh."

"I get better grades than Nancy," Janet said.

"I guess you'd have to; to be a doctor."

We sat through another short silence, "You might never see Nancy again. Or maybe she could come back to the shore. It's hard to tell," Janet said.

"How about you pass along that note. And give me her address," I said.

"You really like her, don't you. Like, even love her?" Janet asked, her voice growing small.

"I admit I like her. Let's not... Besides, Freddy said he loves you!" I said, throwing everything on Freddy's shoulders.

She waved her hand, "That doesn't mean a thing. Freddy's a goof." Then she looked at me and I could feel her getting ready to say something.

"I got to go." I announced suddenly, and stepped off of her porch.

"Wait! I haven't given you the letter yet," she said.

"Uh huh..." I stood in the yard several feet from her.

"Come on inside. I've got to find it," she said.

I followed her inside the bungalow. The lights made us squint. We went into her room which was a mess. There were clothes and books heaped everywhere. My room was never that bad, of course I don't have so many clothes and books.

She searched through several piles. I was beginning to suspect that there was no letter. Either that or Janet had no intention of giving it to me. She made a big show of searching all over and started to act very dramatic about not finding it.

"Oh, where is it!" She said.

By then I was smiling and then she began to smile.

"There is no letter, is there?" I asked.

"Yes there is!" But our eyes met and we both started laughing a little.

"You're too much, Janet," I said, grinning and shaking my head.

"Why?" she asked, "Maybe it's here," she said and began to furiously search some other pile. She was actually making fun of herself and in moments we were both laughing.

"Yeah, maybe it's in here," I said, pretending to be her, and flipped through a pile of clothes, as if people put letters between their shirts and jeans.

She laughed till tears formed in her eyes and then came over to grab the pile from my hands. "No, don't look in there!" she shouted between bursts of laughter.

"Why?"

Her underwear was at the bottom of the pile and she gasped, "That's why!"

I stepped away as if I had been contaminated and we both laughed again.

"Hey Danny, do you like me a little?" She asked.

"Sure."

At that moment Janet's mother entered the bungalow.

"Ma we're in here!" Janet shouted.

I stepped away from all the clothes piles and stood quietly in the middle of the room.

Her mother came into the bedroom.

"Ma, this is Danny. His grandparents own the house and bungalow next door."

"Hello Danny."

"Hi," I said.

"We're looking for a letter that Nancy gave me," Janet said.

"I talked to Nancy's mother by phone tonight, and maybe she'll be back soon," Janet's mom said.

Janet made a sickly smile, "Great."

"I got to get home," I announced.

Walking across the yard in the dark, I felt the best I had all day.

I finally got to see Freddy the next morning. He only had a piece of white gauze on the wound but held his hand like it was about to fall off.

"I can't play anything," he said, standing on the steps to the back porch. "If I go to the beach I have to wear a glove to keep sand out of it."

Doc was there, too, reading the morning paper. "No baseball?"

"No, I can't even close my hand, it hurts too much," he whined

"Gee, that's too bad," Doc said. "Yesterday I hit some balls to Danny. I thought that today we could do the same for you, and then give you guys turns at hitting. I pitch, cleanup man knocks them out, and super-glove swoops them up."

"Hardball?" Freddy asked.

"Uh huh, at the big vacant lot near Fifth Avenue," I said.

"There are big kids there..." Freddy said.

"Doc was doing the hitting. They wouldn't steal the bat from Doc, would they?"

Freddy's eyes brightened a bit, then he moved his fingers and recoiled in pain. "OOO, no I can't. I can't hit, I can't catch. I can't do nothing!" he moaned.

"Hi boys! You too Mr. Ludlow."

"Good morning, Janet," Doc said.

She climbed over the fence and shading her eyes against the early sun looked up at us. Freddy, at least had stopped moaning.

"How's the bite, Fred?" Janet asked.

"Okay, I guess," he said.

"Did they put stitches in it? They usually don't for animal bites," Doc said leaning forward. "Here, give a look."

"No, be careful," Freddy said, sounding like a baby, again.

"Relax." Doc peeked under the gauze bandage at the bite. "It'll probably take a few days to heal. But it doesn't look that bad."

"Can I see?" Janet demanded, coming up the steps.

"No." Freddy stepped away as if Janet was going to do some surgery on him.

"It's a few puncture wounds. He's got to keep them clean," Doc told us.

"And it's really sore," Freddy added.

The three of us kids milled around on the porch for a moment. Janet seemed to be moving closer to me all the time. She twisted around on her legs as if she were going in both directions, but had a huge grin on her face.

"I'll play ball with you." She said to me.

Freddy made a face that was full of sorrow, as if he was being asked to retire from the major leagues.

Doc rustled his newspaper and Freddy moaned once. I looked at Doc for a way out and Janet caught all of our expressions. Without missing a beat, she turned to Doc.

"Mr. Ludlow, do you have any more excellent stories for us?"

Then she sat down at his feet ready to listen. Even Doc had to smile. "I've got dozens of them."

"Well tell us one, please," Janet coaxed, in a sweet voice that would have melted the meanest teacher in any school. Now, I believed her about getting so many A's; she was not only smart but very clever too.

Doc already knew her style. He grinned and winked at me, "I'm willing," he said.

"Sure." Freddy said sitting down next to Janet. I sat across from him, on Janet's other side.

"What type of story would you like to hear?" Doc asked.

"A romantic story," Janet said.

"He only knows ancient stories!" Freddy insisted.

"Hey, what's wrong with romantic stories? You were saying romantic things to me yesterday," she told Freddy.

"I was just kidding," Freddy said.

"See!" Janet said to me about Freddy.

"The Keneem had stories about romance, about cunning, about war..." Doc began.

"Yeah, war!" Freddy said.

"...About how things are. They had all sorts of stories. Old people, like myself, would

sing ballads around the night fires and tell them to youngsters, like yourself."

"You're not that old, Mr. Ludlow," Janet said.

"Thanks. Danny, what would you like to hear?" he asked me.

"About a kid trying to play baseball who gets into trouble," I said.

"Alright, then let's try the one about the boy who wouldn't lose his dreams," Doc said.

We all nodded and waited for the story to begin.

"The Keneem often had a hard life. It was a daily struggle to just stay alive. Even if sun and rain and good health existed one never knew how luck would turn out. And bad luck could turn up in the like of warlike tribes appearing from nowhere across the vast wilderness and doing bad things, stealing, killing and then disappearing again.

"When times were unkind, and the crops failed, the Keneem themselves would take to the wilderness chasing after water holes and appearing with weapons against towns and cities who denied them use of their wells and springs. It wasn't an age for a very long childhood. A boy of thirteen or fourteen was ready to become a warrior, even younger he was hard at work, herding animals, carrying wood, helping from dawn till dusk.

"The girls worked too, and at fifteen they would be married."

Janet made a face and then smiled.

Doc continued, "And marriage wasn't an escape from childhood it was marriage to constant work and responsibility. Children had to be ready to take their places in such a world with no fuss. If a girl refused to marry the man her father had agreed to, she could be sold into slavery with a foreign people."

Janet made an awful face. "Why couldn't girls become warriors?" She asked.

"Fair question. Let me explain things a little bit more. When they were under attack the women fought alongside the men, with whatever they had; knives, sticks, mallets, even a tent-pin. In fact, the Keneem had a woman leader once and a woman battle hero. But 'warrior' was a status reserved for the men. Think of it as an honorary part-time job, kind of like an official hobby. Let me add a few more details: When the Keneem were at their lowest point, before they almost disappeared from famine, the men who were warriors hired themselves out to nearby cities as security guards and fighters. In those days they had the reputation of murderers.

"Later, they developed skills as metal workers. And still later some of them became scribes and wizards.

"Of course, their best stories were based on their hardest times. And, because boys were expected to be warriors, as well as workers, they had to undergo an initiation rite..."

"Have scars carved into their arms and get tattoos, right?" Freddy asked.

"Maybe a little of that. But mostly they had to lose their dreams." He looked into our faces to see if we were following the story so far. We were.

"The final part of the initiation required the boy to learn all the histories and stories of the people, and then to journey into the wilderness, to climb a holy mountain and sit alone in a cave for an entire day and night. And then upon returning, to tell the elders what he had dreamt in the cave.

"If a boy told them he dreamt about adventure in a far-off land, or going to a great city and learning many wonderful things they had to go back to the mountain and undergo the ordeal all over again.

"If the boy came back and repeated the history and stories of his people and told the elders that he saw himself in these stories acting out the role of his people he was marked as a man and a warrior for his people.

"On the other hand, if after many attempts a boys still came back with greater and greater dreams, the elders made a harsh decision; they sent the boy away into the wilderness alone, for ever."

We gasped.

"The boy, Mal, approached the age of the test. He was a good boy, a tender of goats with the habits of a fine herdsman. He was the youngest of his family and well thought of by those in his town.

"He liked a girl of his own age who came from an even poorer family in this little village. The girl was called Yalenda. She worked hard all day curing hides, grinding flour and baking bread. But in the evenings she milked two of the nanny goats outside.

"Mal was always outside. From before first light to dark. And sometimes he would take turns with his brothers watching the flocks at night. --When wild animals prowled about. It could be a few hyena or even a lion. If there was trouble he was to blow the horn he had and summon the adults who would beat their spears on shields, or spoons on pots to drive the hunting beasts away from the flocks.

"In the evenings he would see Yalenda and call to her. And the two would talk till the milking was done.

"Of course he liked her, and she liked him. As they got older --passing away from childhood, they became shy with each other. Sometimes he pretended not to see her. Sometimes, he seemed too busy to call out to. But always, even after avoiding each other this way for a night or two, they would meet, often by surprise, at the well, perhaps. Then they would smile and blush and sometimes laugh.

"The elders called Mal to their place by the gate of the city, which in this case was no more than a crumbling wall of stone. There, before the festival of the new moon they sang all the ballads, and told him all the stories he had heard from childhood. They added a detail or two, a thing that smaller children shouldn't hear.

"They taught him secret songs, and a ritual of bonding leather straps and amulets about him to prepare for the holy mountain.

"It was his father and elder brothers who brought him to the mountain the first time. With no jug for water and no satchel of bread they told him how to climb the mountain toward the cave.

"His father could no longer remember where the cave was. It had been so long since his only visit. His brothers remembered, though, and told him. He was instructed to take his sandals off before entering the cave, and to bow down in all four directions once inside. 'For in that place,' he was told, 'you are in the center of the world.'

"At first he was frightened to be there all alone. But no one could run away from such a place, not and become a man.

"The day past slowly. The light inside the cave changed also. Shadows deepened. He dozed off and was startled by a lion standing in the entrance of the cave. The lion bared its huge teeth and growled. He sat upright and the lion was gone. Maybe he had been dreaming.

" 'Is that what I tell the elders, that I saw a lion?' Somehow that didn't seem to be enough. He had trouble relaxing after that and wound the leather straps about him to ward off the bad and contain the good. He sang a ballad to himself from days of old.

"Outside, the sun went down. The howls of wild things echoed along the sides of the mountain and came into the cave, shaping the darkness with visions. Having had nothing to eat or drink these visions became things that stood out of the night and showed themselves for brief moments.

"Mal drifted into a sleep like no other of his life. The strangest dreams came to him.

"The next morning he left the cave. He put his sandals on and returned from the mountain. His mother fed him before he joined his father and brothers already at work.

"In the evening, before the festival, he went to the gate of the city. There the elders waited for his report. They sat quietly allowing him his chance to speak.

" 'First I saw a lion, looking into the cave,' he said. The elders chuckled. This was the first thing all the boys claimed to see.

" 'Go on, go on. The lion is a good sign,' one of the elders said.

" 'Later, I fell into a strange sleep. And it felt as if I awoke and climbed to the top of the mountain. There I saw a tower going up toward the stars. Strange lights went up and down the steps of this tower. A voice came from above said, 'Mal, don't be afraid. What do you want for your life?' the voice asked me.

"The elders murmured among themselves, and Mal continued, 'Just the simple life as one of my people. Perhaps I could take a wife when I'm older...'

"The elders interrupted Mal, 'This is the dream of a sorcerer, not of a young boy. This is not something that we told you...'

" 'Yalenda. The voice said Yalenda waits for me,' Mal said.

"The elder waved his hand. 'That's for her father to decide, not you.'

" 'But the dream, it was so real.' Mal said.

" 'Not a proper boy's dream. You should have seen this town being built from before your birth, or seen our heroes in battle, or seen our great elders as young men, as boys like yourself bringing good deeds upon our people,' counseled one elder.

"It was decided, that Mal should return to the cave upon the eve of the next festival of the new moon. He went and this time he wasn't so frightened, at least during daylight. He expected to see lions and was not disappointed. By late afternoon, he thought he saw four winged lions guarding the exit to the cave. And then came the dark of night and dreams brought on by hunger and thirst.

"He stayed in the cave most of the next day just to be sure he had gotten what was expected. There seemed to be no rule about staying longer. He returned to his village while the new moon festival was taking place. He found a great deal of playfulness among the townsfolk. It seemed Yalenda's father had announced her engagement to a man from a nearby village. A wealthy man who already had two wives.

"Yalenda was not happy about this at all. She sat in the kitchen of her house and wept. Mal went to her house and spoke to her through the window.

" 'If I refuse to marry him, I'll be sold into bondage, my life will be even worse. I just want to die. I wish I had never been born,' she cried.

"Mal tried to say comforting things to her. But nothing worked. His brothers saw him by Yalenda's house and took hold of him. 'She is engaged, you mustn't talk to her ever again!' They said, and they brought him to the elders who were gathered near the fields away from the gate.

"The elders were in good spirits and hoped to add to the happiness of the village by announcing that Mal's initiation to manhood had been completed. They waited for his most simple explanation of a suitable dream.

" 'What did you see this time boy? More lions?' an elder joked.

" 'Four winged lions,' Mal said.

" 'Four? Winged Lions? Good. That's a good sign,' another elder said.

" 'No towers going to the moon, I hope?' another asked lightly.

" 'I saw an eternal flame that burned more brightly than anything that burns at night. And the Voice said to me, 'If you do good and fight wrong, I will put strength in you.'

" 'This is not a boys' dream. This is the dream of a prophet. And not a prophet we know!' An elder said. He turned his cup of wine to spill it on the ground. 'What a sad day for our village; that instead of a warrior we have a little dreamer who hears things that even men of renown haven't heard before.

Mal's mother wept upon his neck, his father turned and cried, 'Please, give my son another chance. He's a good boy!'

" 'Yalenda's father will sell her to slavers! That's not right! She should be allowed to wait for me!' Mal said angrily.

" 'You shall have no wife. Not among our people!' an elder declared.

"And the elders had his own brothers force him from the village into the wilderness." Doc stopped and sat back.

"And then what happened!" Janet demanded.

"What would you like to happen?" Doc asked Janet.

"Hey, that's not fair," I said, "We want the real ending. We want to know what really happened."

"Well... I want a nice ending," Janet said.

Doc chuckled. "Mal was better able than most to survive in the wilderness. As the colors arch in the sky after a rain Mal made a bow for himself from a tree and became a skilled archer and hunter. Then, when the slavers came through with Yalenda he stopped them with his arrows. Then he had Yalenda, and all the gold and animals the slavers had owned.

"Soon, his reputation as a warrior against evil spread. He became a marshal with four hundred warriors pledging loyalty to him. One day he returned to his village as a king.

"Did he arrest the elders who had sent him away?" Freddy asked.

"By then, all those elders had died. He greeted his father and mother and forgave his brothers, who wept from shame and pride at what had happened.

"Was he a good king?" I asked.

"That's an interesting question," Doc said, and shrugged.

"You just made up the end of that story, just now," Janet said, smiling and waving her finger at Doc.

"I couldn't have," Doc said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"If the end of that story wasn't true, how would I know it?" Doc asked, and grinned

broadly.

"So what does the story mean?" Janet asked.

"Why don't you figure it out," Doc said.

"I think I know what it means, I just want to be sure," Janet said.

"Yeah, right. Then tell us." Freddy demanded.

"Okay..." She smiled and held her head up as if she were in class and had been called upon, "It probably means..."

"Go on," Freddy urged.

"I will!" Janet said, "It probably means that if you have the right dreams and stick to them it could work out for you, right?" She asked Doc.

Doc nodded. "That's a good explanation of the story for today. Of course this is a real old story from a real old people. And they had beliefs about special luck that would win out against great odds."

"It's also about growing up, isn't it?" I asked.

Doc nodded. "Yes. The adult world is a challenge for every youngster. And adults do not know everything."

Janet's head slumped as if she had failed to get the whole question right.

"I would of rather heard more about shooting arrows at the slave traders. I liked the story about the bull and lions better," Freddy said.

"There are other Keneem stories about the great warrior Mal, about the victories of King Mal and then when he grew old about the battle of his sons over the kingdom and its division among them," Doc told us.

"Hey! That's sort of like the bull and lion's story!" Freddy said, pointing with his bandaged hand.

"Very good, Fred," Doc said.

Freddy beamed and Janet squirmed. "Mr. Ludlow, are you a teacher during the year?" She asked him.

"No," Doc answered.

"Then what are you?" she asked.

"None of your business," I said believing that Doc would rather not talk about himself.

"It's not an impolite question, if you ask it right," Janet said to me. It was probably something her mother had said.

Doc folded his hands together and thought the question over.

"A baseball coach?" Freddy asked.

"A world traveler?" Janet asked.

Doc cleared his throat, "I'm a retired fire captain."

"Wow!" Freddy said, his eyes wide open. I could tell he was no longer worrying about his hand.

"Retired early," Doc said.

"How come?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"I was injured. I went into a building after my men to help bring some youngsters out..."

"Was the building on fire?" Freddy asked, breathlessly.

"Unfortunately. And the steps went out beneath me."

"And you got hurt?" Janet asked.

"Broke my arm and right leg and my jaw... It took a while to heal. It was decided that I was no longer in top shape for fighting fires," Doc said.

"What did you do?" Janet asked.

"I spent a lot of time learning while I got better," Doc said.

"Traveling around the world?" Janet asked.

"Sort of, without even leaving my city," Doc said.

"How did you do that?" Freddy asked.

"At the public library. You would be surprised what you can find there if you look hard enough."

"Do you have any kids?" Janet asked, getting real nosy.

"Oh yes. They're quite big and on their own now. My wife was a nurse who passed away at a young age several years ago."

There was sadness in Doc's eyes and I felt sorry that Janet was asking so many questions.

"That's too bad Mr. Ludlow," she said with the sweet manner of a teacher's pet. Though maybe she meant it.

"That's life, kids. We all have our lions and our dreams," Doc said and smiled.

"Thanks for the story, Doc," I said, getting up. "C'mon guys lets play."

Freddy jumped up ready to make a bow and arrows out of something and start playing. Janet rose more slowly and followed behind us.

"Thanks for the story, Mr. Ludlow," she told Doc, sounding like an echo.

By the time we got off the porch Freddy had invented a game for us. "She can be Yalenda and we can be Mal and his brother who fight the slavers."

"His brothers didn't help him." Janet said.

"Maybe one did, besides, we can change the story to include a brother," Freddy said.

"But you can't be either with your injured paw. Maybe you can play one of the stupid slave traders," she said.

"Hey, we don't need any Yalenda either. It could be just Mal and his brother against the bad guys!" Freddy said.

"I got to go now," Janet said, "And I don't think I can come over to your beach today. I'm helping my mom with some embroidery."

"What's that, like spaghetti?" Freddy asked.

"Your brain is like spaghetti." Janet said as she left the yard. "Bye Dan," she waved to me.

"She likes you," Freddy said to me.

"Don't be so sure she doesn't like you," I told him.

"Why not?"

"Girls are that way," I said, thinking I might even be right.

Freddy's hand may not have healed, but his spirits had. When his grandmother told him he shouldn't go to the beach, he whined and stamped his feet, "Aw Gra'm..."

She gave in after he promised to wear a glove. He brought his batting glove and put it on over the bandage.

It didn't slow him down either. We played Mal and his brother against the slavers. Sometimes, Freddy was Mal, sometimes I was. But Freddy was mostly each one of the several hundred slavers we fought. If Fred had a good talent it was for dying after being shot. Especially water-dying.

We played in the surf for hours and Freddy was shot and plunked into the water so many different ways I was amazed. He even had different expressions for each slaver who took an arrow.

I'm not sure how the story's location had changed from the wilderness to the desert/seashore but it seemed to make sense. Dying looked like such good fun that I took

my turn staggering and plopping into the water all the while describing the action that was going on.

Freddy, of course, began to get carried away. He found a piece of drift wood and pretended it was an arrow sticking out of him. Eventually he stuck it into his bathing trunks and jumped around as if one of the slavers had gotten shot in the backside. With all of his hooting and stamping and my laughing his grandmother came out of her lounge chair and over to the water.

She yanked the arrow out his trunks.

"Thanks Gra'm, you saved me!"

And then with the threatened back of her hand she chased him up the beach. "What-a-ya-mean, acting up that way in front of everybody!"

We came back from the beach on the early side and there was plenty of daylight remaining after supper was finished.

We saw Doc on the back porch and Freddy told his newer version of the story about how Mal and one of his brothers defeated an army of five hundred slave-traders.

"It still means the same thing, doesn't it?" Freddy asked.

"It doesn't have to," Doc said. "Let me see the hand."

Freddy pulled the gauze bandage back and showed Doc the wound.

Doc inspected it. "It has to be kept clean. Did you wash it good after the beach?"

"My grandmother did. I wore my batting glove to the beach," Freddy said.

"You did? You know, you might be able to catch pop ups, seeing how you would use your other hand for the actual catch. Would you like to go to the lot where Danny and I were yesterday?"

We both thought that it was a great idea and ran off to get permission.

Doc tossed a few easy balls to Freddy and coached him on making catches just as he had for me. Freddy tried hard but missed a lot of them.

"Take it easy. Try to time them as they fall. Here. This next throw I want you to watch. Just watch it. Don't even try to catch it, just watch it fall," Doc said.

Freddy put his glove up as if he wanted to make the catch anyway.

"No, Fred, just watch it. Watch it fall to earth and get a feel for the time and distance it travels," Doc told him.

On the next series of throws Doc told him to try and move close to where they might land without getting hit. The sight of Freddy wandering around after falling baseballs brought

some laughter from the older kids at the nearby house.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," Freddy complained, looking embarrassed.

"Stay with it. When you feel comfortable with a ball dropping down then try and catch it," Doc said.

The next one was a towering throw that grew small way up in the sky. Fred walked back, looking up at it and extended his glove. "I got it!" He shouted looking into his glove as if a miracle had put it there.

"Ready for the All-Star game, kid?" Somebody shouted at Fred from the porch of the nearby house.

"See, the fans are always fickle, Danny. Yesterday they were picking on you," Doc joked to me.

After getting Freddy warmed up in the outfield, Doc tried pitching to me over a torn pizza box that acted as home plate and coached my hitting. I did poorly and could hear the laughter from the older kids.

"Relax, Danny. A bunch of junior teenagers with nothing at all to do. Everything must be well-timed. The bat can not move too fast or too slow to meet the ball. You must concentrate on the ball. Only the ball. There is nothing else in the world but the ball coming toward you. Nothing else..." He threw one that looked like it would cross the pizza box at the level of my hip.

'Nothing but the ball...'

I swung the bat in what seemed like slow motion and felt a 'thunk' that went from my wrists down my arms. The ball sailed out over the field and Freddy scrambled to get under it.

"Nice wood on the ball!" Doc said.

Freddy could not move fast enough to get under it and the ball fell and rolled to the end of the lot.

It was the first time I ever hit a hard ball that good. I felt something in my hands that I had never felt before and felt sure I could do it again.

Freddy scooped the ball up and bounced it toward Doc on a long throw.

"Another one?" Doc asked as he prepared to pitch.

I nodded, but at the last moment tried to hit it too hard and missed.

"Don't try to kill it. Heroes need work more than luck. Just hit it. Hit it. Just like before." Doc said.

The pitch sailed in and I banged it out over the field. This time it came down into Fred's

glove and he felt great too.

"WHOA!" the onlookers shouted and laughed.

I hit the next three pitches in a row. Freddy caught one of them.

"Getting tired out there, Fred? Would you like to pitch a few?" Doc asked.

Freddy shook his head and put his glove out to be ready for the next one.

I hit the next two pitches also and one of the onlookers yelled to Doc, "Hey, quit giving him easy stuff!"

Doc turned to the house where the calls were coming from. "They're just learning. Why don't you guys come out and show them what you know?"

Two of the older kids came down from the porch. One of them was real lanky and had a mean smile on his face. The other with blond hair combed straight back had no expression.

"Yeah, we'll play," the blond-haired one said.

"Nah, you're kidding! With these little punks?" the meaner one said to his friend.

"You have something against baseball?" Doc asked. There was something in his tone that was different from the way he talked to Freddy and I. Something that came from his having been a fire captain.

The meaner-looking kid ran his fingers through his hair. He had an unlit cigarette behind one ear. "Nah.... Hey, Johnny, see you later." He said to the blond and walked back to the porch.

"You're Johnny?" Doc asked.

Johnny nodded. He picked up my glove. "Okay?" He asked me and walked into the field.

I didn't concentrate on the next pitch and missed it. Then I went back to 'nothing-but-the approaching-ball... nothing...' And smacked a high one deep into the lot.

Johnny went back for it. He had the kind of grace seen on television. He made an almost impossible catch look easy. He tossed the ball back to Doc.

"You play some, huh?" Doc asked him.

"Some."

Johnny scooped up most of the balls I hit, though he let Freddy have a few and even gave him some advice.

Then Doc suggested that I take my turn with Fred in the field. He moved the mound back a little and allowed Johnny to hit.

And Johnny could hit. Fred and I stood at the left and right corners of the huge lot and Johnny took turns hitting to both of us. Doc had a big grin on his face every time Johnny connected with a pitch.

Each one whistled high and away and curved down to earth spinning with the shadows of clouds. With each hit we felt fear and excitement and hoped the ball would either come to us or not. Soon we caught enough of them to feel at ease and even giggled if we handled one badly.

Freddy's hand was still too sore for batting or even throwing hard and he would relay catches to me for the long throw to Doc, on the mound.

Time seemed to hang like the long ball taking its fleeting yet forever fall toward our scrambling mitts. We would sometimes loop through the center field between us and call each other off to make a play without knocking one another over. It was the first time in both of our lives that we didn't feel like kids.

We wanted it to last and last, but slowly the sun sank in the west and the pink bands on the horizon darkened with dusk. The balls became harder to see yet we were better at judging them.

Finally, Johnny dropped my bat on the ground and said, "Gotta go."

Doc said something to him that we couldn't hear as we ran in from the far reaches of our outfield to see this sports legend leave for the night.

"What did you say, Doc?" Freddy asked.

"I told him he had talent," Doc said.

"What he say?" I asked.

"Nothing. He knows he's good at the game. But sometimes that's not enough."

We walked back to my grandparent's house and all the adults were on the porch.

"Did they hit anything?" Mrs. Showbuck asked.

"They did very well," Doc said.

"Yeah, and they was this guy who plays like a major leaguer and he hit to us and you should have seen us making those catches, Gra'm," Freddy gushed to his grandmother.

She put two fingers into his collar to see how perspired he was. "I hope you didn't get dirt in that bite."

"Aw, Gra'm," Freddy squirmed away from her, feeling all of the triumph going out of him.

"How'd you do?" Beth asked me.

"Okay," I said, and left the porch and all the adults to put away my stuff.

Later, I lay across my bed with the lights out and looked across the skyline of houses to enjoy the memory of hitting and catching the little, white ball. I had a thought of playing in a big stadium and hitting a ball so far that the crowd hushed to see it fall. I closed my eyes to see where the ball was going, but all I could see was the faces of the people in the crowd. There in the middle of them was Nancy and my head flopped down on the pillow as my triumph leaked away just before I fell asleep.

I dreamt of her that night. Her and baseball and Mal and Yalenda and they all got mixed up together in a story that made sense in my dream. At one point in the dream I seemed to be lost and alone and I heard Doc's voice say, 'It's all right to be lost, Danny, it's hard growing up in the world, but hang onto your dreams hard and maybe the best will come out of them...' In the last scene Freddy and I rescued Nancy from the lanky kid with the mean smile and the cigarette behind his ear who was going to sell her into slavery, far away. Then I hit a baseball that exploded like fireworks, high up, above all of us.

It was Freddy who woke me up the next morning. He was already dressed for what he wanted to do. He had his Dodgers baseball hat on and his mitt under his arm. He also had colorful sweat-socks and a shirt with his name sewn on it.

"Danny, get up, c'mon let's go play ball."

I looked at the clock. It was only seven thirty.

"It's too early," I yawned. "Doc won't be ready yet," I said, knowing that Doc was an early riser but liked to walk along the boardwalk and get his newspaper before breakfast.

"We won't need Doc, Janet will pitch for us," Freddy said.

"Janet?"

"Yeah, I saw her already this morning. She'd like to play."

"This early?"

"Yeah!" he insisted.

"Alright. Give me a few minutes. I want to get something to eat, too," I said.

The three of us went over to the large vacant lot a few blocks away. It couldn't have been more than eight o'clock in the morning and the neighborhood was very quiet.

Janet was very excited about getting to pitch to us.

"This ball is real hard," she said.

"It's called hardball," Freddy said.

"I know that! In gym we use a ball that's a little lighter than this." She hefted the ball into the air and caught in with two hands.

"Hey, Danny, do you think I could bat, first?" Freddy asked, as he pulled the pizza-box home plate in front of him.

"Sure, if you think you can," I told him.

"It doesn't hurt as much, today, and I got the bandage and the batting glove. I think I can hit a little."

"Okay." I walked behind Janet between second base and shallow center field. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to see very much action.

Janet was eager to pitch and was pretty good at it except she threw underhand.

"Not that way!" Freddy insisted, letting a waist-high pitch go by.

"Freddy, just hit it!" she urged.

"Danny, tell her that in baseball, not like softball, you don't pitch underhand!" Freddy called out to me.

"What's the difference. She's getting them over the plate," I said.

"Thanks, Dan," Janet said, squealing happily when another pitch went right down the middle.

Freddy became frustrated going after the missed balls that rolled away behind him. He threw them back to her and she caught them using his mitt. "Can't you try overhand?"

"I'm afraid, I'll hit you," she said.

I rested my head on my glove. Finally, Freddy swung and missed and then yelled, "Owww!" and held his hand gingerly.

Janet turned to me, "I guess it's your turn to bat," she said.

"Do you want to bat?" I asked her.

"Can I?" She asked, with a bubbly smile.

"Fred, you want to pitch to her?" I asked.

"Naw... I'll field... If she hits anything..." Freddy said.

I wasn't sure I could pitch very good overhand either, not without putting some power on the ball, and I wasn't too sure of my control, so I waited till she got into position and tossed the ball softly, underhanded.

She smiled and tried hard to hit it but missed.

"I can do better!" She said, running after the ball

"Just take it easy. I'm throwing it easy, bat it easy," I told her.

"Okay." Her lower lip curled up as she concentrated on hitting.

I tossed another one and she smacked a blooper over my head.

"Nice!" I said.

Freddy tried to run it down, but it was too far from where he was standing and it plopped into the dirt.

He threw it back to me and I tossed her another one which she smacked back at us as an infield grounder.

"One more, okay?" She pleaded.

"Sure." I tossed another one but she missed again and had to put the bat down and throw it back to me.

"One more, please?" Janet asked.

I threw another one and she popped it up between us. It was an easy catch.

"Okay, You hit now," Janet said.

We changed places and I got ready.

Her pitches were pretty good. Better than mine had been to her, anyway. I got some good hits off of them. 'POP' another ball sailed out toward Freddy.

"Wow! You can really hit." Janet said as we waited for Freddy to run it down.

Just then we heard a lot of noise from the house behind us. I turned around with the bat resting on my shoulder and saw a mob of big kids running toward us from the backyard of the nearest house.

It happened so fast, I didn't know what to do. I glanced over to Janet and Freddy and they were dumbfounded also. Janet's expression changed. Her eyes grew wide and she stood stiffly.

I couldn't see Freddy's expression that clearly, but he moved closer toward the sidewalk as if he were ready to walk home.

The bigger guys spread all over the field with great motion and much noise. I only recognized two of them, the mean-faced lanky one and Johnny. Most of them had baseball gloves.

"Look at these squirts, here!"

"MOVE IT!"

"We're playin' here, now, so beat it!"

I was ready to leave, but one of them lifted the bat off of my shoulder. I tried holding

onto it but he twisted it away.

"Let me see it."

He was much taller than me and looked like he had to shave. He took my bat, looked it over and started swinging it.

"Hey this is a nice one. Alright, I got my bat. I want first ups," he said to the others, paying no more attention to me.

It was the same across the field. The mean looking one waved at Janet, "Beat it, rat, unless you want to go for beers with us later."

Several of the others laughed. Janet backed off the pitcher's mound. Another guy took my glove from her.

"Hey, look at this dufus out here in on the right-field foul line. He's got his little name sewn on his shirt. 'Duh, I guess your name is Freddy; is 'dat right, little man?'"

Freddy tried to step onto the sidewalk but another guy blocked his way.

"Huh? I asked you a question, dipstick. You deaf?"

"No..." Freddy said in a small voice.

"Can you catch with that glove? It looks kind of big for you?" He asked Freddy.

Freddy shrugged.

"Either you can or can't. And if you can't you ought to let somebody borrow it who can use it."

"I can, a little," Freddy said, holding onto the glove with both hands.

"He's a Dodger fan. Let's pound him."

"Look at those socks! Did you ever see such wild socks?"

The guy who had my bat drifted over to the group picking on Freddy. "Hey, kid can I buy those socks off of ya? I think I got a nickle on me..."

The meanest looking one had my ball in his hands.

"Let's see if he can catch," The mean-looking one said, "Stand aside, men," he laughed, and then he burned a throw to Freddy.

Freddy caught the ball with a loud 'pop' of the leather. I could tell by his face that the throw had been too hard, and hurt.

"Give me a mitt!" The mean one demanded. Someone gave him one and he put it on and pounded the pocket.

"Okay, snodgrass burn one back to me, let's see if you're a ballplayer or not," He said to Freddy.

Freddy threw the ball to the fellow, who had to reach forward to catch it.

"Lame! Real lame. We got two wimps here, maybe three. Why can't you throw the ball, kid!" The mean said coming up close to Freddy and looking down on him.

"A dog bit my hand, and..."

"A dog bit your hand! " He repeated. The others thought this was hysterical.

The one with my bat shifted nervously, "Hey, Gasters, enough..."

"Well, I'm a doctor, I can operate on that hand. I got my knife right here in my pocket..." The mean one said sliding his hand into a pocket.

I could tell Freddy was about to cry. His eyes were full of tears, and his mouth was trembling. I looked around the field and toward the houses to see if there was any adults around. I saw Johnny kicking at the pitchers mound and then doing the same thing by home plate.

I hurried over to talk to him.

Johnny saw me approaching him but hurried past me. He moved out onto the field and seemed to be counting people. I changed direction too.

"You gonna cry for us? What else you gonna do? Hey take off that batting glove. You shouldn't wear one, it's only for people who can play the game. And you can't." The mean one shouted at Freddy.

Janet was on the sidewalk, watching, only five or six feet from Freddy. .

"Leave him alone!" She shouted at them.

They we're surprised by her and turned in her direction.

"You do one thing to me and I'm going straight to a policeman and tell them about the bad things you said!" She threatened them.

They laughed, but with less gusto.

"About making me drink beer and go out with you. The police won't think you boys are so funny!" Janet shouted.

Almost without realizing it I had crossed the field and was behind the mean kid.

"You can have the field. Just give us our stuff back," I said.

"Hey, we need these kids. We only have fifteen guys," Johnny said.

"What did you say to me, punk?" the mean one said, turning around to glare at me.

"Oh no, Gasters, you don't want to mess with this kid. His old man's a cop," Johnny told him.

Gasters, the meanest looking one, thought about that. "So? I still think I'll ring his neck."

He took another step toward me, but Johnny grabbed both of his arms and turned him around as if he were a stick figure.

"Get on the mound, Gasters, before I get mad at ya. Let's set up!" Johnny said. "My team has first ups!"

Johnny noticed Freddy sniffing quietly and saw Janet's red face. "Hey guys, you want to play?" he asked them.

"No!" Janet shouted. "You have some of the most rude friends I ever met."

"Sorry..." Johnny watched Freddy and Janet for a moment.

Janet came up behind Freddy and touched his shoulder. "C'mon Freddy, let's go..." And she practicably led him off the field. I began to follow.

"Kid!" Johnny said.

I stopped and looked at him.

"We need you to play. We need at least eight for a team. And you own the best bat," Johnny said.

I didn't know what to say.

"You can probably hit better than half of these clowns, anyway. And nobody will mess with you," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

He smiled. "You're old man's a cop."

"No he isn't," I admitted.

"The guy who was here with you last night?" Johnny asked.

"He's a... a fire captain..."

"Something like that. I've seen him at some games, he coached Police Athletic League. He's a good guy, Doc something... Used to play some minor league ball."

"He's not..." I began.

"I'm gonna bat you eighth. You play right field," he said and then ran off to organize the rest of the batting order with the other guys. I drifted toward home plate behind him.

A half block away Janet lead Freddy home. She was talking to him and patting his

shoulder. She turned once to look back. I waved at her and she seemed to nod.

I didn't want to play with them, I didn't even want to be there. The guy holding my bat was named Smollen and he made a fuss when Johnny told him to bat second. After a lot of complaining he gave up the bat to another guy they called 'Wiz.'

Gasters was pitching for the other team. The batting team had to provide a catcher to the fielding team. In a play at home the pitcher would have to cover the plate on any throw from the field.

"We calling balls and strikes?" Gasters asked Johnny.

"Just misses," Johnny said, catching Gaster's warm-ups and tossing them back.

"Alright, top of the line up!" Johnny yelled to our team.

Gasters checked his infield and outfield. He waved his center-fielder in.

'Wiz' took his place over the pizza box. He swung the bat while rotating it with his wrists. It seemed so natural a movement for him that I knew he would hit the ball well.

Gaster's first pitch was wide. "What's wrong with that?" He teased, "You want me to hit it for you?"

"Put it right here, buddy," Wiz told Gasters, extending my bat to a spot three feet over the center of the plate.

Gaster's second pitch was inside and Wiz had to kick his right leg back and move out the way. The ball hit the dirt next to Johnny and it got past him.

"Hey, Gasters, if you don't want to eat the ball, you won't do that again," Wiz threatened.

Gasters smiled.

Gaster's next pitch must have been better because Wiz smacked it into the gap behind short and between center and right field.

Johnny ran after Wiz on the outside of the baseline.

"Go! Go! Go!" everybody yelled. By the time Wiz got to first only the other team yelled "Go, go, go," as their shortstop hid the ball in his glove and waited for Wiz to attempt second base.

But Johnny halted Wiz at first, where he crouched down to coach him.

Next Smollen was up but, with Johnny coaching Wiz at first, there was no one to act as catcher.

"Hey short-stuff, catch, will ya..." Smollen said to me.

"I don't have my glove," I said.

"You don't need a glove to catch him," Smollen said of Gastors.

I made a face.

Whose got the kid's glove?" Smollen called out.

Johnny shook his head, "Don't put the kid down there. Bean, you catch for Smollen," Johnny said.

And Bean, who was going to pitch for our team bent down to catch for Smollen's at-bat.

"Look over his stuff," Bean coached Smollen.

"Just catch!" Smollen replied, swinging the bat as if he intended to kill the ball.

Smollen let two pitches go by, then he smacked a high, long one to the center-fielder. The sacrifice moved Wiz to second base but Smollen was very angry with himself. He threw the bat down and said a string of curse words. At first, I thought he had hurt himself. Everyone else laughed at Smollen.

Johnny ran over to coach Wiz from near third base. Their third baseman was a huge guy, the biggest one on both teams.

Our next batter was Ray. And Ray had a long at bat with a lot of foul tips that came down among us. I accidentally almost caught one.

"Hey, you want to catch our own guy out, huh?" Bean asked me.

"No," I said.

"Don't listen to him. Catch 'em if you want. It don't mean squid," Smollen said.

Finally Ray swung and missed at Gastors pitch and we had two outs.

"Ray! How could you do that? Letting him wiff you!" Smollen demanded.

"The same way you flied into Jerry's glove," Ray said.

"Smollen, coach third." Johnny said as he came over to take his at bat. As they passed, Johnny whispered something to Smollen.

"I know, I know," Smollen said loudly taking up his position near third.

"Remember, with no team catcher, there's no bunting," Gastors told Johnny.

"Gotcha," Johnny said.

Gastors turned around and waved his outfield back. "Wake up back there! Yo! Jerry, don't watch butterflies!"

"I'm watching bees!" Jerry yelled back and waved his glove as if he were swatting them.

Gastors gave Johnny an outside low-ball.

"We gonna be here all morning?" Johnny asked, watching it roll away as Bean scrambled for it.

"I don't know," Gasters smiled.

There were five more pitches like that. Johnny put the bat down and leaned on the end of it. "Do you want me to take first, or what?" he asked.

"We're not calling balls," Gasters said.

"Then put it in play," Johnny said.

The next pitch was also low, but nearer the corner of the plate and Johnny hit it with a tremendous swing. The ball lifted up like a rocket across the field.

Smollen waved Wiz around from second to score and Johnny halted at third as his hit was relayed from across the street and bounced back to the infield.

Gasters shouted a curse.

Bean was up next. I guess he was a fair hitter as well as a pitcher, and Ray crouched down to catch for him.

"Get me home, Beaner," Johnny said from third.

Bean missed Gaster's first pitch, let the next two go by and then smacked the fourth pitch on a hop to the second baseman. He was out at first and that was the end of our team's at bat.

We headed into the field. "Where's my glove?" I asked.

Smollen stopped at first base, "Where you playing?" he asked me.

"Right field," I said.

"These guys never hit to right field, don't worry about it," Smollen said.

Ray, at second base shouted out, "Where's the kid's glove?"

"I left it on top of that pile of dog dirt that the bees are flying around!" Jerry, their center-fielder shouted.

There was a lot of laughter as I went for my glove. It lay on the grass near the stuff he mentioned. I picked it up and headed back to right field with one bee buzzing at my head.

Johnny played short-stop, Wiz took third and two guys who hadn't batted yet played center and left field. Johnny motioned where we should stand for their first batter.

The guys tossed a ball around the infield at each other. Finally the ball was passed to the other two outfielders. Ray, at second, decided to relay it to me and I managed to catch it, but looked pretty clumsy getting it. I threw it back to Ray and it didn't quite reach him.

"Not so high, kid. Don't rainbow the ball," Ray said, then pivoted and fired the ball to Smollen at first.

"What are you doing, trying to wear me out?" Smollen complained before passing the ball back to Bean, our pitcher.

Soon, I began to believe that maybe Smollen was right. That nobody hit to right field. A few hits sailed into left field. Some of their guys got on base. But standing alone in right field all I became aware of was the sun getting hotter overhead, and the occasional bee buzzing at me. They weren't really bees, like honey bees, but yellow-jackets, and seemed like they wouldn't mind stinging me.

I walked a few feet away, but these wasps kept flying a pattern in that part of the field that seemed to include a circle a few inches from my head.

I covered my head with my glove and ducked once, and moved a few feet in another direction.

"HEY!" Someone called.

A saw a ball fly high over Smollen's glove sail toward right field. I ran toward it but it hit the ground and bounced. I knocked it down but it bobbed off my foot. Finally, I picked it up and got ready to throw.

Johnny waved the play dead. Everyone was safe, and Gaster's team had scored a run, tying it up.

"Nice going!" Ray said, meanly.

"Keep alert out there," Johnny said.

And I nodded and decided not to pay any more attention to the yellow-jackets, no matter what they did.

There was one more play before they were out, and we were up. I ran in with the others, getting there last and handed my glove to Jerry, their center-fielder.

I counted the batters ahead of me. Without a doubt, I would have an at-bat. The thought scared me.

The first two guys up were called Minny and Moe, which were not their real names. They were brothers, and fairly tall. Neither said very much. Minny flied out to center and Moe lined out to short. Next was me.

"Whose up, next?" Ray asked.

"Me!" Smollen said.

I didn't say anything, hoping that Smollen would hit instead.

"Bull!" Gasters said. "You didn't go through everybody."

"The kid's just a substitution. I'm batting for him," Smollen insisted.

"Kid. You're up," Johnny said. He picked up his glove and relieved Ray at catching. "I'll catch for the kid."

"Easy out," Gasters said and even the guys on our side seemed to agree. Ray put his glove on and prepared to take the field again.

"Relax," Johnny whispered. "Relax and look them over."

I let Gasters first pitch go by.

"What was wrong with that?" Gasters demanded.

"Do it again!" Johnny said and then whispered to me, "If he gives you the same thing again, take it."

Gaster's next pitch was low but I swung anyway and missed.

"That's better, STRIKE ONE!" Gasters shouted.

"Look them over," Johnny whispered.

I let the next one go by and Gaster's mouth twisted into a mean expression. "Hey, I'm not gonna give you good pitches like that if you're gonna just give me goo-goo eyes. I'm gonna get mad..."

He wound up as if he was gonna throw a hundred mile an fastball, but gave me a lousy pitch that didn't reach the plate. "SWING!" he yelled.

And I did. I swung after the ball hit the dirt and everyone either moaned or laughed.

"STRIKE TWO!" Gasters held up two fingers and smiled.

"Why did you do that?" Johnny asked. He put his hands up for time-out.

"Does he have to call his mommy and ask her a question?" Gasters joked.

"Do like you did, last night. Don't listen to him, he's a jerk. He won't tell you anything you should do," Johnny told me.

I nodded, beginning to feel like Freddy had before he left. I blinked a few times to clear my eyes.

"He's gonna start bawling." Gasters said.

"Throw the ball, Gasters!" Johnny said.

I let the next pitch go by. I tried to think. 'All alone, nothing in the world but the approaching ball. Watch the ball, only the ball...' I shut Gaster's face out of my sight and watched his hand and then... the ball.

I didn't even remember the swing, just that same good feeling running down my wrists into my arms. I saw the ball fly into shallow left field and take a big bounce.

"RUN!" my team yelled.

And I ran. I reached first and heard "RUN!" and I turned and ran for second. I reached second and heard "run," and turned for third.

Johnny was heading toward third from out of the baseline and waving me back to second.

I turned to go back and heard Gastors laughing, "Run." A throw reached second before me.

"Third! Slide in!" I heard Johnny shout. And I turned and ran back toward third. I saw Johnny waving me in and then saw the ball passing over my right shoulder.

The third baseman was the biggest guy on either team. He was probably taller than Doc and weighed more too.

"Slide!" Johnny yelled.

And I slid.

In a confusion of dirt and shouting I looked and saw my foot on the board we used for the base.

"SAFE!" Johnny yelled.

"OUT!" Gastors shouted.

"He wasn't tagged! There's no force. You got to tag him!" Johnny told them.

"Mace, you tagged him, didn't you?" Gaster asked his third baseman.

Mace shrugged. "He's so small, I missed him."

Gastors was angry. He cursed for half a minute. "Hey, kid, if you run home, I'll be there covering. Watch your teeth," He threatened me.

"Relax, kid. Keep your eye on Wiz, he's gonna bring you home," Johnny said and ran over to whisper something to Wiz who nodded. Then Johnny returned to coach third.

Wiz let Gastor's first two pitches go by. Then he connected with a line drive to centerfield.

"Go!" Johnny said.

I went. Gastors ran for home and put his arms out for the ball there. He stood in the baseline in front of the plate and waited for the throw.

I put my hands out and bounced into him, trying to reach around with my foot and tag home. He pushed me down and waited for the ball to come. Again, there was a lot of

shouting. I tried to wiggle to the plate, but Gastors held me. The ball bounced toward home but Gastors couldn't catch it and hold me too. The ball smacked my lip and rolled away. I flopped over and touched home plate with my left hand. Under my stomach I felt my belt buckle break off.

Smollen pulled me up. He was already holding my bat in his other hand. "Gastors, if you ever do something like that again to one of our players, I'm gonna personally smash you." He said.

Gastors stuck his hand in his pocket.

"Yeah, pull out that 'knife' and see what I do to you," Smollen said.

Gastors grinned and headed back to the mound. Johnny asked how I was. There was a lump on my lip.

"It's a blood blister. It'll go away in a few days. How's your teeth?" Johnny asked.

I felt them. "They're all there," I said.

"Good."

Most of our guys patted my shoulder. Smollen went up to the plate. "Alright, I'm gonna hit a homerun, now!" he announced.

He never got to hit a homerun. Not in that game. A woman yelled from a nearby porch for Ray. It seemed it was his mother and she had something for him to do. Then Jerry remembered something too and told Gastors that he'd have to leave also.

"Can we play seven and seven?" Johnny asked. "Two men for the outfield?"

"Hey, we win. We'll play another one later," Wiz said, walking off of first.

Smollen stood at the plate. "Hey, I want my ups!" But the fielding team drifted past him on their way in. Gastors let the ball drop and Smollen picked it up, he tossed it into the air and pounded it way into the outfield.

"Not quite a homerun, but a standing double, easy. Whose ball was that?" he asked.

"Mine, I guess," I said.

"Well you can pick it up on the way home. Here's your bat. It's got a nice feel to it," Smollen said.

"Good game, guys," Johnny said, "Nice hit, decent base-work," he said to me.

In moments they were gone, wandering into the backyards they had recently come from. The field was quiet again. I had my bat and thought I saw my glove in shallow centerfield, and the ball beyond that. I trotted out to collect them, ducking as the yellow-jackets came after me again.

Turning the last corner toward home I met Doc. He looked worried.

"Hi Doc."

He looked at my lip. "Someone hit you?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Your little friend Janet found me," Doc said. "I didn't like what I heard."

"Freddy got it pretty bad. There was only one guy there who was real mean. The rest were just, kind of, like clowns," I told him.

"Got all your stuff?" Doc asked.

"Yeah."

Doc relaxed, "So, how did you do?"

"Not that great. I did hit a double, though, but got into a pickle. Got out of it, and scored the winning run."

"Playing those big guys? That's not bad," Doc said.

We walked toward home. "Johnny, that blond kid, said he knew who you were. Coaching P.A.L."

"Uh huh," Doc said.

"He said you once played minor league ball, is that true?" I asked.

"A long, long time ago," Doc laughed. "When the lions were eating the Keneem's cattle. I mean to say, that's an ancient story."

Freddy was in his room playing board games. His grandmother let me in. He didn't say much.

"That one guy was really bad," I said. "His name is Gasters."

"They were all bad," Freddy said, continuing to put quiz cards down on a game board.

"He held me down by home plate and a ball whacked my lip, see?" I showed him the spot, but he barely glanced at it.

"Uh huh."

"You going to the beach, today?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Why not?" I asked, surprised.

"My mom and dad are coming down for the weekend, and they'll probably take me out. I

don't care if I miss the beach today," he said.

I watched him set up his game for a minute, "That Janet is something. She's afraid of nothing," I said.

"I like Janet," Freddy said.

"Yeah..." I watched him for another minute.

"She made sure I got home and then went looking for Doc to tell him what happened," Fred said.

"I know..."

Freddy finished setting up the game. How come you stayed and played with them?" He asked.

"I didn't want to leave my bat and glove, and the ball," I told him.

He thought about it for a minute, "Would you have left if they were picking on you as bad as they were picking on me?" He asked.

"Yeah, if I had my glove," I answered.

He seemed to feel a little bit better. "You want to play?" he asked.

I really didn't, but thought I should, "Sure. Till lunch, anyway."

"Did you get to bat?" He asked.

"Uh huh."

"You do anything?" he asked.

"Got a lucky hit. That's when this guy Gasters pounded me. Some of the other guys on my team weren't afraid of him, though..."

It didn't look like it was going to be a fun day at the beach. After going for a swim I helped Beth make an arcade out of sand that we could play skill-ball with using a rubber ball. But, she got bored with it and started dumping pails of damp sand.

"Danny, why don't you get water for the sand, so we can keep them from drying out?" She asked.

"Because, I don't want to," I told her.

"Why don't you want to?" She asked.

"Because it's what little kids do. When I was little I must have filled up a whole beach of pails, dumped them in circles and sprinkled water on them," I said.

"Then go bury yourself," she said.

"I'll bury you," I threatened.

"Aunt Grace, Danny said he'd bury me," she told my mom.

"Danny, go find something to do," Mom told me.

"Like what?"

She dug into her beach purse and fished out a dollar. "Get some ice cream."

"Can I have some too?" Beth asked.

"You had some, already," Mom said.

"Mom, I don't want ice cream," I told her.

"It'll be good on that lip," Mom said.

"But, I don't want it. I don't want ice cream," I said.

"Get something," Mom said.

"Lemon ices?" I asked.

"Okay."

"Can I have some too? Can I go with him? Aunt Grace, can I go with him?" Beth asked.

"No!" I said.

"Why don't you make some more sand piles," Mom told her.

"Do you like them?" Beth asked.

"Wonderful," Mom said.

I started for the boardwalk. My Mom checked the old watch she kept in her beach purse.

"There's no reason to hurry, but don't disappear on me," she said.

"I won't."

I had never thought of the beach as a long afternoon with nothing to do. Suddenly, I was aware of how much time I had to fill till we went back to the house. At least, I had something to do for the moment, and I took my time crossing the beach, though the hot sand near the boardwalk steps makes you go faster than you want. Then I slowly climbed the steps, wandered over to the lemon ice stand and got into the longest line for ices.

Even after I got the ices I was in no hurry. I stood in the shade so they wouldn't melt as fast and held it up to my lip. I put the change into my bathing suit pocket and peered over the rail toward the next beach.

"Hi!"

I turned and saw Janet sipping a soda she had just bought. She had another one in her hand.

"Hi."

"What happened to your lip?" she asked.

"Playing baseball..."

"You shouldn't have played with those big guys. They are too rough. And mean!"

"Hmmm..." I nodded.

"It took me quite a while to find Mr. Ludlow. I was going to tell your grandma, but I didn't know if that would have gotten you in more trouble," she said.

"Probably," I said. I could see my grandmother running onto the field, waving her arms and shouting at Gasters.

Janet opened her mouth to say something, then stopped.

"What?"

She gave me a little down-turned grin, "Nothing."

She started walking toward her beach, which was the next one, then she turned, "Why don't you come to our beach for a little while?"

I thought about it for less than a second, "Okay," I said, licking the lemon ice.

"Are you sure you can come, without telling anybody?" She asked, as if she were having second thoughts about inviting me.

"I got about an hour," I said.

I followed her along the boardwalk and down the steps at Fourth Avenue. Janet was unusually quiet.

Finally she said, "I got to bring this soda back for someone..."

We approached a clump of beach chairs and two umbrellas. If Freddy and I had been playing they could have been a desert oasis we were sneaking up to attack.

"There's somebody here..." Janet said, "who just got down today..."

That someone looked up from a book she was reading, and it was Nancy.

I couldn't help it, I stood dumbfounded as I had fallen asleep on my feet and wandered into a dream that you know is not real.

"Hi Danny," she said.

I could barely croak, "Hi."

Janet kept her back to me. She handed the extra soda to her mother and looked away at the ocean. I couldn't help looking into Nancy's eyes as if I were held there.

She stood up and I actually felt a little light-headed. My ices were melting but I couldn't remember how to eat them. None of this had ever happened to me before.

"What happened to your lip?" She asked.

Then I felt embarrassed, thinking she was glad to see me when maybe she was just staring at the ugly, blood blister swelling there.

"He got it playing baseball with this mob of rough bullies who threatened all of us and chased me and Freddy away. Danny stayed with them," Janet said.

"Does it hurt?" She asked.

"Only if I try to smile." Which I did.

"Hey, why don't we take a walk along the beach and look for shells?" Janet suggested.

"Sure," Nancy said, putting her book into her beach bag. She pointed to my lemon ice. "You better eat that before it melts."

Janet led us toward the water. We followed behind.

"How long are you down for?" I asked Nancy.

"Awhile. I'm staying with Janet. I don't know if I can stay the rest of the summer, but maybe I can," she said, brushing some strands of hair that blew in front of her face.

Ahead, Janet's head bobbed as if she were saying something to herself.

"How's your friend? I heard he got bitten by that little dog the morning we left," Nancy said.

"Better," I answered.

"And you soaked the dog with a bucket of water?" Nancy asked.

"I hosed him down. The woman and the dog moved to mean Mrs. Green's," I said.

"He's quieter over there. They have the bungalow in the corner near the sidewalk on the far side. He'll bark at you if you walk past the bushes, but you can't hear him at night, like when he was next door," Janet said, drawing even with us as we walked through the surf looking for shells.

"Where is Freddy?" Janet asked.

"His parents are coming down for the weekend, so he was waiting for them," I told her.

"My dad's coming down tonight, too," Janet said.

I didn't say anything, and went ahead of them as if I found something interesting. I did see a small starfish in the shallow water. I picked him up and he was still alive.

"Look, those little things are still moving," I said.

Janet made a face.

I was finished with the ices so I rinsed out the paper cup and filled it with seawater. I put the starfish in the water of the cup.

"Are you going to save him?" Janet asked.

"Maybe we can find a small shell that's still got stuff in it. Then we can watch him open the shell and eat the clam inside," I said.

"Yuk!" Janet said.

"One creature eating another," Nancy said.

"Yeah, the bull and the lions," I said, looking for a small shell that hadn't been broken.

"Too bad I missed Mr. Ludlow's last story," Nancy said.

"It was about growing up in a place where almost everyone is a stupid brute," Janet said. "And you had to do these hard things to prove you were ready to become a grown-up."

"I bet you, the point of his stories is how the same we all are, buffaloes, ancient people, modern people..." Nancy said.

"Nope," I said, "we're much better."

"Why?" Nancy asked.

"Because," I said, "we have baseball."

They both looked at me. Janet pointed to my fat lip, "That proves it; we aren't much better."

I found a perfect snail shell and after rinsing the sand out of it I held it up. "Look at this one."

The both 'oohed' and 'ahhhed' as if I had plucked a pearl or diamond out of the water.

"Can I see it?" Nancy asked.

I handed it to her, "You can keep it," I said, looking for a live clam or mussel. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw Janet looking at me strangely.

We spent the afternoon exploring the shallows of the surf in a clear low-tide. Suddenly, I remembered my promise not to disappear. I told Nancy and Janet that I had to get back and would see them later. I put the starfish back in the sea, throwing him toward deeper water, put the soggy, paper cup into a trash can and dashed back to our beach.

My mom and Beth stood alone next to their folded beach chairs, waiting for me.

"I told you NOT to disappear." Mom said.

"Sorry..."

"I told Aunt Grace that you were probably at Fourth Avenue," Beth said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Next time, let me KNOW where you are." Mom said.

"Yes. I will," I said, carrying the beach bag up to the boardwalk, where our carriage was chained.

It looked like I was going to spend that night on my own. Freddy was gone. His parents had taken him on amusement rides and then to a movie. Janet's parents took her and Nancy out for dinner, or something, too. I was on the back porch when they left their bungalow, dressed to go out. Both girls waved at me, and I waved back. Janet shouted something, but I couldn't make it out. I nodded as if I heard it, though, so she wouldn't have to shout again.

It was the first time I had ever seen Janet's father and I wasn't certain they looked alike. Though, both of Janet's parents seemed very certain in all of their actions. I had met Freddy's parents and he looked a little like both of them.

Mom asked me if I wanted to take a walk with Beth and her on the boardwalk, I almost said yes, but knew I would regret it.

"So, what are you going to do this evening?" Mom asked.

"Not watch television," I said, feeling a little sorry for myself.

She watched me for a moment without saying anything and then left with Beth.

I pulled my feet up on the big, cane rocker my grandfather had painted a hundred times and began to really rock.

I remember thinking that it was too bad I had nothing to do, because it would have been a great evening to do something, anything. It was one of those late afternoons that was so clear and crisp, especially for summer, that the light would stretch for hours. It glistened golden over everything in the backyard and church bells chiming from the distance blending all the sights and sounds together.

Doc came out and sat beside me, "Nothing doing this evening? Where is everybody?" He asked.

"Out. Out with their parents," I said.

"How come you're not out with yours?" he asked, "I just saw your mom heading toward the ocean."

"I only have one parent, and she's a girl. And a cousin whose a girl and I've spent almost my whole day with girls," I said, surprised I'd complain about that to Doc.

Doc looked out over the backyard. "What a lovely evening it is." He inhaled deeply. "I can still smell the lilacs."

"Yeah, it's nice," I said.

"I didn't know my dad either," Doc said, "He was killed in an accident where he worked just after I was born. And that accident destroyed my mother who passed away when I was nine. My aunt took care of me for a few years until I moved in with my older brother who was married. I've also lost my wife and the work I love..."

He looked me in the eye and I stopped rocking the chair.

"There is still enough in life to enjoy so you don't become bitter. But you always have to reach out for it or you won't even know it's there. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"I think so... But my dad's not really dead. He just moved away and forgot about me..." I said.

"He doesn't know what he's missing," Doc said, smiling.

"And my life is different than other kids. During the year Mom works in the office of a school-supply company. I stay with my aunt after school --Beth's mother and..."

"Look what you have here," Doc said, "A big house on a great block within walking distance of a huge ocean. You have trees to climb, bushes to hide in and places to play baseball. Think how many kids would trade places with you in a minute. I would have."

"I'm feeling sorry for myself, aren't I?" I asked.

"Yup. And it happens to the best of us," Doc said.

"You?" I asked.

"Sure. That's how come I read. And reading got me the nickname, 'Doc.' "

I nodded.

"You want to get your glove and have a catch?" He asked.

"Where?"

"Right here in the driveway," Doc said, "You've got good enough control, by now, not to smash windows, haven't you?"

"I suppose," I said.

Freddy woke me up the next morning. He poked me once or twice with his baseball glove.

"Let's see if we can get into a game," he said.

"Where? With whom?" I asked, and then remembered that Nancy was back. Maybe he had found out already.

"The big kids," he said.

I sat up in bed and looked at him. My lip was still sore and I licked at it. "Are you nuts?" I asked.

He was serious. Real serious, and dressed differently too. He wore his old jeans instead bright shorts and colorful socks. And had a torn tee shirt on instead of the shirt with his name sewn in and no baseball cap, or batting glove, just a bandage on his hand.

"Let's get in a game with them," he said.

"I don't even know if they're playing," I said.

"I think they play almost every morning before the beach, and they go to Second Avenue beach, I've seen them there before," Freddy said.

"I don't like that guy, Gasters..." I said.

"Let's go, I'll wait downstairs till you finish breakfast," Freddy said.

Freddy was right. We got there, carrying our gloves just as they were choosing up sides.

"Bring your bat?" Johnny asked.

"Not today," I said.

"Well, we got the old bat."

"Who is this kid?" Smollen asked about Freddy, not recognizing him.

"A friend," I said.

"It's the crybaby who ran home yesterday," Gasters said.

"Shut up, we need everybody," Johnny said, "Even with these two we only got fourteen. We'll have to go with two outfielders."

"Bull!" Smollen said, "You just don't want to give up shortstop. Let's go with three infielders besides the pitcher and three outfielders. We need three, John," Smollen insisted.

I looked around at who was missing, but couldn't remember everybody who had been there the day before, especially on Gaster's team.

"We'll take this kid," Johnny said about me.

"Let us take him, today," Gasters said.

"Okay," Johnny turned to Freddy, "You bat last and play right-field. We won yesterday's stub game so we get first ups again."

I felt bad about being split up, and being on Gaster's team, but then I realized that I wouldn't have to face Gaster's on the pitcher's mound, either.

Gaster's turned to me, "Alright, squirt, right-field!"

Johnny's team was really good that day. One after another they banged the ball out of the infield, line-drives and whizzing grounders and almost all of them got on base. In no time they were up by three runs and had the bases loaded with no outs. I had chased a couple of hits but was never in place to catch any. Gasters screamed at me, he screamed at everybody but that was the way it was.

"Maybe it's your pitching, fool!" Smollen yelled at him as he prepared to bat again.

Johnny took the bat away from Smollen and handed it to Freddy who had not been up yet.

"Triple play, people," Gaster's announced and then waved the outfield in. "C'mon, c'mon..." he shouted pointing to a spot behind the first-to-second baseline for me to stand.

The bat was too big for Freddy to swing properly, so Johnny had him choke up on the bat. He showed him how to hold his hands, and how to swing.

"You holding a clinic? Can we get on with it?" Gasters asked.

Freddy was in the batter's box concentrating on getting a hit. I could tell. He wanted a hit off of Gasters so bad that I believed he would do it.

He fouled the first pitch off. Smollen ran for it and tossed it back to Gasters. "Atta-way, kid. Knock the next one out, bring home Beaner. Bring in Minnie and Moe. Grand slam!"

"Okay," Freddy said swinging the bat slowly before the next pitch.

Gasters checked the field behind him. He had a nasty smirk on his face that gave me the creeps. I really didn't like him.

The next pitch hit Freddy in the face. He went down and a groan went out from most of the guys in the field. Johnny ran over to him.

Smollen started walking toward the mound. "I told you...." Smollen cursed, "if you ever...."

"An accident," Gasters claimed, backing away with his hands up. Smollen turned back toward the plate.

Fred stood up though I could see blood dripping from his nose.

"You want me to get you home?" Johnny asked.

Freddy shook his head. He wasn't crying. He picked up the bat to try again for the next pitch.

"Take a base, kid," Johnny said, "You just brought in Bean. Four to zip!"

Freddy went to first, wiping blood from his nose on his tee shirt.

"If you try and take another base, runt, you're gonna have to deal with me!" Gasters threatened Freddy, on first.

This was too much for Smollen. He threw down the bat and ran for the mound. No one on our side moved. It was over quickly. I had never seen so much temper and fury as Smollen had in the thrashing he gave our pitcher. In moments, Gasters was trembling as he sat in the dirt, trying weakly to smile. Smollen stormed off the field, "I told that jerk to watch it! I've had enough of him!" Smollen declared.

The game broke up. I walked the short distance to Freddy. Johnny was already there. He held Fred's eyelid back and asked him to look in first this direction, then that one.

"You're going to have a big shiner, there," Johnny said. "You okay?" he asked again.

"Uh huh..." Freddy nodded.

"We usually get to play three to five innings. You're not catching us at our best, sorry fellahs," Johnny said to both of us.

Freddy and I walked home silently. "First the dog, now this," I finally said.

He shrugged.

We met up with Doc coming back from his morning walk. He took a long look at Freddy. "What happened?"

"He got hit by a pitch," I said.

Doc looked closer. "Yeah I see. It's red now but will turn black and blue soon.

"But I didn't cry, and I didn't run home," Freddy said.

Doc looked from Fred to me and from me to Fred, "Well, maybe it's a shame it has to be this way, but, I guess both of you boys have been to the mountain, now."

I knew exactly what he meant, and grinned.

Fred's Dad forbid him to play baseball with the bigger kids again. Fred didn't care. In fact, he was back to his old self again. He couldn't wait to go to the beach and show off the black eye that was forming. I went to take my towel off the clothes line in the backyard and found him sitting on top of the fence telling Janet about what happened.

"...And some guy on my team went out there and really beat him up. Punched him a couple of times and knocked him down," Fred told her.

"Why did you go back there?" Janet asked with a puzzled look.

"To play baseball," Fred said.

"Baseball? I never thought in a million years you would ever want anything to do with those bullies. I'll never understand boys! Never!" she said.

We four kids had a great time on the beach. Fred kept clowning about his time at bat. He kept getting beaned, rolling his binged-out eyes, and would fall a new way, making different expressions. Fred, after all, was always a great die-er.

We built a wall and a castle on an empty stretch of beach between Fifth and Brinley, and spent so long doing it that the tide began coming in and we dug moats to try and drain the water away before the wall crashed. Soon, we had a new wall made from wet sand, and as the waves washed higher on the beach parts of that would collapse too.

It was the first time I didn't care whether the castle made it or not, just in keeping our play going. I noticed a funny thing, though. While Fred worked alone on the wall, I was busy helping Nancy making windows and towers, and almost every time I turned around Janet was trying to do something to help me. I didn't say anything, but after awhile went to help Fred with the wall. It would all be a lost cause, sooner or later the castle would be destroyed, anyway.

"Don't you want to put another tower over here?" Nancy asked me.

"Maybe the wall needs to be strengthened, first", I said and quickly regretted saying so because in moments Janet was there with globs of wet sand that she handed me as if only I knew how to slap them onto the weakening wall.

At last a really strong wave surprised us shooting between our legs melting over the top of the wall and making most of the castle into lumps and blobs. We all groaned, but Freddy and I started laughing. Even Janet joined in. Nancy stood up and brushed the wet sand from her legs. She didn't look happy at all.

"All that work..." she said.

"We'll build another one, tomorrow, Nance," Janet said.

Early in the evening we began a game of wiffle ball in our backyard. Nancy and I were winning by a run when Freddy really whacked the ball hard. It was a foul but ended our game by getting stuck high up in a tree growing in our neighbor's yard. We couldn't remember where the spare balls had gone to, either.

Freddy gathered rocks to throw at the ball, which we could see was perched among several branches. Doc asked about our problem and Janet pointed to the ball --way out of reach.

"I don't think that throwing rocks at it is a good idea, folks," Doc said.

"Why?" Freddy asked, his black eye making him look like a pirate.

"What goes up comes down. I don't believe your neighbors want rocks rattling against their windows," Doc said.

"There's some old bamboo poles in the garage, maybe we can tie them together and knock the ball down," I said.

"That's at least thirty-five feet up," Doc said. "The wind will bring it down. Or, we can always get more wiffle balls."

"So, what are we going to do now?" Freddy asked.

"Mr. Ludlow can tell us one of his terrific stories," Janet said.

Doc laughed, "I don't think you kids even like them," he said.

"They're hard to understand at first," Janet said.

"But later it seems to come true a little bit," I said.

"Well good, good," Doc said, "That's why people tell stories, so you can see something else from a distance before realizing it might be about you, after all."

"And I missed the last one," Nancy complained, "so make this one really good."

We followed him up to the porch. He sat in one of the rockers there and leaned back trying to think. We sat down close by and waited.

"The Keneem used to consult witches," Doc began, " when they had a problem they couldn't figure out. They didn't call them witches. They called them sorceresses or 'people who divined by the spirit.' So if you were uncertain about something important you went to see the witch. Paid her a coin or gave her a small goat. The cost depended on the nature of the problem.

"And after discussing the problem, the witch would conjure up a spirit that could provide some possible help. Maybe she would advise to take some herbs or drink something and do such-and-such..."

"Like fortune-tellers?" Freddy asked.

"Something like that. The common people among the Keneem believed in the witches. And if you believe in something, it can make you think special things are happening. And the witches were generally very shrewd, observant people."

"Where they ugly?" Janet asked.

"No. No uglier, or prettier than anyone else. Smarter, maybe," Doc said. "People would consult the witches about business deals, buying a plot of land, whom to marry, problems they had and so on..."

"Anyway there was a man from a small village who was in love with a woman from another village. He had only seen her twice, from a distance, at the market place. But

something about her smile stayed with him in all he did afterward.

"The man's name was Obe. Obe had two problems. One problem was he would not marry a woman who didn't want to marry him. So he wouldn't ask for Abida's hand, --that was the woman's name, from her family unless he knew she was willing. The second problem was Abida's brother. He was a noted warrior, whose sword was always ready. He drank too much wine and he had a bad temper."

"So, how could he find out Abida's wishes without angering her brother and getting killed? This was a problem. He wrestled with the problem for days. For weeks. He wished that he could forget Abida and find someone else. But he couldn't get the thoughts of her out of his mind. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat. He had trouble doing his work. Some of his cattle wandered off. His life was becoming a mess.

"So he went to the witch, Huldy, one night. She had a small house between the villages, on a small hill near a thicket of oak trees. He brought, the choicest kid from his flock of goats and knocked at Huldy's door.

" 'What troubles you, Obe?' Huldy asked.

" 'How did you know my name?' Obe answered.

" 'It is my business to know,' Huldy said. And of course it was. She always asked people who came to her, about what else was going on. Many of the villagers knew that Obe was troubled. Why, the baker, Smool, had mentioned it when he came for a relief to his aching back. But Huldy, didn't explain this to Obe. And Obe believed that Huldy knew everything.

"So Obe told his troubles to Huldy. He sat on her floor upon a cushion and explained his situation. He would not ask Abida's hand from her family until she had a chance to meet with him, speak with him and make her own decision. Otherwise, he could end up marrying a woman who resented him, and this would be a terrible mistake. Yet, he didn't want to run the risk of being cut down by her brother.

" 'Give me an answer of what to do. And if I can't marry Abida, make me a strong potion that will release her from my mind. I must get back to my work. Round up my herd and find someone else to marry.'

"Huldy thought this over. 'There are several things we could do. We could cast a spell upon Abida's brother and make him sick so he can't attack anyone. We could make a potion to help you forget her, but that would be the hardest thing to do. Because, Obe, love is the strongest thing in the world and it is very hard to treat.'

" 'Isn't there any other way?' Obe asked.

" 'Yes. We can make a magic that will bring Abida to you. She will know how to handle her brother. How to avoid his anger and soften his moods.'

"Obe shook his head. 'That sounds like the hardest magic of all. You see, I only want her if she would want me.'

" 'I see,' Huldy said. 'We will do what we can do.'

"Obe spent the night sitting on Huldy's floor as she conjured up things, threw sparkling-dust into the fire and made magic the like of which Obe had never seen. She worked extra hard for Obe, because she was so impressed with his honesty and his decency. He wanted no harm to come to Abida's brother even though the brother was not a good man. And he only wanted Abida as a wife if she was willing. Not all men are so pure in their wishes.

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"Just before dawn she sent him home. 'Abida will make her intentions known to you before the next morning. Go into her village after your work is finished and see,' Huldy told him.

"Obe did as he was told. He went down the hill, worked through the day and tired as he was he went to the next village in the late afternoon. Abida's brother was in front of their house. He was showing off his strength before neighbors. He could split a log with one smash of the ax. People clapped him on the back and gave him wine to drink. 'And if anyone crosses me, or my family...' He slashed his sword through the air, 'That's what I'll do to them, ' he threatened.

"Obe waited, hoping for a sign of Abida. Finally, seeing nothing, he left the village and climbed through the oak forest to Huldy's house.

"He told Huldy, that the magic hadn't worked. He was so tired, and upset. 'Maybe I should let her brother slay me. Maybe that's will be the only rest I can have,' Obe complained.

"Huldy put her hand out, 'Obe, I will perform my strongest magic and by tomorrow night the woman you marry will be waiting for you. And Huldy covered herself with a dark veil and went into a deep trance. Obe watched for a moment but he felt such power moving about him that he could no longer stay. So he went home and lay awake through the night, wondering how this new magic would work.

"And through the next day he wondered. As he repaired his roof, or tended his flocks, or drew water from the well, always he kept wondering, how will this love he had be realized? He would look up every once in a while and almost expect to see Abida standing near him, smiling. But she wasn't there and his heart sank.

"The afternoon cooled to evening and the work was done for the day. Obe prepared a simple supper of bread and cheese. He hoped to hear a knock at his door but it was only the wind rattling through the boards. Several times he peered from his window wondering if a shadow was Abida. But no, they seemed to be just shadows.

"At last, he put on his cloak and went into the night. He climbed through the forest, as bats and owls flew overhead. The door to Huldy's house was open and there seemed to be powerful things swirling through the fire on the hearth.

"There was a woman sitting on the floor clothed in pink and purple veils with golden

necklaces beneath. 'Where will she be?' Obe asked.

" 'Right here in my house,' Huldy's voice said, seeming to come from behind him in the night. Obe entered the house and sat quietly before the woman in the veils. Wind hurried through the house making the fire leap and glow.

"Suddenly, Obe realized something. He put his hand out toward the veils, 'Abida, is that you?' he asked.

"The veils began to drop from her face, 'Yes, Obe, it is Abida...' And the last veil floated down uncovering her face. But, it was Huldy the witch looking beautiful in her finest clothes and jewelry. And she met Obe's eyes and smiled. 'Obe, you need a woman, worthy of you,' she said."

"So what happened?" Freddy demanded, slapping the porch floor.

"They married," Doc said.

"He married the witch?" Freddy asked, curled up in a ball upon the floor.

"She wasn't an ugly, old witch, like ours are!" Janet told him.

Doc's eyes were smiling. He looked at Nancy and me, because we hadn't moved. "How was that one?" He asked.

Nancy shook her head, "I wasn't expecting that. She cheated him, didn't she?"

"I wouldn't say that. No." Doc said, "I would say that she had some very powerful magic. Most of which comes from up here." He pointed to his head.

I laughed. "It'll take me a hundred years to figure that one out," I said.

"Not that long, " Doc said. "Not that long, at all..." He grinned.

Night had already fallen, yet it was a warm night with its own endless magic. We drifted from the back porch to the deeper shadows near the fence. We talked about witches and what they did.

"We know some witches," I told Nancy and Janet.

"You do not," Janet said.

I looked at Freddy, "Don't we know some witches?" I asked.

"Yup," he said, without guessing who I meant.

"And they live right over this back fence behind your bungalow," I told them.

"Yeah! The two, weird sisters!" Freddy said. "Definitely witches. Yeah!" He said, growing excited about the idea of an adventure after dark.

"There are two witches living behind our bungalow?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, we'll show them to you," I told her.

"I don't know about this..." Nancy said, with a nervous laugh.

"Sure, show us!" Janet said.

I was surprised they were so willing for an adventure like that --after dark.

"You have to be real quiet, until we're ready," I told them, thinking they would back out.

"We will," Janet said.

I felt a thrill. I guess we all did. "All right, follow me," I told them.

I led the way, going very slowly, and stopped to help the girls climb up the fallen tree trunk, over the fence and through the break in the bushes to the weird sister's back yard. Fred, who had brought up the rear guard was now in the lead, sneaking ahead and acting as a scout.

The sisters' yard was a jungle. I hadn't been in it at night, myself, for some time. A cat was spooked in the grass and dashed up the fence. We all cringed for a moment.

We walked forward slowly. The girls giggled a little. Nancy held my hand and Janet held onto my arm. For a moment, I wished I was Freddy, sneaking alone through the grass with his camouflaged face --the black eye.

The longer we took creeping toward the windows, the higher our excitement grew. To the side of an overgrown bush we could make out a window. There was a light on inside. It must have been from a tiny bulb because it didn't make very much light. One of the sisters moved by the window. She opened her mouth and seemed to grin with missing teeth. Her head bobbed a bit as if she were studying us.

All of us swallowed our breath. Nancy's hand flew over her mouth as she bit back a scream. The weird sister kept bobbing her head like she was a creature floating over the floor. I tried to step forward and get a better view, but both girls held me back.

"Let's leave!" Nancy whispered.

"Is she looking at us, and licking her lips? Is she?" Janet asked.

I stepped up on a small tree stump to get a better view. The old woman seemed to be tying up a package of some sort. They had a lot of junk in there.

Something large sailed over my head twirling as it zoomed toward the house. Then it walloped the wall of the sisters' house making the old woman jump. A curdling laugh came from behind us and we believed the other old sister had magically gotten behind us. We all turned to run.

"FLY TO THE MOON, YA OLD HAG!!" the voice yelled.

Janet's nails scratched my arm. I tried to push them in front of me, back toward the rear

of the yard. But someone was there, closing in on us, rapidly.

"Look what we got!" the voice said, "More fun seekers!"

It was Gasters and a friend of his. His friend held another stick to throw at the house.

Freddy yelled, "Look out!" and distracted Gasters for a moment. He peered into the dark and made out Freddy's marked face. "It's the runt!" he said, "Both of them! And their little girl friends..." he laughed. He kept Janet and Nancy from moving by blocking the way with his long arms.

Behind us, a door opened. "Who's out there?" One of the sisters demanded. "Who's out there?"

"You ain't going nowhere," Gasters said. "I got something for you, anyway," He said. And put his hand into his pocket.

"He's got a knife!" Freddy yelled. Nancy and Janet shouted and backed up onto my feet.

"Who's out there!?" The old woman yelled from behind us.

All the commotion made the little dog start to bark from Mrs. Green's yard which was very close by.

"I'm outa here," Gasters' friend said, as he dropped the stick and trotted toward the street in front of the sister's house.

Gasters held something in his hand, as his eyes glistened in the dim light. "I got something for you runts..." He chuckled, stepping forward.

I pushed the two girls to the side. "Go back!" I told them and moved to Gasters left. Freddy grabbed Janet's hand and she grabbed Nancy and the three of them ran toward Mrs. Watchel's yard.

"Try and get past me," Gasters teased.

I ran around the tree stump and took off away from Mrs. Watchel's, toward Mrs. Green's yard. Gasters recovered my lead in a couple of quick bounds. But I knew the way and ducked under the old trellis between the yards where a rose garden must have grown fifty years ago. Gasters got caught in it, and I found the opening to Mrs. Green's.

He cursed and rushed forward reaching out to grab me, but I scooted over the broken chair that lay before the fence and clambered to the top of the fence. The nasty, little dog was down there in the dark. I could here him barking and snarling as he dragged the chain across the earth. I'm sure he knew it was me, and had some revenge to get. I waited a moment.

Gasters arm crossed in front of me as he tried to grab onto me. I tumbled forward and slipped beneath him to the ground. In an easy leap, his long legs cleared the fence and he was there with me in Mrs. Green's yard. The dog's chain brushed my leg. I hopped away from it and ran for the space between the bungalows. A shadow blocked my way.

The shadow was Mrs. Green. "You rotten boys are up to no good!" she shouted, "Scaring all the neighbors, trying to wake the dead! This will teach you!" She shouted, drawing back her broom to swat a double across my arm and chest.

I felt Gasters' breath on my neck, but ducked to my left avoiding most of the broom swat. Suddenly Gasters stopped short. The dog chain was wrapped around his leg. He tripped and got up, but then the dog bit him in the back of his leg. He shouted and dropped the thing from his pocket. I looked down at it, as Mrs. Green drew back her broom. The thing on the ground looked like a nail clipper.

This time trapped by the wall of the bungalow, I got the brunt of her smack. The wall snapped the broom head off though and it clattered to the ground at my feet. My arm stung. I pushed past Mrs. Green feeling the heat of her anger and ran a mad dash, jumped the fence to Mrs. Watchel's and jumped the next fence to my grandmother's.

I lay on the ground, panting and felt the bumps rising on my arm. "Danny are you okay?" Janet asked.

I looked up and saw Janet peering over me, then Nancy, then Fred. I closed my eyes and swallowed. "You better call Doc," I said.

They already had. And Doc had been on his way into Mrs. Green's yard from the front while I was on my way out through the back. It was Doc who removed the broomstick from Mrs. Green and untangled Gasters from the dog chain while holding the little dog by the collar on its neck. The ambulance and police came shortly after and took Gasters to the hospital to treat the bites.

Later, my mom put an ice bag on my arm. The next day my grandmother went over to Mrs. Green and threatened to have her arrested if she ever raised a finger to a kid who happened to be in her backyard. We were all told not to enter Mrs. Green's property and to avoid the two sisters. We swore we would obey, at least for the rest of that summer. But Freddy and I knew better. Within a day, life was back to normal. We never saw Gasters again, and found out from Smollen on Second Avenue Beach that he had gone home already and wouldn't be back for the season.

And day by day that's how the summer went, with afternoons on the beach and evenings on our block. We kept away from adventures at Mrs. Green's, and the weird sisters, but sometimes we got a little wild. A week or so before the summer ended, my grandmother ended my punishment and said I could watch television. I can't remember watching any, though.

In a way, during the end of that summer we tried to hold back the days, trying to stop our time together from dissolving like sand castles under the surf. We all knew it was coming, though. No matter how much fun we had or even during our small arguments over little things, we knew, each of us, that soon it would be over.

On our last day we all said how next summer would be the same, but, privately, we knew it would never be.

Nancy left first. Her mother picked her up in the morning. We had already exchanged addresses and phone numbers. We waved at each other and followed each other's eyes until her mother's car was moving down the block, away from the ocean and toward the highway.

Freddy and I parted with a simple handshake. We gave each other a few baseball cards and nicknacks as presents. Janet ran over and gave him a big hug before returning for the last time to Mrs. Watchel's yard. I watched from the porch and waved as Freddy got into his parent's station wagon, packed with suitcases, and pulled out of the driveway.

Then there was just the two of us, Janet and I. She had a bigger smile than I as if the sadness of the summer's ending was less for her. I didn't know why till the last moment when she came to the fence to talk to me.

"Danny, come here," she said.

I walked over to her. Suddenly she seemed a little sheepish, her eyes floating along on the fence post. "You got Nancy's address and stuff, right?"

"Uh huh," I said, feeling a little down, already

"You going to write her?" She asked.

"I don't know..." I said.

"It doesn't matter. She'll have lots of boyfriends after school starts. I got your address too. I got it from your grandmother." Janet said.

She brought her eyes up to mine and smiled broadly. Then, as if she were almost laughing she stopped speaking, moved a few strands of hair from her face and looked at me for a long moment.

"It doesn't matter about Nancy," Janet said, "Because I'm the one who is going to marry you one day." And she leaped up on her toes using the fence for support and kissed me quickly. Then she jumped back onto the gravel, near the spot where I had watered the dog, smiled from ear to ear, waved and ran inside the bungalow to finish packing her mountain of stuff.

My knees became so weak I had to go inside the house and sit down.

Doc had a going away present for me too. A pile of new books, some about baseball, some about different peoples around the world. They were held together with a brand new belt.

"I know you're going to have a lot of books to read once school starts. But these are extra. I hope you can enjoy them," Doc said as he squeezed my shoulder, gently. Inside the cover of one of them was a card with a note that read, 'To one of the finest young men I have ever known, From your good friend, Doc Ludlow.'

After Doc left, with all of his things in one giant suitcase, I went upstairs to my room,

now bare except for the bed and uncovered mattress. I lay down on it and tried not to feel as bad as I did.

Janet was right about one thing, I never did write to or hear from Nancy. Doc moved to another state and I believe found a new job teaching fire safety. For years I used to get a card from him on my birthday with money inside. Finally, the cards stopped and I fear that Doc had passed on to join his wife.

There have been times when I've spent days searching through library after library to find copies of the very stories that Doc told us throughout that great summer, long ago. I could never find those exact stories, but as I live and learn, I know they are true.

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