

# VOODOO

by

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Volume Two:

# Jack's Diary



JAN. 1

This is my first entry. Maybe a good idea, maybe not. We'll find out.

I'll begin with the unexpected visit, early this afternoon, from two of the three Huckfeldt brothers. The oldest and the youngest. Our first face-to-face meeting since they moved into the neighborhood. Why were they here? To use my bathroom, even though they live directly across the street! Funny boys. Especially that oldest one, Jimmy, here mostly to bum cigarettes, I'd say. This kid is such a tough guy, a real punk, so full of cocky energy and nasty attitude. Hell, maybe I'm wrong about him. Today being our first actual encounter, I shouldn't jump to hasty conclusions. But I've watched him in action with his own brothers, and also with Frankie, and today was just more of the same.

Anyway, he talked me into giving him a few cigarettes, then sarcastically returned my own warning about tobacco being a dirty habit, unhealthy and so on. I laughed and told him that he was right, that I should quit smoking, that I would quit. He grinned and chuckled as if he'd won a little victory over me. It was a strange encounter altogether, unexpected and apparently pointless, the two of us bantering and bickering like old acquaintances even though we were meeting for the first time. Dally (that's what they call the little one, his real name is Dallas) didn't seem interested in anything that his brother and I were saying or doing. What was it Frankie said about him? That he just stands around and watches? That certainly seems accurate. He might just be quiet and withdrawn, or he might be slightly slow, not too bright, I don't know.

Jimmy wanted to light one of his borrowed cigarettes and smoke it here, but I said no—just to be argumentative, I guess—although, honestly, I don't like the idea of young boys smoking tobacco. (Jimmy mentioned, as if to impress me, that he also chews the stuff, which is even worse, in my opinion.) Frustrated, he put the cigarettes into the pocket of his jacket for later. It was strange, I have to say again, having

him here in the house with no warning or preparation. He asked me, before he left, how I knew that he was fourteen years old. Seeing that I was puzzled by his question, he explained, “Before, when y’all said I was too young to smoke, you knew I was fourteen.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “Frankie told me.”

“Your nephew,” Jimmy said, even though he already knew better. I laughed, sharing his little joke. Dally glanced around when he heard me laughing, but his expression never changed. Jimmy responded with another small grin and chuckle, chomping and chomping on his big wad of gum. I was watching him, studying him, while trying not to be overly conspicuous about it. He’s not quite as tall as Frankie, which I already knew from seeing them together outside last Sunday, but he’s heavier and much more sturdily built. Up close, that sturdiness becomes even more impressive.

Today he was wearing a maroon nylon jacket with a yellow insulated lining, also a pair of loose khaki pants, but no amount of clothing could hide the strong shoulders and strong hips beneath. His hair, showing shaggily from under his camouflage Jack Daniel’s cap, is a russet brown with just a hint of curl around the ears and neck. He has a sharp nose and close-set eyes and big ears (a trait shared by both of his brothers, I’ve already noticed).

In other words, Jimmy is cute, you might even say handsome in a sort of peculiar and rascally way, but he’s not a golden beauty like Ryan Fox, or puppyish and sweet-faced like Frankie, or darkly exotic and pretty like Pepper. He’s none of those things—and yet, chomping his gum and chuckling his wicked little chuckle, he might be the hottest and most exciting of them all.

## LATER—SAME DAY

After Jimmy took his cigarettes—and his brother—and went home, I flopped on the couch and took a nap. My head was still woozy from last night’s overdose of champagne. Maybe that’s why, thinking about it

now, I was being slightly snappish with Jimmy. A small reason, at least. Mostly, though, it's the boy's own pugnacious attitude that invites a pugnacious response—with more than a little humorous bluster on both sides, to be honest, like two kids sparring verbally on the playground. I wonder how Jimmy and Ryan would get along? Which one could out-insult and out-scowl the other?

Tonight I finally called Pepper. I couldn't tell if he was happy to hear from me or not. I haven't seen him since Christmas Eve, and he hasn't been here for an overnight visit in a number of weeks, so I'm beginning to worry about us drifting apart. It's always difficult to figure him out, of course, and tonight was no easier. Holly answered the phone, and we talked for a while, and then she put Pepper on to say hello, which was truthfully the whole point of my call. He gave brief monotone answers to all of my predictable questions: How was your New Year's Eve? Did you have a good time? What have you been doing all day? Not much, he said, just playing video games and stuff like that. A moment of silence, and then I asked about the racing set that I bought him for Christmas. Has he used it yet? Pepper said no, because there's not enough space in his bedroom and because his mom won't let him put it in the living room, which doesn't surprise me. I immediately proposed that we set it up here, plenty of space on my living room floor, no problem. Pepper agreed with no hesitation, and I could tell from his voice that he was smiling. In that sly way of his, he asked, "Do you have lots of space for it, for sure?"

"Yes, for sure," I said. "You know how big my living room is."

"Will it be fun having it there?"

I said yes, it'll be great, I can't wait. When should we do it? Pepper didn't care, any time would be OK because he doesn't have school until next week. That's perfect, I said, because I'm also off until next week. So we agreed on tomorrow. I'll pick him up in the afternoon and he'll stay here for dinner. He doesn't know if he'll stay overnight. His indecision makes me nervous. Why is he skittish about staying here for

the night? It might be nothing, just his usual moodiness or touchiness or whatever you'd care to call it, a good way to keep me guessing about his plans and to keep himself the center of my attention. Could he, in fact, be clever enough to understand my desire for him and to tease me with himself in this way? Sure he could! All boys, I think, are able to sense their own sexual power, and are willing to use it in various clever and manipulative ways.

I've had enough for today. I need as much rest as possible to be fresh tomorrow for Pepper. One last cigarette, and then I'm off to bed.

### LAST ENTRY—SAME DAY

I forgot to mention that I gave the Power Ranger toy to Dally Huckfeldt when he was here earlier. Buying a little Christmas present for Ryan seemed like a good idea at the time, but that moment has passed, Christmas is long gone and I won't be seeing Ryan until at least next week. So, when the Huckfeldt boys were here, I impulsively gave the toy to Dally, explaining that it was "left over from a Christmas party." A lame story, I know, but the boys didn't question it. The thing was already gift-wrapped, of course, which gave Dally the pleasure of tearing off the paper. He actually smiled when he saw the Power Ranger inside! He has several missing teeth, including a top one in front, making for quite a funny ragamuffin smile. He was still wearing that baseball cap which looks so comically large on his little head, the adjustable strap in back pulled to the last notch and sticking out from his neck like a plastic tail. In fact, I actually thought it was a tail of hair at first. What is it called? A rat tail, I believe is the name for it. But no, it was his hat's strap, not his hair—which is reddish blond, by the way, and buzz-cut extremely short, from what I could see of it on the sides.

He didn't actually thank me for the gift, but his happiness was obvious, as good as spoken gratitude. It was Jimmy's turn to stand and watch while this was happening. If he was jealous, he did a good job of hiding it. Puzzled maybe, but not jealous. He said, when the toy was



finally unwrapped, “That’s real nice, a Power Ranger, that’s nice.” It was his way, I think, of saying thank-you for both himself and his brother.

## JAN. 2

I felt fresh and reinvigorated when I fetched Pepper this afternoon. He brought his red Nike gym bag with him, but still would not say for sure if he intended to stay overnight. Holly, as we were leaving, said, “Please, keep him as long as you want!” Pepper reminded her that he might be back in a few hours, which is when I finally was given an explanation for his mysterious behavior: One of his friends received an especially rich bonanza of computer games and video games for Christmas, and Pepper has been hoping for an invitation from him ever since, eager to play the coveted new games. If he gets a call from his friend, in other words, he’ll abandon me with all possible speed. It’s that simple! All of my speculation about his motives and about sexual subterfuge seems very silly in light of the mundane truth.

So far, his friend has not called, which means that Pepper is spending the night after all (for lack of a better offer, you might say). I was surprised, seeing him earlier today, that his hair has been cut short, much shorter than I’ve ever seen it before, those fleecy curls of his cropped close to the scalp, like a freshly groomed poodle, with one very long curl (speaking of rat tails) corkscrewed down the back of his neck. The haircut makes him look older, makes his pointy ears more prominent, makes his big copper-rimmed glasses seem even bigger. In all honesty, I prefer his hair longer and fuller, but Pepper himself is adorable either way.

He didn’t bring his saxophone this time. No need for it, really. Our project, this visit, was setting up his elaborate racing set, complete with bridges and tunnels and multi-level tracks, a job that took about two hours. It’s big, that set, easy to understand why Holly didn’t want it in her living room. Even here, in a much larger room, it fills most of the

floor. Playing with it was slightly anti-climactic after so much preparation. The little cars speed around and around the track, frequently flying off when they hit a curve, no real skill involved. It takes a boy's imagination and high spirits, I think, to make something fun out of something so basically monotonous. After just a few minutes of playing, maybe half an hour, I was already feeling bored, and wondering if Pepper was feeling the same way. That's why I was so happy when Frankie showed up for an unexpected visit.

He apologized for not calling first, but I told him not to worry, that we were beyond the "call first" phase of our friendship. (Once you've had your dick up someone's ass, I'd say it's time to end the formalities.) Pepper had met Frankie only once before, and then for just a few minutes, so I briefly re-introduced them to each other and then said no more. I didn't even try to explain Frankie's typically boisterous and affectionate entrance, when he grabbed me in a hug and kissed me full on the lips with Pepper sitting on the floor nearby, watching us. I found it unnerving at first, then reconsidered and decided that Frankie's unabashed show of affection was a good thing, possibly beneficial, a valuable example for Pepper. Then, when I re-introduced them, Frankie lit up even brighter, so happy to be with this other boy at long last. I wondered if he might also grab Pepper in a hug, and how Pepper might respond, but he's too sharp for that, as I should have known. Sometimes I forget that Frankie is an ordinary sixteen-year-old hetero to everyone but me and Doc, and that he spends his life at home and at school pretending to be straight, suppressing his flamboyance. He would never do anything, I'm now convinced, to put me into an embarrassing or awkward position with Pepper, or with the Huckfeldt brothers, or with anyone else. His greeting of Pepper, as it turned out, was normal enough, just a regular handshake and a cheerful "how's it goin, dude!" Pepper seemed confused, not sure how to behave with this new kid suddenly in the house, suddenly interrupting our familiar routine. It seemed strange to me as well, certainly more complicated, a three-way dynamic that demanded every bit of my attention.

Two other things happened today before Frankie showed up: First, Pepper noticed the extra abundance of Twinkies and Cherry Coke and other snacks in the kitchen, but assumed only that it had something to do with the holidays, an idea that I encouraged. If I had known then about Frankie's impending visit, I would have provided a fuller and more honest explanation.

The other thing Pepper noticed, of course, was the bathroom. He thought it looked great. Later, when Frankie joined us, it once again became the topic of conversation. He came right out and asked Pepper about it, cheerfully and frankly curious. "Dude," he wondered, "did you like Jake's new shower? Did you use it?" Not yet, Pepper told him, so Frankie said, "You gotta try it, bro, it's awesome! You can even use it like a sauna."

"A sauna?"

"Like a steambath, you know."

"Have you used it?"

Frankie seemed to realize, all at once, that he might have said too much. He glanced at me for advice, so I nodded and said, "We've used the shower a couple of times, but not the steam. Not yet." Sort of daring, I guess, telling Pepper that "we" (meaning Frankie and I, together) had used the shower. Did he catch the "we" reference? Certainly he must have. Smiling, he asked, "Did it work real good? Was it awesome?"

"So awesome, dude," Frankie said, fidgety with excitement at finally being with Pepper, talking to him, joking around. "You should use it."

Pepper informed us that he was clean and didn't need a shower. Frankie was bright enough to drop the subject, having made his point. He had taken my place on the floor—with my eager blessing—and was working his set of controls in a race against Pepper, their two little Indy cars zipping crazily around the big track. It was the perfect type of activity to spark a tentative friendship between them. I couldn't have planned a better way of bringing them together, or of freeing myself from having to play something that I found so tedious. Nothing tedious

about it for the boys, however. Frankie, at the beginning, declared that he loved racing sets but hadn't played with one since he was "a little kid." And this one, he added, was especially cool, the best one he'd ever seen. Pepper enjoyed the flattery and happily accepted Frankie as his new opponent.

I sat in the La-Z-Boy (pushed into one corner by the expanse of the racing set), drinking a beer and smoking the last of my cigarettes. (Yes, I was serious when I told Jimmy that I intended to quit.) Nothing to do but watch the boys as they alternately sat and kneeled over their controls, both of them bouncing on their knees or bouncing on their bottoms from the energy of the competition. Frankie was in his usual outfit of tie-dye and flannel and denim; his hair was loose against the very tops of his shoulders, the way I like it, long and fine and silky. Across from him, Pepper was dressed exactly as he'd been on his last visit, as if he'd never left, still in blue jeans and the black T-shirt with GIBSON USA shaped like a white guitar on the chest. I could see, at his neck, the two or three undershirts that he always wears layered beneath for extra warmth.

While they were playing, Frankie made a point of mentioning Pepper's haircut, asking why it's so short. Pepper seemed a little shy about it, a little self-conscious, and then confessed, "The barber took off too much, I think."

"It's OK," Frankie said, "it'll grow back fast."

"Now your head is going to get cold, Pepper," I teased him. "You'll have to start wearing a hat."

"Hats are evil," Pepper asserted with a creeping smile. Frankie laughed at him, not yet familiar with Pepper's silly jokes about "evil" things like onions and cameras. He told Pepper, "Dude, you should see my special pimp hat! It's in my car. I forgot to bring it in." Not even bothering with his ski vest, he dashed outside and got the outlandish stocking cap and wore it back inside. Pepper, when he saw it, let out one of his rare giggly laughs and actually fell onto his side. I don't think I've ever seen him laugh longer or harder than he did at that goofy hat of Frankie's, which is all garish stripes of red and green and yellow and has

a big fuzzy yellow ball on top, like something out of Dr. Seuss. Of course Pepper had to try it on, mostly at Frankie's urging, which prompted a whole new fit of convulsive giggles when he saw himself in my bedroom mirror. Frankie was standing behind him and manipulating the floppy hat into various positions on Pepper's head, both of them laughing and laughing at their own little show. Frankie used the laughter as a convenient way to keep bumping and touching the other boy, leaning against Pepper from behind, hanging on to his shoulders. I might have been jealous if I hadn't found the spectacle so exciting.

They must have been at it for fifteen or twenty minutes before finally putting the hat aside and returning to the racing set, first detouring to the kitchen for a root beer and a Cherry Coke and a bag of chips. The hat, very clearly, had been a smashingly successful ice-breaker, one of those small things that end up being so crucial. Once you've laughed together as long and as loud as Pepper and Frankie, the strangeness between you is gone forever, replaced not by friendship, no, but by the beginnings of it, by something that might grow into the real thing. That, at least, is what I hope.

### JAN. 3

Frankie left around eight o'clock last night, with a hug and a kiss for me and, for Pepper, a playful series of pokes and punches ending with a swat to the head, a very gentle swat that gave him the opportunity, clever lad, to feel Pepper's hair. Later, when he got home, he called to tell me how great it was to meet Pepper, what an awesome time he had, how exciting it was to be with him, actually touching him. "He's too cute, Jake, it's impossible," he kept saying into the phone, his tongue tripping and lisping over every "s" it encountered. "Does he know I'm gay?"

"No, no, that's not for me to reveal," I said.

"But he knows about you, right?"

“Oh yeah, he knows I’m gay, that I don’t like girls, that I’ll never get married. But I’m not sure, in his own mind, how much it has to do with actual sex, if you know what I mean.”

“You should tell him about me,” Frankie decided. “I want him to know.”

“Are you sure?” “Yeah, I thought about it a lot, totally, I’m very sure.”

“I’ll see if I can do it tactfully,” I promised him. Pepper was watching a rerun of Cheers while I talked on the phone in the kitchen. I asked him, when I was finished, if he had enjoyed Frankie’s visit. He nodded and started asking all sorts of questions about the other boy: Where does he live? Where does he go to school? How old is he? To me, his curiosity seemed to be his way of saying yes, I liked him a lot. It also provided the perfect chance to slip in some information about Frankie’s sexuality. I said, as casually as possible, that he had no girlfriend, no girlfriends at all, wasn’t interested in them. You know, I elaborated, the same as me. Pepper nodded again, silently considering what he’d just heard, then asked, “Will he be back tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “It’s possible. He had fun here with you.”

“Did he like my racing set?”

“You know he did,” I laughed, forcing a grin from Pepper. He was beside me on the hide-a-bed in the living room with one of the tiny cars in his hands, turning it over and over as if inspecting it for damage. I put one arm around him so that he could settle himself against my side, comfortably slumped with his head back against my shoulder. I kissed the top of his head, strange to feel his curls so short against my lips, although the delectable wooly fragrance was the same as always. When I saw and felt him beginning to doze against me, I kissed him again and suggested that he take off his clothes. He mumbled, “No, I’m too tired,” and then rolled away to his own side of the mattress, pausing to put aside the toy car and take off his glasses before covering himself with the blanket. At least his shoes were off, if nothing else. Honestly, I don’t think he was trying to ward me off by sleeping in his clothes. I think, as

he said, that he was tired and simply couldn't be bothered with undressing. Besides which, he had stayed fully dressed all evening because of his friend with the new games, whose phone call had been expected at any moment.

That call never came last night, but it did come today. More accurately, it came from Pepper's mother, who passed along the message inviting Pepper to his friend's house any time this afternoon. I drove him there myself, not far from here really, and that's where he is right now. He might or might not be back tonight. It's my turn now to be waiting hopefully for the phone to ring.

Something unusual happened while Pepper was still here. Joey, the middle Huckfeldt brother, came knocking on my front door just after lunch, when I was still chewing my last King Oscar sardine on a cracker (a repast that always makes Pepper sick to his stomach, just watching me). The boy was wearing an unzipped jacket and no hat, as if he'd just come running from his house on some urgent mission. Without any other greeting, he asked, "Are you that Jake guy?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm Jake. Jake Brahms. Are you Joey?"

He quickly nodded and said, "Y'all gave Dally a Power Ranger."

"Yeah, I did. Is something wrong?"

He was breathing hard and rocking from foot to foot. "Y'all got any more of them things?"

"Any more toys, you mean?"

"Yeah, them Power Ranger toys like you done give to Dally," the boy rattled on. He had that same pale, freckly, big-eared look of all the Huckfeldt brothers, with mousy brown hair that had been carelessly cut into messy, uneven bangs. I said no, I didn't have any more Power Rangers, sorry. Joey stared at me with eyes that are, I must say, strangely unsettling, like the eyes of a fever patient, intense and unblinking. He looks a bit like Jimmy, but he's slimmer in the body and has a thinner, more angular face. Mostly, though, it's those eyes of his, wide-set and grayish-green and staring intensely, that are so distinctive.

“So maybe y’all got some other stuff,” he finally said, trying to see around me into the house. I said no, don’t think so, and apologized again.

Pepper was watching and listening to all of this from a few feet behind me. Joey soon spotted him, and then saw the racing track (how could he possibly miss it?) spread tantalizingly across the living room floor. There was no way to deter the boy after that. He simply invited himself into the house (much like his brother Jimmy two days ago) and challenged Pepper to a race. He didn’t care who Pepper was or why Pepper was in my home. His interest was focused on the racing set and nothing else. That he was in an unfamiliar house with two strangers seemed never to occur to him, or to bother him in any way. Pepper went along with this impromptu encounter, but kept glancing at me as if to say, “Who is this kid? Why is he here?” In fact, I did take a moment to introduce them, just a quick exchange of names—and, of course, Pepper was already familiar with Joey as one of the new kids from across the street. Joey, on the other hand, knew nothing about Pepper and obviously didn’t care, focused only on playing with the newfound racing set.

It’s been fascinating to watch these boys—Pepper and Frankie and now Joey—find so much pleasure in this old-fashioned form of entertainment. I remember Doc once saying that boys today are interested in nothing but computers and video games. There’s truth to that, no doubt, but this racing set proves that boys can still find pleasure in more traditional ways. Maybe it’s the solid and concrete reality of the track and the cars that they find compelling, an atavistic sensory thrill that virtual reality has yet to provide. Manipulating objects, in other words, as opposed to images—maybe that’s what these boys find so captivating.

Whatever the explanation, Joey was here for an hour and would have stayed longer if Pepper hadn’t been called away to his friend’s



house (to play computer and video games, ironically). Now Pepper is gone, as I've already reported, and I'm waiting and hoping for his eventual return this evening. In the meantime, believe it or not, Joey came charging back here this afternoon (does he ever move at less than full speed?) accompanied by both of his brothers. All three of them at once! I've never encountered a group of such bold boys, no hesitation at all about barging into the home of a stranger for a little amusement. I wouldn't actually describe Dally as bold, of course, not in the same forward and outspoken way as his older brothers; but he does seem perfectly comfortable with whatever Jimmy and Joey propose, not at all bashful about tagging along or sharing in their mischief.

First thing I did, once the boys were here, was run across the street to inform their parents. Really, I had no choice. Keeping their presence here a secret, in the long run, would be impossible, and also pointless. Their parents need to know who I am, become acquainted with me, grow to think of me as a safe and familiar neighbor: Good old Jake from across the street, he's a nice guy, the kids love him! As it turned out, only the mother was home. Her name is Sharon. She's a grim-faced woman with bleached blond hair and a cigarette forever in her hand. I say grim-faced, but not unfriendly; she seems, in other words, to have lived a rough life and not to feel much like smiling. I introduced myself, welcomed her to the neighborhood, then revealed that her sons were in my house. "Your boys and my nephews have become friends," I told her, continuing the fabrication begun by Frankie. It seems as good a story as any. Is Frankie my nephew? Is Pepper? Who's to say yes or no? Sharon Huckfeldt, informed of the whereabouts of her sons, showed no surprise or concern. "If they make trouble," she said in her smoke-roughened voice, "just kick 'em out, you hear?"

"They seem OK so far," I said. The two dogs were woofing and woofing from behind the house, for no reason it seemed at first, until suddenly Mister Huckfeldt appeared through the back door. He had just returned from his job at the poultry factory on the east side of town. His

first name is Jim (which makes Jimmy a Junior, of course). In fact, he looks much as I'd imagine Jimmy looking as an adult, not very tall but impressively sturdy and muscular and with the same reddish brown hair. His response, when told about his sons, was identical to his wife's, sort of a "what else is new?" shrug and nod. He added, while offering me a beer that I gladly accepted, "Y'all let me know if them hooligans give you any trouble, man, and I'll whip their ass!"

"They seem OK so far," I said again. Jim Huckfeldt appeared unconvinced and offered once more to whip ass (or "whup" ass, as he said it) should his sons (the "hooligans") get out of hand. As for any concern or suspicion about me, the man who has befriended their three young boys, he and his wife showed not a trace.

When I came back home, I found Jimmy and Joey playing with the racing set and Dally with his Power Ranger, which he'd brought with him. All of them had cans of pops from my refrigerator. Jimmy even had his shoes off, looking as comfortable as he might in his own living room. I told him and his brothers about my brief visit with their parents. "They know you're here," I said, "and they know you've met my nephews."

Joey, without glancing away from his racing car, asked, "Who's your nephews?"

Jimmy, also without glancing up, said, "You know, man, that Frankie kid and. . . and. . ."

"Pepper," I said helpfully.

"They're his nephews," Jimmy confirmed for the benefit of his brothers. I was sitting behind him, at a slight angle, so I could see that he was grinning; but he never glanced around, never looked at me. This "nephews" business has apparently become our little joke, our very private little joke. It's scary, but he already seems to know exactly who and what I am. He's too clever, this boy Jimmy.

Am I jumping to conclusions? Consider this: While he was kneeling on the floor and working the controls for his car, Jimmy kept leaning forward in a sort of "bowing to Mecca" position with his butt in

the air, aimed right at me. I could see the strip of bare skin between his pants (the khaki ones) and his shirt, which was loose and rode slightly up his back every time he leaned forward. Innocent enough, I suppose, except for the way he kept working his ass for me to see, spreading his legs as he kneeled forward so that he was down almost flat with his back arched and his rear end wagging slowly in my direction. Just my imagination, you still might say, but I don't believe it. Jimmy Huckfeldt, I'm convinced, knows precisely what he's doing. (And don't forget the snowman with the snowcock that he built last week!)

Joey, in his own way, is just as strangely provocative as his big brother. He never stops moving, bouncing, chattering, yelling, whooping. He's clinically hyperactive, I'm sure. Frankie can be similarly hyper and fidgety when he gets excited, but nothing quite like Joey, whose eyes even seem to shout. He has one special habit that I noticed earlier while he was playing with Pepper, and again—displayed even more frequently and blatantly—while he was playing with Jimmy. He bounces from position to position, you see, and often ends up on his belly with his hips thrusting against the floor. At first, I thought it was just his over-energetic style of play, getting his whole body into the action, bouncing from excitement. But I kept watching, and I'm convinced that he was actually humping the floor—not for my benefit, no—not for show—just a natural thing for him to do, like a dog humping a table leg. Needless to say, his dick must get hard when he does it. With those baggy jeans, though, who can tell?

While his brothers were busy with the racing set, Dally sat beside me on the couch, his Power Ranger on his lap. "It's his favorite toy now," Jimmy told me when they first came in. I let him (Dally, that is) work the remote control for the TV, which seemed to please him more than you'd expect, a puzzlement until he revealed in his whispery little voice that his family never had cable in Missouri, and doesn't have it here either (not yet, at least)—so it's all new to him and all interesting. I

wasn't surprised that we spent most of our time watching cartoons and professional wrestling. After a while, I suggested to Dally that he take off his hat. I'd never seen him without it, that John Deere foam-and-mesh baseball cap which looks so large on his head. He took it off obligingly, quickly, like someone accustomed to following orders. He has a little round head fuzzy with short reddish-blond hair which whorls up naturally in front. The skin of his forehead was banded red from the pressure of his cap. I ran my hand one time over his head, over his hair, and said, "There, that's better, more comfortable." Jimmy glanced back to see what I was talking about, discovered nothing of particular interest, then went back to racing. Dally, when I ran my hand across his head and said that he looked better, more comfortable, agreed with quick birdlike nods and a grin that showed his mouthful of missing teeth.

Time to finish this entry.

#### LATER—SAME DAY

Jimmy and Joey were such distractions today that I neglected a couple of details about little Dally. While he sat beside me and worked the remote control, I noticed that he's a mouth-breather, and learned eventually from him and from Jimmy that he suffers from asthma. He has the sound of someone breathing loudly and raspily in deep sleep, about ready to start snoring. Poor kid, it must be miserable to labor so constantly for breath. He keeps an inhaler in the pocket of his jacket, but according to his own account, seldom needs it or uses it. His asthma is troublesome, but not acute.

I don't know if there's a connection to his asthma, but Dally is in the habit of sucking his thumb while he's sitting quietly and, for example, watching television. Truth is, it actually seems to ease his breathing, to relax him perhaps, when he has that thumb in his mouth. Jimmy, right before they all left, saw him doing it and started teasing him about it—for my benefit, I think. "Dally, man, don't be such a

baby,” he said. The little boy ignored him. Jimmy walked to the couch on his knees and gently removed the thumb from Dally’s mouth, then surprised me by replacing it with his own. That’s right, yes, he put his own thumb into Dally’s mouth. “See,” he grinned at me, “he’ll suck your thumb too, Jake, he ain’t picky about it!” He always calls me Jake, Jimmy does, as if we’re old friends. I said no, thanks anyway, I’ll take your word for it. Jimmy was grinning and laughing that little chuckly laugh of his and holding his thumb steady while Dally, compliant and expressionless, continued sucking on it. “See there,” Jimmy insisted, “he likes it, he ain’t picky about it. Ain’t that right, Dally?” The little boy nodded, but seemed to be only half listening, and was actually changing channels with the remote while he sucked on Jimmy’s thumb. I said OK, that’s fine, maybe some other time. The whole situation was sort of exciting but also sort of unsettling, especially when Joey, at the same time, started banging two empty pop cans together and singing along with the TV (a music video by the Beastie Boys) in a loud, off-key voice. All the Huckfeldt brothers, taken together, can be rough on the nerves.

Now, to be fair, Jimmy was not bullying Dally or being mean to him during their peculiar thumb-sucking episode. He was grinning and chomping his gum (he always seems to be chewing gum) and treating the little boy quite gently, reminding me again of someone playing with a puppy, putting it through its tricks for the amusement of strangers. In their own screwball fashion, the brothers actually do seem fond of one another.

JAN. 4

I’m glad, in a way, that this week is over and that all of the boys will be going back to school tomorrow. (I’ll also be returning to work at the post office, which makes me not so glad.) The last few days have been too hectic and fatiguing. So many boys in and out constantly,

demanding so much attention. Be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes.

Pepper came back here last night, but only briefly, just long enough to eat some pizza and race a few matches against Frankie, who also was here for a Saturday visit. Pepper told me when I brought him back that he'd be returning to his friend's house to spend the night, giving them additional time to play those precious new games of theirs. So why did he come back here at all? I'm only guessing, but I think he felt guilty about deserting me, afraid I might be hurt, and wanted to show his affection with a return visit, however brief. Well, yes, I was disappointed, but Frankie took the news harder than I did. He was already here when I brought Pepper back, and looked devastated as only Frankie can look when informed that Pepper would be leaving again soon. Those very squinty eyes of his, which can often look so moist and sorrowful, were moister than usual last night and also redder than usual, leading me to assume that he'd been smoking a generous amount of pot before showing up. His behavior was also slightly erratic and over-animated, slightly reckless. "No, dude, you can't possibly be serious," he moaned when given the news about Pepper. "You're breaking my heart!"

Pepper laughed and asked, "Is your heart breaking for real? Are you sad?"

"Breaking totally, bro."

"Why?"

"Because," Frankie said, standing face to face with Pepper and holding him by the shoulders, "I thought you'd be here all night! You shouldn't leave so soon."

"We'll get a pizza," I told them, "and then you can have a few races. Before Pepper has to leave."

"By nine o'clock," Pepper reminded me. He tapped his watch for emphasis. Have I mentioned that he likes watches and often wears one? This particular one, last night, was a Bart Simpson watch that he's had

for a couple of months. It has a big face and a thick plastic strap and looks clumsily large on his skinny wrist. He tapped it, as I said, to remind me of his tight schedule. Frankie, still clutching him by the shoulders, said, “You won’t even have time to use Jake’s new shower!”

“I’ll be leaving too early,” Pepper nodded. “I can’t use it.”

“One of these times,” Frankie said, “maybe I can stay overnight, you know, when you’re here, I mean both of us.”

“Haven’t you ever stayed before?”

“No, not overnight, not so far. But dude, one of these times when you’re here, when we’re both here, we can use Jake’s awesome shower.”

Careful, I thought, don’t overdue it. Frankie was becoming too worked up, too excited, actually bouncing lightly on his toes as he held Pepper by the shoulders and kept chattering about the shower. Pepper, however, seemed comfortable with the discussion and was listening with a patient little grin. Because of his short hair, the shape of his head is more clearly visible than ever before, especially in profile, which is how I was watching him at that particular moment. It’s a distinctive head, with a skull that curves out gracefully in back like the large end of an egg—like those heads of pharaohs and princes in ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, roundly and regally protuberant in back. It’s a head that invites the most loving of caresses.

I said as much to Frankie when we were alone, after I’d driven Pepper back to his friend’s house promptly at nine o’clock. Frankie couldn’t agree passionately enough, then confessed that he’d just smoked another joint while I was away—because he was losing his buzz, and because he needed to mellow (his words, not mine). I shrugged and said OK, you can smoke if you want, even when I’m here. Thanks, thanks, thanks, he said, kissing me at the same time. I’ve never seen him so crazy with excitement. We were on the couch, and Frankie started going on and on about it being Pepper’s bed, and about sleeping with him if they ever stay together overnight, and sleeping naked, and giving Pepper a boner, and wondering how big Pepper’s dick is when

it's hard. "We're going to take a shower together, me and Pepper," he decided emphatically. He undid his jeans and shoved them to his knees so that I could get at his erection with my hand and with my mouth. "I'm so totally serious, bro, so totally serious, next time, or sometime, Pepper is going to take a shower here with me, I'm sure he will, I know he will."

"He might."

"You told him I'm gay?"

"Yeah, he knows."

"He doesn't care?"

"He doesn't seem to."

"What if he saw us now?"

"He would be slightly freaked out," I said, my mouth against the tip of Frankie's dick, that Tabasco-red dick which curves back banana-like against his scrawny belly. I could feel the blood-infused warmth of it against my lips. Frankie kept mumbling about Pepper, about the two of them getting naked and messing around. "Jake, dude," he finally wondered, "would you be jealous?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You won't be jealous?"

"More excited than jealous," I said. "Another man would make me jealous, but not you, you're a boy."

"It would be kinky," Frankie said with a gaspy hiccup of laughter, using his favorite new word. "Two boys for you to watch."

"My god, I can't even imagine."

"Two boys together?"

"I've never seen that. In real life, you know, just pictures."

"Never?"

"Never," I said again. "Just pictures." That must have been Frankie's cue, because he nudged my shoulder and said that I should get the camera, that I should take his picture while he jerked off. "You don't have any Polaroids of me," he pointed out. True, I said, very true, a dreadful oversight. I rushed for the camera to get some shots before



Frankie spilled his load. He was working away frantically with his left hand. Yes, he's left-handed, and uses his right hand to fondle his own balls whenever he's masturbating. I now have several Polaroids of him doing precisely that, a few from medium range showing the full length of him, head to toe, with his jeans and underpants shoved down and his tie-dyed and flannel shirts pulled up and everything in between starkly and nakedly on display. Also a few shots from closer in, taken as I kneeled beside him or stood over him, just the exposed middle of him with his banana-curved red dick in dramatic close-up. And, of course, a series of shots (four altogether) showing the moment of his ejaculation, one lucky photo even capturing the first and strongest release of his semen in mid-spurt, a perfectly white ribbon of it frozen forever as it geysers from his penis. Frankie declared the pictures "amazingly cool" and then said, "You should show them to Pepper."

"I don't think so, my dear."

"Or maybe you should show them to Jimmy Huckfeldt," Frankie laughed. He knew about the brothers coming to my house, and about Jimmy's brazen behavior. "You just wait and see, bro, I'll get Jimmy in the shower too, or even that Joey kid. They're both cute, especially Jimmy."

"You have big plans, Casanova."

"Dude, just think of all the awesome possibilities! It makes me crazy, really crazy."

"Take it easy, loverboy, settle down."

Frankie laughed again and said, "You should kiss me and make me shut up, Jake!" He was lounging there on the couch with his pants still down and the semen still puddled on his bare belly. I was happy to kiss him.

## LATER—SAME DAY

After Frankie went home last night, I was looking at the pictures of him, enjoying them, but also thinking that my old Polaroid camera has

become inadequate, insufficient. There's a sale right now on camcorders at the Sears downtown, and I'm severely tempted to stop there tomorrow after work and buy one. In fact, just today Joey Huckfeldt said that we should make a movie. He's always blurting out ideas like that for no apparent reason. "We oughta make a movie!" he yelled while playing with the racing set. I asked, "What kind of movie?" He yelled back, "It don't matter, just a movie!" Not a bad idea, really, which is why I'm sure, thinking more about it, that I'll be buying a camcorder tomorrow with plenty of cassettes. If Joey wants a movie, then a movie we shall make.

They were here again, the three brothers, as I've just mentioned. They showed up early, too early for my taste. I like to sleep late whenever I have that luxury, also to relax and read the Sunday papers, neither of which was possible this morning when the Huckfeldt boys came pounding on my front door. Is this how it will be every weekend? Too much of a good thing, for sure. Jimmy and Joey, and then Joey and Dally, played with the racing set for a while, which is when Joey yelled his random comment about making a movie. After waiting long enough to be polite, I informed them that I needed to leave in order to do my weekly grocery shopping. No problem, Jimmy announced, we'll come with you! Whoa, I told him, wait a minute. No, he insisted, seriously, we can go, you don't gotta worry none. I hemmed and hawed a bit and then said OK, well, at least tell your parents. They won't care, Jimmy said. You have to ask them, I said, or you can't come with me.

Jimmy ran across the street to get the permission that he insisted, one last time, was unnecessary. Joey and Dally, meanwhile, clambered outside and into my Volvo without waiting for any reply. They must have known that Jimmy was right, that their parents would never object to our expedition. I'm getting the impression, in fact, that Jim and Sharon Huckfeldt are happy to get their sons out of the house in any way possible, even if it means consigning them to a virtual stranger. Very different, I'm thinking, from Frankie's parents, or Ryan's. The Huckfeldt boys, it seems, can come and go as freely as a pack of

neighborhood dogs (more freely than their own carefully confined hounds, for that matter). It didn't take long for Jimmy to come running back. His mother emerged briefly onto their front porch (like the ghost of Helen Dillon, I thought for an instant) to wave at me with the cigarette she was holding, a nonchalant gesture of "go ahead and take them." Jimmy threw himself into the bucket seat beside me (his brothers were in the back) and shook his head and said, "Now, see there, I just wasted my fuckin time!"

"I didn't want to get arrested for kidnapping," I replied.

"Kidnappin? For what?"

"For driving away with three young kids without their parents' knowledge or permission. How about that?"

"It ain't never gonna happen, man," Jimmy said, shaking his head and chuckling.

"Not in a million years," Joey practically shouted into my ear. "Nobody can't kidnap us!"

"OK, OK, if you say so."

"If they tried to kidnap me, you know what, Jake?"

"No, Joey, what?"

"I'd shoot 'em, that's what I'd do!"

The boy kept shouting from the back seat throughout our entire brief drive to the store—reading billboards, reading street signs, commenting on other cars, singing bits of songs, making up jokes that popped into his head. He was just as hyper-animated at the store itself, the chattery center of our little group, with Dally tagging along behind and Jimmy chewing his gum and grinning in that smartass way of his. The job of pushing the cart went, at first, to Joey, but he soon became such a hazard—banging into shelves and displays and other shoppers—that I ousted him and awarded the job to Dally, who responded with a smile of, I'd call it, delighted astonishment. He's like a little scavenger fish in Joey's and Jimmy's wake, thrilled by any morsel of fun that happens to float in his direction.

It was snowing by the time we got back to the car—big wet flakes that plopped almost like raindrops when they hit—giving me the perfect opportunity to ask the boys about their snowman. I told them I'd seen it in their front yard and had been very impressed. "Yeah," Jimmy laughed, "that was pretty funny, man."

"Extremely funny." "Was you watchin us make it?" "Off and on."

Joey tapped my shoulder from the back seat and said, "But Jake, you know what?"

"What, Joey?" "D'you know it had a boner?"

"Yeah," I said, "a rather large one."

All the boys burst out laughing at that, Joey writhing in his seat as if being tickled. That's the way he always laughs, whether sitting or standing, almost doubled over and writhing as if someone is poking and tickling him around the stomach. I waited until they were nearly laughed out, then said something about "Frosty the Bone-man" that made them all start again even louder than before. Jimmy finally said, "That snowman was the biggest fag in the world."

"You made him that way," I pointed out.

"He was that way all by hisself," Joey yelled from behind me. "He took his own clothes off!"

To my surprise, even Dally chipped in, cheerfully echoing his brother's comment, "He took his own clothes off!"

"So," I asked over my shoulder, wondering how Joey might respond, "what were you and Jimmy doing to him?"

"We wasn't doin nothin at all."

"It didn't look that way to me."

"Well, anyway," Joey said, his face reddened from laughing so hard, "you know what, Jake?"

"What?"

"That snowman had a boner and I ate it!"

Another barrage of laughter followed, and then we were back home and the boys were off to play in the snow, under-dressed as always in their jackets and baseball caps and ratty gym shoes. I was left alone to

contemplate our wild conversation in the car, as I've been doing ever since. These Huckfeldt kids might do anything, no limit to their devilry, sexual energy oozing from them like sweat. (Not so much with Dally, of course; he's still so young; but he's a Huckfeldt, and nothing he might do with his brothers would surprise me.) That's all very exciting, yes, the stuff of fantasy and daydream; three of the Lost Boys from Never-Never Land suddenly living in the house across the street; nothing could hold more promise of dark and delicious pleasure. But the promise (I should say the threat) of danger is just as great, just as palpable. Especially with Frankie involved. And Pepper. Possibly even Pepper. So many boys. Too many.

This afternoon, I received a glimpse of pandemonium. I brought Pepper here, from his friend's, at two o'clock. We had intended to see the new Spielberg dinosaur flic playing at the multiplex on Henderson Street; and even when Frankie showed up, it still seemed like a workable plan for the three of us. But then the Huckfeldt brothers descended like the wrath of hell and the situation quickly became a noisy free-for-all. Enough snow had fallen by then to provide excellent ammunition for a snowball fight, as well as plenty of material for a snowman. That's how the boys, all five of them, spent the remaining daylight hours, outside romping and chasing one another and hurling snowballs, then collaborating on a giant snowman in the Huckfeldt's front yard, built on the remnants of the one from Christmas week. They encouraged me, from time to time, to come out and join them, but I opted to stay inside and watch through the window. It was inevitable, especially with me as their audience, that Jimmy and Joey should reproduce their phallic handiwork on this new snowman, packing the slushy snow around a long stick to craft a spectacular erection. First time, it fell off when only half finished, but Jimmy quickly reattached it and went back to work, helped along by Frankie and (of all unlikely people) Pepper himself. Joey had drifted away by then and was making angels in the snow with Dally.

Did Pepper realize what he was helping to create? I couldn't hear their conversation, of course, but I'm sure Jimmy must have been providing a graphic commentary as they worked. Pepper was laughing at him and looked to be having a wonderful time, no trace of the shy modesty that always plays a part in his relationship with me. Not unusual, really; I'm aware that kids behave differently around adults than they do around other kids; still, rather startling to see Pepper happily shaping and smoothing a snowman's boner.

It was getting dark by the time the boys finally completed their masterpiece. I decided to do something special for them and hurried to the kitchen to make five mugs of Swiss Miss hot chocolate, an easy and fast job with a microwave. I was just finishing when the whole gang came storming into the house, banging the door and stomping their snow-encrusted shoes. Only Frankie, in his combat boots, was properly shod for the occasion. I had insisted that Pepper wear one of my stocking caps (a gray one with a postal insignia in front); it was now frosted white with snow, as were his pants and his coat. The other boys were just as thoroughly covered, all of them together looking like a snowy band of Arctic explorers. My first thought, confronted with this snowy mess, was for the safety of the racing set. I commanded the boys back outside to the porch to brush themselves as clean as possible. Frankie assumed the role, you might say, of my second-in-command, getting himself cleaned off and then helping the other boys do the same, giving each of the Huckfeldt brothers a quick brushing with his hand across their backs and legs before tending to Pepper. Very special attention he gave to Pepper, using both hands to hold him and brush him and turn him and brush him some more, swiping slowly and carefully across the front and back of Pepper's coat, then up and down the front of his jeans, then the back of his jeans, even lifting the bottom of Pepper's coat to brush and pat his snowy backside more efficiently. Pepper hadn't worn his glasses out to play, and wasn't wearing them now, so he had sort of a baffled and bleary stare as Frankie gently manhandled him.

Inside, Frankie continued to serve as my trusty lieutenant. I instructed everyone to remove shoes and coats and hats and leave them by the door, an effort that Frankie supervised while I fetched the mugs of hot chocolate from the kitchen. In the minute or so that I was gone, Frankie had taken my instructions a logical step further and convinced everyone to remove their soggy pants and socks, which they were all busily doing when I returned. Even Pepper! I voiced grateful approval for this unexpected initiative, told them to put their pants and their socks on the two big steam radiators against the wall, then passed out the hot chocolate, a pleasant surprise that made each of the boys smile. Such a sight, all five of them in nothing but shirts and underwear—white briefs for Pepper and Frankie and Jimmy, Batman briefs for Joey, and what appeared to be red Superman Underoos for Dally—their shirts mostly covering them, of course, but still plenty of chances to see more whenever they bent over, or sat, or sprawled on the floor. I wondered if someone might be inspired to undress completely, but no one was, and no one did, even when I guided the conversation not so subtly toward sex by talking about their horny snowman. “Dude, it’s a genuine work of art,” Frankie enthused.

“He’s got a fuckin big one, that guy,” Jimmy said, meaning the snowman, I assumed. Joey laughed and said, “But Jake, but Jake, you know what?”

“What, Joey?”

“You know what?” he asked again. Frankie squinted at me and at Pepper and bobbed his head laughing, thoroughly tickled by Joey’s silly, stammering excitement. “You know what?” the boy asked for a third time, making Frankie (and me, and Pepper) laugh even harder. “What, Joey?”

“That snowman has a boner again! But I didn’t eat it this time!”

Everyone exploded at that, a frenzy of laughter that had Jimmy rolling on the floor and holding his stomach (one of those chances to see the white briefs beneath his shirt). He was on the floor already, I should explain, because he and Joey were racing Pepper’s cars. Pepper himself

was on the couch with me and Dally, the little boy between us. Frankie was on the floor in front of us, one hand holding his hot chocolate and the other resting loosely and casually on Pepper's right knee. I glanced at Pepper when Joey made his raunchy comment; he was holding his mug of chocolate close to his mouth, close to his face, enjoying the warmth of it, and he was laughing just as hard as everyone else. I reached around and behind Dally and patted the back of Pepper's head. He looked at me and kept laughing. "Dude," Frankie finally asked Joey, "so why didn't you eat this one?"

Joey was sitting cross-legged and rocking from side to side on his bottom. He was on the far side of the racing set, therefore facing us, and his rugby-style shirt was short enough to leave a clear view of the Batman Forever logo on the bulgy crotch of his underpants. (Only eleven years old, yes, but definitely a full and bulgy crotch.) "The snowman told me not to eat his boner," he explained, igniting another frenzy of laughter among the others boys. "He's too proud of it, he said!" He has a way of saying these strange things, Joey does, with a perfectly straight face and widely staring eyes, then responding to his own statement by doubling over and wriggling with giggles.

That pretty much exhausted our discussion of the snowman. The remainder of our time together was a haphazard shouting match of jokes and insults and profanity. Frankie, who kept hanging around and onto Pepper, announced to everyone that we were having an underwear party, one of his favorite expressions. Jimmy chuckled with a wad of chewing gum clamped between his front teeth. Joey took the expression and started singing an "underwear party" song that sounded something like Jingle Bells. His hand kept darting down to scratch himself between the legs and to pluck and pull at the fabric of his underpants, at the words Batman Forever and the picture of Batman himself in a circle of scarlet on his crotch, somehow reminiscent of a Japanese rising sun, of samurai regalia. Dally listened and watched and said almost nothing, his thumb frequently in his mouth to calm his asthmatic breathing. I had my right arm around his shoulders, which allowed me not only to hold him warm



and cuddly against my side but also, at the same time, to reach and touch Pepper, to rub Pepper's shoulder, to pet Pepper's hair.

Frankie, not I, finally had the presence of mind to get the Polaroid and snap a few pictures: One of Pepper with his leg up on the couch and his chin resting on his knee, Fruit of the Looms fully displayed. One of Joey on the floor near the racing set, his mouth opened in song and his hand absentmindedly scratching at Batman. Also two shots of Jimmy, probably the best, definitely the most titillating. In the first, he's on his knees (also near the racing set) with one hand clutching himself between the legs and the other flipping the bird, a nasty scowl on his face, the very picture of bold and lusty defiance. In the second, he's wearing Frankie's "pimp hat" and has adopted the persona of sexy provocateur, a classic pose with one hand lifting the front of his shirt while the other hand tugs down the side of his underpants to bare some hip—and just enough of the groin to show a few pubic curls on that exposed side. What might his next pose have been? No way of knowing because the camera, at that point, ran out of film. I won't be buying any more. No need for it. Tomorrow, I'll have a new camcorder to replace the Polaroid.

I can't end this without making special mention of Jimmy's extraordinary legs, as smooth as polished marble and swollen with muscle at the calves and thighs. I would bet, from the look of him, that he pumps iron. His ass, beneath those clingy white briefs, is every bit as muscular and solid-looking as his legs. He's what you might call a young hunk, I believe.

The photo session instigated a brief discussion between Frankie and Jimmy about their respective earrings. While he was still holding the camera with the last photo dangling from it, Frankie stepped closer to Jimmy and touched the little silver stud in Jimmy's left earlobe. Jimmy took off the floppy stocking cap he was still wearing and swatted Frankie with it, like "hey, get away, quit touching me!" But he was

grinning, and actually ended up returning the gesture of friendly curiosity by examining and complimenting Frankie's earrings, two of them today—a gold stud in his left ear and a little gold hoop in his right. “You done pierced both ears,” Jimmy observed, perhaps enviously, I’m not sure.

“My mom and dad bitched about it,” Frankie confessed.

“Y’all got anything else pierced, man?”

“I thought about here,” Frankie said, touching his left nostril, “but I decided it might be, you know, unnecessary.”

“And,” I said, “your parents would have killed you, right?”

“Dude, that’s probably true.”

“You know what, Frankie,” Joey suddenly yelled to him, “tomorrow you oughta get your pecker pierced!”

That brought another eruption of laughter from the whole group, including Pepper, who was on the floor to take Jimmy’s place at the racing set. I’ve been wondering for months how Pepper might respond to a more testosterone-charged environment of cussing and farting and talking crudely about body parts and sex. Now I know, and the answer is that he responds the same as any normal boy, laughing and enjoying himself just like everyone else (especially when I’m not right beside him, as I witnessed earlier when he was outside building the snowman). He was certainly comfortable with our “underwear party” while it lasted, happily kneeling there on the floor in just his underpants and black T-shirt. Frankie, just before the party broke up, knelt beside him and put one hand on his back as if to offer encouragement during his race. Twice, out of excitement, Pepper rose on his knees and bent slightly forward over his controls—and, both times, Frankie quickly took advantage by patting him smack on the seat of his briefs. Pepper hardly seemed to notice.

Later, when we were once again alone, Frankie and I both got naked for a furious session of sex. He wanted me to fuck him, said he needed it, said he wanted to explode, kept begging me to do it harder, to

get in deeper. He came twice over the course of an hour and had tears of exhaustion in his eyes when we finally groaned to a finish.

How, I'd like to know, can I ever describe or explain any of this to Doc?

JAN. 9

A week of blessed tranquility since my last entry. I'm no longer picking up Pepper each day after school, not this semester, which makes my life a bit easier, even if I do miss the daily contact with him. I have the suspicion, in fact, that my lovely little idyll with Pepper may have ended, that our days and nights of luxurious privacy have been replaced by something larger and noisier and harder to control, and that I need to keep reminding him, as the weeks and months go by, how special he is to me. I may lust after Jimmy or Joey or whoever, it's true, but I love Pepper. He's my boy, my sweetheart.

My new camcorder is resting beside me on the couch. It's a Sony, and I've spent the last few days learning to use it as proficiently as possible. I also have a bounteous supply of cassettes, hours and hours of potentially devastating and incendiary footage. This is the threshold—right here, right now, today as I write this. What started so slowly with Pepper in October has now accelerated into full stampede; what seemed merely possible is becoming a vivid reality, and not just with one boy, but with many (six, if you include Ryan); what was fantasy is gradually coming to life in a chaotic feast of asses and cocks and Underoos. This camcorder, I'm thinking, might be the very thing that propels all of us over that precarious threshold, no turning back, no retreat.

We've had a great deal of snow this week, including an actual blizzard Wednesday that canceled school just three days into the new semester. Ryan was home when I arrived to deliver the mail at his house

on Tompkins Street, our first encounter since before Christmas. That's why I mentioned him in the previous paragraph, because he seems to be lurking on the sidelines, eager to enter the game but waiting for the right opportunity. I should have written about him Wednesday night, I know, but my workday was exceptionally difficult and tiring with all the snow and I had no energy for updating this journal.

I'll report now, therefore, that Ryan Fox was hotly displeased with me for being out of touch these past few weeks. I apologized, standing sheltered from the snow storm on his porch, but he said, "Well god, why were you on a stupid vacation anyway?"

"Everybody needs a vacation, Ryan."

"You were gone forever!"

"Just about ten days."

"You even missed my latest tournament, but I don't care," the boy grumbled. "My brother was home from college, and he came to see me." His bowl of yellow hair had been cut recently, shaved nearly clean around the back and sides to keep its perfectly round shape. His Walkman headphones, which he wears so often, were pushed back off his ears a couple of inches to allow him to hear. I apologized again, promising to come to his next tournament to see him swim. "Anyway," I said, "I read about you in the newspaper. You won two events, right?"

Ryan actually smiled, caught off guard by my question, flattered by it. Yeah, he said, two events, should have been three but he got a bad start in the fifty butterfly and couldn't overcome it. He used the word "overcome" just like that, probably in imitation of his coach. I offered sympathy for his bad luck and then tried to back away and resume my route, but Ryan wasn't ready to let me go. He grabbed roughly at the sleeve of my blue coat and said, "I bet you don't know what I got for Christmas!"

"Something spectacular, I imagine."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," I laughed, "maybe. . . maybe a new computer?"

“Wrong,” Ryan crowed happily. “Don’t you know I got a computer last year?”

“No, I didn’t know about that.”

“Here, look, I’ll show you.”

“I don’t have much time, Ryan.”

The boy ignored me. He wanted to show me not only his computer, I soon discovered, but also his new CD player and all of the other toys and games he’d collected this Christmas—among them, I noticed, the same Power Ranger action figure I’d come close to giving him. He was dragging me by the sleeve through his house to show me these things. I wouldn’t have blamed his mother for dialing 911 when she saw me. In fact, she tried gamely to be polite even before recognizing me as her regular mailman. Who did she think I was at first? Just some stranger from the post office, I guess. I laughed from embarrassment and apologized for intruding so unexpectedly. She finally realized, at that point, who I was, although she couldn’t remember my name. Ryan said, “Don’t you know his name is Jake?”

“Oh my lord,” his mother said, “you’re the Jake he’s been talking about!”

“Me?” I asked stupidly.

“It’s the funniest thing,” she said, “but I thought Jake was another boy from his school.” She was wearing a pink sweat suit and holding a cup of coffee as she told me this, explaining that Ryan had been griping about Jake being gone, about Jake not coming to the swimming meet—about Jake this and Jake that. “I thought you were talking about some boy from school,” she said again, this time directly to Ryan.

“There’s no kid named Jake,” Ryan said, giving his mother one of those disdainful glances I’ve received so often myself. He was chewing gum today (cinnamon, from the smell of it), and he was gnawing at it with his side teeth the way he does with everything he chews—like his french fries, for example. His mother offered me a cup of coffee right about then. I accepted gratefully, happy for anything warm, then gulped it too quickly and burned my mouth. The woman, now that she knew the

surprising identity of this Jake character, was asking her son, “Why are you so obsessed with our poor mailman?”

Ryan was predictably embarrassed by this line of questioning and mumbled that “obsessed” is a stupid word, and that he just wanted to show me his stuff from Christmas—and anyway, he continued, his mother should know who Jake is because there’s no kid named Jake at school—all of which, in the end, answered nothing. How was I supposed to react to this discussion? I’m not sure, but I put on my best nonchalant smile and said, “You know, Ryan, you should’ve called or come over to see me. My nephews were around. You guys could’ve kept one another entertained.”

“Oh sure, right.”

“He knows where I live,” I said to his mother.

“On Whitman Street,” Ryan said, also to his mother. “It’s by the junior high.”

“You have an open invitation,” I said to the boy. “Just for the record.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” Ryan’s mother told me. Was she accepting or rejecting my invitation on behalf of her son? Either way, I was falling behind schedule and needed to leave. I was half expecting to hear from Ryan later that night after work, or maybe last night, but I never did. Still, it was an interesting visit, a revealing visit, no secret any longer that Ryan has a healthy curiosity about me and about some sort of friendship between us.

## LATER—SAME DAY

I surprised Pepper today by picking him up after school and driving him home, where he and his mother and I played a game of Hero Quest and then had dinner together, Cantonese food delivered from Chin Lee’s on Main Street. Pepper, while we were eating, asked about Frankie and the Huckfeldt brothers, wondering if they’d been back since Sunday. No, I said, then explained to Holly who Pepper was talking about—or started

to explain, because she already knew. "Pepper told me what a zoo your house was over the weekend," she revealed. "What are you, the Pied Piper or something?"

"I'm beloved by the youth of America."

"How can you stand it?"

"It's a little out of hand, I admit."

Pepper, poor thing, has a nasty cold, and was sneezing and coughing throughout the entire visit. "He probably should've stayed home today," Holly admitted. But he went to school anyway and is now too sick for anything but rest and recuperation until Monday. In other words, I won't be seeing him anymore this weekend.

I won't be seeing Frankie either. He called and told me, in a croaky and almost unrecognizable voice, that he has a cold and needs to stay home. Don't be too depressed, I said, Pepper has a cold just like you and won't be here either, so you won't be missing any fun. He felt better after that, I think.

No sign of the Huckfeldt boys.

Work tomorrow.

JAN. 10

The weather was pleasant today, so I drove out to Doc's as soon as I finished dinner. He had been gathering wood from the pile behind the house and was just tying down the protective tarpaulin when I arrived. We went inside and he lit a cigarette and offered me some cold chicken (left over from his supper) and a piece of rhubarb pie. I declined the chicken but gladly accepted the pie, then had a few of my beers from his refrigerator and (I might as well confess it) a few of his English Ovals. I had brought two cartons with me from the tobacco shop in Sandburg. Doc was pleased to get them; he hasn't been to town recently, he told me, partly because of the snow storm and partly because he's been feeling "under the weather lately, no energy, not a lick." I didn't tell

him, but I could see, just from looking at him, that he wasn't his usual robust self. He seemed pale and his face had that same intense and humorless expression that I noticed on my previous visit.

He was exceptionally worked up tonight, going on and on about boys in baggy clothing, about what a disgrace they are. "I find myself avoiding public places, crowds, even more than usual, anything to keep from seeing those goddamn clowns in their baggy pants."

"I know what you mean," I said.

"Do you? I'm not sure anyone else understands what's happening here. They've robbed the souls of an entire generation, just the males of course, the females still smug and stupid in their tight little short-shorts, everybody so stupidly content with this current arrangement!"

"You're right, it's a shame," I said, trying once more to be conciliatory, to calm Doc's agitation. He was almost yelling, and he had a fleck of saliva in the left corner of his mouth that, I kept thinking, shouldn't have been there. He stopped to light another cigarette, then returned quickly to his tirade about goddamn clowns in their ridiculous baggy costumes, all of them cowards and traitors, too blind and too stupid to see how they look or to know what they're doing or to understand their own self-betrayal, a lost cause, impossible for any of those body-phobic boys ever to celebrate their own beauty, impossible ever to uncover or display what has been covered and hidden for so long, but of course that's the whole point, the irreversibility of it, no turning back once you've ingrained the shame and the body-phobia, unacceptably queer for boys ever again to expose or display their well-guarded and long-concealed bodies.

I tried to change the subject two or three times, but Doc didn't seem interested in discussing anything beyond baggy clothing. He did finally ask about Frankie, and about Pepper, which gave me the chance to tell him about my constantly growing menagerie of boys. I didn't show him or tell him about the Polaroids of Frankie masturbating, and I didn't tell him about my new camcorder. He would think I'm being reckless, and would probably chide me about it if he knew, so I'm leaving some



details unspoken. Strange, keeping secrets from Doc, but he's never been so volatile and touchy before, and I now find myself withholding information that we would have happily shared in the past.

His rhubarb pie, by the way, was as good as ever. I had two pieces, also four beers, and got home before midnight.

JAN. 18

My first entry since visiting Doc last Saturday. No boys have been here to write about—not last Sunday, not this past week. Finally there was a fleeting encounter Friday evening with the Huckfeldt brothers as I was coming home from work. We talked for a few minutes, and I discovered that Jimmy gets back and forth from the high school on one bus while Dally and Joey shuttle between their school and home on another. It surprised me to learn that Dally and Joey attend the same school—Butler Middle School, to be exact. Joey, I would expect, but Dally is only in the third grade and goes to Butler (the boys tell me) because of overcrowding at the older elementary school across town. Another surprise is that Joey is still in the fourth grade, having been held back a year because of a “learning disability” and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, for which he's supposed to take Ritalin but seldom does). I asked him, “Do you know a kid named Ryan Fox? Blond hair? On the swimming team?”

“He's in my gym class, and geography, and English,” Joey said. “He's a big star.”

“A star?”

“Girls like him.”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Millions, I guess,” Joey shrugged. “But you know what? He's a jerk, I don't like him much.”

I didn't find out why Joey feels that way because he ran home with his brothers to watch Power Rangers before I could ask more questions.

Today, which is Sunday, I got to see Ryan himself when I attended his tournament at the high school in Stonerville (Frankie's home turf). His parents were there for a change, although they stayed for only a few events before gathering their coats and heading for the exit. Maybe I'm crazy, but I actually made a point of catching their eye and waving to them. I could see Mrs. Fox explaining to her husband who I am. He obviously didn't recognize me as his mailman or remember our previous meeting at his house before Christmas. I intercepted them on their way to the exit and praised their son (who had just won his first event of the day), then made a comment about my ex-wife and about the son I never get to see. "He's just about Ryan's age," I said. "They live on the coast."

"Oh my, that's a shame," Mrs. Fox said. Her husband agreed, although he seemed barely interested when I added, "That's why I have my nephews and their friends over so often, I guess. Because I get lonely for my own son."

"Sure," Mrs. Fox said, "I can imagine."

"And Ryan, of course, reminds me of him."

"He'll be very glad to see you here," the woman assured me. I smiled and said that I might give him a ride home, if they didn't object. Yes, that's fine, they both said, we'd drive him ourselves but we have another engagement. With that, they excused themselves and hurried out. I never like concocting stories about ex-wives and estranged sons and all that, but often it's unavoidable when living and functioning in the hetero world. A life of honesty and openness would be nice, but it's impossible, something I can't even imagine.

This was the second half of a two-day tournament for Ryan. He won three events altogether, then accepted my offer of a ride back to Sandburg. On the way, he produced a Payday candy bar from his gym bag and chomped at it with his side teeth while recounting every detail of his victories. I told him, when I could get a word in, about my conversation with his parents. I left out the part about my fictitious ex-

wife and son. Ryan's parents can mention it if they want, but I doubt that they'll bother, and I really don't care. The bogus information was meant for them, not for the boy.

When we got to town, I told Ryan that I needed to stop at my house on Whitman Street before I took him home. I didn't offer a reason. If he had asked, I would have improvised something, but he didn't. He was happy, I'm certain, for the opportunity to see my house for the first time, no explanation necessary. I gave him the usual tour. First, though, he very carefully and politely removed his shoes at the door, something he must do routinely at his own house. He seems somehow more sweetly vulnerable in his stockinged feet, maybe because of that dainty tiptoed strut of his, which is more conspicuous when he's not wearing shoes. He allowed me to put my hand on his shoulder as we wandered from room to room, also once or twice to touch his head and his perfect yellow hair, which was still slightly damp and smelled of chlorine. As always after one of his tournaments, the chlorine had reddened his delicate eyelids and ears and the bridge of his nose—although his eyelids and ears, I've noticed, always have a hint of natural redness to them—as do his lips, naturally reddened as if moistened with rouge. He was most curious about the racing set. I explained that it belonged to Pepper, which made Ryan respond with that peculiar sniffing expression, his nostrils flared, his mouth downturned. His reaction to everything else about the house had been “Oh wow, exciting” or “Oh wow, thrilling.” He also ridiculed me for not having a computer or a game system (such as Nintendo or PlayStation or whatever). The racing set, however, apparently intrigued or impressed him, at least a little.

Just as I was showing it to him, we were interrupted by someone pounding at the front door. My first thought, as ever, was a paranoid one, that Ryan's parents had reconsidered their decision and come, in a panic, to retrieve him. Instead, the noisy intruders were Dally and Joey Huckfeldt, bored and restless and looking for someone or something to amuse them. The brothers were surprised to see Ryan in my house, and Ryan was just as surprised to see them, especially Joey. “You guys go to

the same school,” I remarked. For Ryan’s benefit, I added, “Joey and his brothers live across the street.” I wrapped an arm around Dally’s shoulders and introduced him separately. He looked up at me from beneath his too-big John Deere cap and grinned. He doesn’t get to be the center of attention very often, after all. He’s such a quiet little guy, but he’s not bashful; he enjoys attention whenever he gets it, no different from his brothers in that respect. (Jimmy, by the way, was off to see “some stupid girl,” according to Joey. He apparently knows her from school. The usual hetero stuff, I guess.)

Ryan came across as strangely awkward during this encounter with the Huckfeldt boys. He’s not very good at being friendly, whether with me or with other kids. His meeting with Pepper several weeks ago was much the same, even though they eventually bonded over their mutual dislike of raw onions. Today he seemed more annoyed by Joey and Dally than anything else, sort of nervously defensive, like a cranky old man irritated by pesky kids. He accepted Joey’s challenge on the racing set and lost three times, then lost to Dally twice more, understandable given the Huckfeldts’ advantage in experience, but no consolation to Ryan. He doesn’t like to lose, and doesn’t accept it gracefully, griping after each race that his controls didn’t work, that his car was no good, that the whole racing set sucked anyway and only an idiot would want to play with it. After his second loss to Dally he announced that he had to go home because “it’s family dinner day” and because “I can’t keep wasting my time here.” Joey, getting right to the point, said, “Good, go home, bye!” I had just shown him my new camcorder and he was peering through the eyepiece. “I can’t see nothin outta this here thing,” he told me. He pronounced it “thang” just like Jimmy would. I informed him, laughing, that he had to turn on the power switch. “Hey, yeah!” he yelled, aiming the camcorder at various objects and people around the room. “Now we can make us a good movie!” I noticed, as he held the camcorder, that his hands are large and bony, as if they’ve grown faster than the rest of his body.

Ryan had stormed away from the racing set and was perched on the edge of the La-Z-Boy with his coat on and his arms crossed. Joey's cheerful exclamation of "Good, go home, bye!" hadn't helped his mood. Joey himself was oblivious as he put a cassette into the camcorder and started shooting everything and everyone around the house, including Ryan, who gave him a scowl that seemed more put-on than real. Much of Ryan's impatience and anger is for show, I think; or maybe just the only way he knows of relating to the world, to other people, something wrong with his social skills, some kind of emotional disorder. He comes across as bossy and obnoxious, but I actually feel sorry for him. I've seen glimpses of the gentler, more loveable boy beneath.

I took him home in time for his weekly family dinner and told him to come back whenever he wants, anytime—even tomorrow, which is Martin Luther King's Birthday, a free day for both of us. Back at my own house, Joey and Dally were still running around outside where I'd left them. They had wanted to stay inside while I was gone, but I wouldn't let them. Jimmy was also back by then, the tough guy himself with his pulled-down camouflage cap and his wad of chewing gum, as well as a beat-up and half-empty pack of Marlboro cigarettes that he'd acquired, mysteriously, at his new girlfriend's house. She lives a few blocks away, not far from the post office. Her name is Anita—Sanchez or Lopez or something Mexican. She's not actually his girlfriend, I guess. Jimmy says that she's a year older than he is, a sophomore in high school, very cute, very hot. The fact that she's Mexican doesn't seem to bother him, which surprises me a little, unfair perhaps, not every Ozark hillbilly has to be a bigot. At this point, he's still just sniffing around her with salacious intent, no boyfriend/girlfriend commitment so far.

Jimmy kept coughing as he told me these things. He's suffering from the same cold that has been plaguing nearly everyone around here. (Frankie, by the way, turned out to have more than just a cold. He's called me a couple of times, most recently yesterday, to let me know that

he has a full-blown case of flu and still feels “like shit, bro, I can’t even tell you.” I assured him once again that nothing very exciting has happened here since his last visit. He told me, in return, that he’s been calling Pepper on the phone while both of them have been sick, and that Pepper has now started calling him. They’re becoming “pretty good buds,” according to Frankie.)

But back to the Huckfeldt boys: They joined me uninvited in the house and helped themselves to cans of pop from my refrigerator. I guess we’re friends now. I still think of them as the “new kids” who’ve taken over Helen Dillon’s old house, a group of youngsters that I barely know and barely trust. Slowly, though, we’re arriving at a point of familiarity that feels more and more like friendship, less and less like an invasion of noisy strangers.

They’re getting bored with the racing set, I can see that clearly enough. Joey played with it by himself for a few minutes, then returned his attention to the camcorder to continue making his so-called movie, which consists of recording any person or object that enters his viewfinder. I was in and out of the room during this time, trying to do my laundry, Joey and his camera occasionally following me into the basement where I have my washer and dryer. Jimmy and Dally stayed mostly on the couch. It was obvious that Jimmy didn’t feel well; he kept coughing and sniffing and his eyes were droopy and red-rimmed. Dally, always asthmatic anyway, was also wheezier than usual, sniffing and coughing along with his big brother.

When I came back to the living room after doing a load of towels, I found the two of them, Jimmy and Dally, on the couch in a position that I hadn’t expected. The little boy was lying on his back with his head on Jimmy’s lap. He had Jimmy’s thumb in his mouth and was sucking it contentedly. Jimmy was using his free hand to pet Dally’s rusty-blond crewcut. They were groggy and indolent and hardly seemed aware of my presence in the same room. Joey was also there with us, still making his movie. I told him to record his brothers looking so cute together, which

he did, and which made Jimmy respond with a tired grin. He had his cap off. His shaggy hair isn't quite red enough to be auburn; it's a darker reddish brown, say chestnut, with just a hint of curl around the ears and neck, sexy as hell with those close-set and devilish greenish-brown eyes of his, and that long wolfish jaw, and that milky pale skin.

Cameras always put Jimmy into a playfully lascivious mood, it seems. Remember the naughty posing he did for the Polaroids? It's the same with most boys, of course—something about a camera that makes them behave in lewd and mischievous ways. Still, I wasn't prepared for what Jimmy did today while he was being videotaped. First he took his thumb from Dally's mouth and replaced it with his middle finger and started working that finger in and out, slowly then rapidly then slowly again. Dally, who had been practically asleep, opened his eyes wider and sucked compliantly on the finger, clearly not the first time he's done it, perfectly at ease. He stayed just as relaxed when Jimmy thought of something even better and said, "Hey, Dally, let's show Jake this here. Make sure y'all put this in your fuckin movie, JoJo!" (Just a quick note to point out that Joey's brothers always call him JoJo. From now on, in these entries, I suppose I should start calling him that as well.) Jimmy, as I was saying, came up with something special for his brother's movie: He reached down and undid Dally's jeans and opened them and then pulled down the front of the little boy's underpants (red Underoos, same as two weeks ago). Dally very agreeably lifted his bottom so that Jimmy could pull everything down farther, almost to his knees. "There now, look here," Jimmy said, "this here makes a nice movie! Right, Jake?"

"Sure, good idea."

Dally raised his head just a bit, just enough to look at the naked part of himself. "My pecker," he said quietly, helpfully, as if he needed to explain for my benefit. JoJo was recording all of this and laughing and now started yelling one of his impromptu songs. This one sounded like Happy Birthday To You and had lyrics that went, more or less, "Dally's wienie, little wienie, little little wienie, Dally's wienie. . ." And so on.

None of this bothered Dally in any way. No trace of embarrassment on his face. In fact, he lowered his head back onto Jimmy's lap and let his eyes droop as if he intended to doze. Jimmy was grinning—although more tiredly than usual, not with his typical rascally energy—and fiddling gently and idly with Dally's penis. "See," he said, "Dally likes this, me doin this, he's gettin hisself a nice little boner."

"Yes," I said from the La-Z-Boy, "he is. Very nice."

"This ain't sick or perverted or no bullshit like that."

"No, no, you're right."

JoJo was watching and singing and rocking from foot to foot, but had absentmindedly lowered the camera and was no longer recording. Jimmy suddenly noticed and ordered him to continue. "Don't stop, you dumbass, keep makin the fuckin movie!"

"You're the fuckin dumbass!"

"Jake can show it to them nephews of his."

"Pepper and Frankie," JoJo shouted, aiming the camera once more at his brothers on the couch. Jimmy nodded and said, "Hear that, Jake? Y'all can show this to them guys Pepper and Frankie."

"I might do that," I said. "What about Dally? What does he think?"

"They can look," Dally responded in his murmur voice, as if those other boys were already present and waiting for a peek. The truth is, I'm looking now, watching the video on my TV. JoJo's first movie—some of it badly focused as he danced and bounced around, some of it ineptly and comically misframed, but otherwise just fine for those six minutes and forty-two seconds that show Jimmy taking down Dally's pants and then playing with Dally's penis, coaxing it to stiffen while the little boy peers down at himself, at his own boner like a rigidly extended pinkie finger against his stark-white tummy. Six minutes of fondling can seem, when recorded on tape, like a lot of fondling, Jimmy's thumb and two fingers rubbing and rubbing and rubbing in close-up until Dally's "pecker" was as hard as it could get, and as red, a firecracker that wanted to pop. Jimmy fooled everybody just then (and I laugh now when I see it again) by announcing that Dally had managed to ejaculate.



“Look here,” Jimmy called excitedly, “Dally done spermed for real!” Not impossible, after all. I’ve known eight-year-olds who could produce a clear seminal fluid when they orgasmed. But Jimmy was only joking, and started laughing through clenched teeth at my gullibility when I approached to take a look. The video ends there, with Jimmy’s smug chuckling over a close-up of Dally’s little red throbbler.

Do I seem blasé about all of this? I’m not. Today’s performance had me practically shaking in my chair, somehow helpless and exhilarated at the same time, that old feeling of free-falling through a whirlwind. After his joke, Jimmy lost interest in fondling his little brother and lit one of his Marlboro cigarettes. Dally stayed where he was, with his pants and Underoos down to his knees. I guess you could say that he’s the antithesis of Pepper, the anti-Pepper, never giving a thought to modesty or hesitating to put himself on display. Imagine Pepper on the couch with a hard dick and three other people staring at him! Impossible.

Jimmy took a few drags on his cigarette but was coughing so hard that he finally gave up and put it out and went home, mumbling on his way out that he felt like “shit warmed over” (a self-diagnosis similar to Frankie’s but more colorful). Dally did up his pants and went with him. JoJo, forever perky, stayed for a while longer to putter from place to place and whistle and sing and clap his hands, no expression on his face, his starey gray-green eyes darting from object to object until he spotted my upright Hoover in a corner of the living room. “Hey, you know what, Jake? You know what? I can vacuum every floor for y’all!”

I smiled and said OK, but be careful of the racing set. Of course he ended up knocking into it with the Hoover despite my admonition, then moved on to the hallway like a happy little housekeeper. He might have done the whole joint if his mother, Sharon, hadn’t phoned to summon him home for supper. How did she know my number? I’m guessing that Jimmy saw it on my phone and memorized it and gave it to her. In any event, I passed the message to JoJo and put my hand on his shoulder to usher him to the door. He bounced along beside me and even put his arm

around my waist, and then made me laugh, startled, when he grabbed me with both arms as if to hoist me off the ground. “I’m pretty strong,” he yelled against my chest. “I can lift Jimmy clean in the air! I can lift you too probably but you’re a lot bigger.” His voice trailed off as he gave a heave and grunted and scrunched his face in furious exertion. He tried twice and then shook his head and shrugged, admitting failure. I took advantage of the situation by hugging him and kissing his messy brown hair. It had a sweaty, unwashed smell to it. The boy himself, in fact, always has a sweaty, unwashed, faintly pissy odor—not wholly unpleasant, just not clean. He didn’t seem to be bothered by my hug or my kiss as he ran off to his house across the street.

I sat down and watched the video as soon as he was gone, and I’ve watched it two times since. Something I should mention about Dally: His penis (circumcised, incidentally) is what you’d expect on an eight-year-old, but his testicles are a lovely surprise, bigger and plumper than you’d imagine, a pair of nice pigeon eggs in their pink sac. Must run in the family, I’d say, having seen Jimmy and JoJo in their underpants, both of them with full, bulgy crotches of their own. What I’m saying is that all of the Huckfeldt boys appear to have big balls.

#### LATER—SAME DAY

Frankie called again, feeling a little better, excited about a new idea of his. He told me that he’s going to get Pepper on the phone tonight and start jerking off and then tell Pepper about it. “Like that time I jerked off on the phone with you,” he said. “Remember?”

“Of course I remember.”

“Is it a good idea?”

“Phone sex with Pepper? Sure, it might work, I don’t know.”

“Dude, I bet he’ll jerk off with me if I start,” Frankie said, his voice still huskier than usual from sore throat and congestion. “I’ve got a good feeling about it, you know, like extremely optimistic.”

“You can measure your dicks together,” I joked.

“Oh dude, perfect, yes,” Frankie said. He promised to let me know “if anything kinky happens.” That was an hour ago, but I still haven’t heard back from him. I hope he and Pepper are having fun.

## LATER—SAME DAY

Intriguing news from Frankie, my Spy Boy: Pepper was away playing video games at his friend’s house when Frankie first called him. Holly let Pepper know about the call when he returned, and he then called Frankie back around nine o’clock. (Two notes: First, Pepper seems to like spending time with his video-game friend better than visiting me—at least for now, while their new games are still most enticing and entertaining. I’m trying not to feel slighted or jealous or hurt. Second, I should mention that Holly asked me about Frankie this past week over coffee and donuts at work. “What’s with this kid?” she wanted to know. “Why is he calling Pepper all the time?” I explained, as vaguely as possible, that he’s a harmless and good-natured boy who likes to yak on the phone—like most teenagers—and who gets along especially well with Pepper. Holly wanted to know if he’s “into drugs or anything like that.” No, I told her, nothing like that.)

What happened tonight, according to Frankie, was this: Pepper calls around nine o’clock and spends a few minutes talking to Frankie about some sort of Mortal Kombat game. Frankie asks Pepper what time he usually goes to bed, and Pepper says about ten o’clock on school nights, maybe midnight otherwise, like tonight, because tomorrow is a holiday. Frankie says, I always sleep in the nude, what about you? Pepper says he mostly sleeps in his underwear. Frankie asks if he ever watches the Playboy channel. I’ve seen it, says Pepper, but they don’t subscribe to it at his house. There’s some hot stuff on the Internet, says Frankie. Do you ever look at it? Yeah, says Pepper. He’s mostly just laughing softly at Frankie, not saying much, often simply echoing Frankie’s questions in that coy way of his (“Is it better to sleep in the nude?” or “Is the Playboy channel good?” or “Does the Internet have hot

stuff on it for real?”). Frankie thinks it’s funny and cute and happily continues to flirt—but more frankly now, more boldly. He asks Pepper where he is in the house. Pepper, whose mother just received a cordless phone for Christmas, is in his bedroom. Dude, that’s excellent, says Frankie, I’m in my bedroom too and I’ve been looking at about a million porno sites on my computer and I’m so horny it’s unbelievable! Pepper just laughs again and asks, Is it really unbelievable? Yeah, Frankie says, I’ve totally got a boner. Pepper laughs some more. Frankie keeps talking about how horny he is, that he needs to jerk off or else he’ll go crazy, that he’s going to take off his underwear and “do what comes naturally.” Pepper is listening. Frankie says something like, You must jerk off, right? I mean, dude, I was seriously jerking off when I was twelve, that’s for sure!

I can picture Pepper—in his room, probably on his bed with the phone cradled against his cheek, that sly little half-smile just barely curling the corners of his mouth. No way would he discuss such things with someone like me, creepy to be talking about masturbation with a grown man—but with Frankie, with another boy, maybe it’s OK, it might be fun, just goofing around. With Frankie, it’s like sneaking a beer or shoplifting a pack of gum or furtively smoking a joint—stuff you just don’t do with an adult, but perfectly good and acceptable mischief with another kid.

He admits to Frankie that, yes, he does “do it” sometimes. Frankie starts teasing and coaxing him to take his clothes off, come on, you’re in your bedroom anyway, nobody can see you, get naked like me, it feels good. Pepper finally says OK. Frankie, through the phone, can hear the faint rustling and commotion of the other boy undressing. He asks Pepper, Did you take off everything? Pepper says yes. Everything? Even your underwear? Yes, Pepper says, a big smile in his voice. Too bad we can’t use Jake’s shower, Frankie says. He keeps talking about the shower until Pepper agrees that they should use it (meaning together?) next time they have the chance. Frankie then announces that he’s already jerking off, couldn’t wait any longer, asks abruptly if Pepper cares that

he's gay. Does it bother you? Do you think it's really fucked up? No, Pepper replies. Frankie asks, What about you? Do you like girls? Pepper says yeah, they're OK, he likes to look at them. Frankie says, Dude, you should think about an awesomely beautiful chick and get a boner. Pepper laughs and wants to know who he should think about. Like those chicks on Baywatch, or maybe some cute girl at your school, Frankie says. He goes on and on about tits and pussies, doing his best to get Pepper excited.

They've been talking for about thirty minutes. Frankie tells Pepper to "do what I'm doing." Pepper goes into his fake boo-hoo sobbing but then says OK, I'm doing it. Frankie has gotten himself so worked up that he's ready to cum after just another moment or two. He announces this to Pepper, then describes to him in vivid detail exactly what's happening as he ejaculates, every squirt and dribble and drop. Another minute or so passes and Pepper announces that he too is finished. Frankie says, What happened? Pepper replies vaguely, offering no real description. He's bashful, even with Frankie.

In fact, when it comes to clever young Pepper, I'm not sure what to believe. "Are you sure he was really doing anything?" I asked Frankie. "He could've been pretending."

"Seriously, Jake, I think he was doing something for real. I'm pretty sure."

"It's hard to picture him behaving like that."

"Oh fuck," the boy suddenly said, "I forgot to have him measure his dick!"

"Now Frankie, don't get carried away," I said. "You're making me a little nervous."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I don't want you to push Pepper too hard or too fast and freak him out. If his mother ever finds out. . ."

"Dude, he wouldn't say anything!"

"You can never assume that, Frankie," I said. "Don't get careless."

"Shit, it's like you hate me now," the boy muttered.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You don’t even trust me.” “Stop it,” I said, “you’re being silly. I do trust you. But sometimes you can get a little overexcited.”

“OK, OK,” Frankie said, still in that bruised and mumbly tone. I tried to soothe his hurt feelings, but our conversation ended a few minutes later with him still sulky and quiet. I could imagine that melancholic, moist-eyed expression of his, so quick to cloud his face whenever something disturbs him.

So did Pepper really jerk off tonight while he was on the phone? Maybe, maybe not.

JAN. 19

No school today for the boys. No work for me. Jimmy was at Anita’s house again. I went to the mall to do some shopping for shoes and pants and shirts, things I’ve needed for a while but haven’t had time to buy, not with so many boys dogging my every move. I ended up with a pair of brown shoes (sort of dressy) and some new Reeboks that JoJo thought were fantastic. He and Dally were here when I got back, actually sitting and waiting for me on the front porch—on my front porch!

JoJo wanted to know where I’d been, as if I shouldn’t be allowed to come and go without his permission. He’s congenial about it, though, not bossy like Ryan. I told him which stores I’d been to and showed him my shoeboxes. JoJo grabbed the Reeboks and eagerly tried them on. He squatted to do it and lost his balance and fell onto his bottom, but then he was up on his feet and parading back and forth as if the shoes (white, with blue trim) were his own. Funny, but they fit him fairly well. His feet are large, just like his hands, giving him a gangly and ungainly look that reminds me of Pepper, both of them poised a bit clumsily on the brink of adolescence with almost man-sized hands and feet on slender boy’s bodies. I finally pointed out to JoJo that the shoes are not his. He

said, “But they oughta be! Y’all might give ’em to me!” No, I smiled, I can’t do that. The boy made one more promenade through the house before reluctantly taking off the new shoes. I almost felt guilty about reclaiming them. But JoJo was quickly distracted when he saw my Hoover. Happy as the proverbial clam, he continued his vacuuming from yesterday, practically dancing behind the machine in his stockinged feet, his toes and heels showing through those white socks almost hidden by the draggy cuffs of his blue jeans. I don’t know why, but he strikes me as the raggediest of all the raggedy Huckfeldt brothers.

While JoJo was noisily and contentedly vacuuming, I sat with Dally on the couch and helped him out of his jacket with its ripped lining and its stubborn zipper that took a minute of tugging and jiggling before finally coming unstuck and undone. He took off his John Deere cap and then showed me his red Power Ranger, which he’d brought with him, holding it up as if to say, “You see, it’s still my favorite!” There’s a real sweetness about him. “I’m glad you like it so much,” I said.

“I do believe it’s my best thing,” the boy said in his quiet voice. His choice of words surprised me. He sounded, for that moment, like a thoughtful little man. Fact is, I’ve come to realize that Dally has a bright and lively brain behind his deceptively silent façade. He’s not the simpleton that someone might imagine from a brief meeting with him. Far from it. Anyway, he said, “I do believe it’s my best thing,” and then showed me a Power Rangers comic book that he’d brought along with the action figure. He seemed to be offering it to me, so I took it and asked, “Would you like us to read it together?” Dally nodded and moved closer to see the pages. I put my right arm around him, using my other hand to hold the comic book on my lap and to turn the pages as I read aloud from the simplistic, cheesy story. Dally was soon sucking his thumb and leaning cozily against me.

JoJo finally tired of his vacuuming after going over every inch of carpeted floor for the second or third time. He fiddled with the racing set after that, then found his video from yesterday and played it for himself

and his brother, fast-forwarding through several portions of it until he came to the Jimmy-and-Dally segment. We all watched as Jimmy took down the little boy's pants, took down his Underoos, started fondling him. JoJo laughed and accidentally hit the fast-forward button on the remote, then rewound and started again where Dally was getting his Underoos pulled down. "You know what, Jake? You know what? This is an X-rated movie!"

"Yeah, it is, you're right."

"X-rated for HBO," JoJo said. "It's for cable!"

"Do you like it?" "It's a wiener movie," the boy answered, whether as a positive or a negative review, I have no idea. Dally himself looked up at me and grinned when his brother called it a "wiener movie." I grinned back at him beneath my arm, honestly a handsome little guy with his wide-set greenish eyes and all those gingery freckles across his nose and cheeks and that brushy up-whorl of rusty hair above his high forehead. He seemed so happy with the spectacle of himself being fondled right there on my TV, so pleased with the X-rated footage of himself we were watching, that I reached almost unconsciously between his legs and squeezed him. The denim at his crotch was rough and warm. He didn't glance down or flinch or react in any way.

Maybe two minutes went by before JoJo, staring at the TV screen, looked in our direction. I didn't expect him to be shocked, and he wasn't, but seeing my hand on his brother's crotch apparently did surprise him a little, just a little. He began to laugh in that exaggerated wriggly way he has, as if being tickled in the stomach and ribs—but he misdirected the laughter back toward the television in a strangely inappropriate and hysterical manner, then did a crazy hopping dance, then some frantic singing about "Dally's wiener, Dally's little wiener, little little wiener wiener. . ." He was so excited by the video, and by seeing me and his brother together, that he seemed ready to explode, like some cartoon critter with a bellyful of dynamite, blam-splat all over the room.



I was prepared at any moment to remove my hand, to pull it away and pretend as if nothing had happened—but no alarms went off, no sirens sounded, no signs of danger caused me to panic or retreat. My hand stayed where it was on the rough, warm denim. Was Dally's penis hard beneath? Yes, it was, I could feel it. After watching the video, we went back to reading the comic book about the Power Rangers and their space-alien enemies, Dally once again sucking his thumb while I entertained him with a variety of character voices and accents—many years since I've employed those particular talents. I kept pressing and kneading at that hard little thing in his pants. Dally opened his legs for me to get at it more easily.

JoJo disappeared to use the bathroom and to raid my refrigerator for pop, then came hopping back, always hopping and jigging, and always (as I mentioned once before) poking and plucking at the crotch of his pants as if something inside is forever itching to get out. It's not a flirtatious habit; I've seen him poking and plucking when outside with his brothers, when at the grocery store two weeks ago, when getting on and off his school bus; whenever or wherever, it doesn't matter, that rude itch is always there. Back with us in the living room, he spent some aimless minutes rambling from the racing set to the La-Z-Boy to my boxes of records before finally arriving at the couch. I asked if he'd like to sit with us and listen to the story we were reading (half a dozen pages still left). "I already know how it ends," he said, as if declining, but then squeezed himself into the space between me and the arm of the couch. I scooted a few inches to the right (moving Dally with me) to give JoJo more room on the left side. He half sat on one knee and actually put his arm around my shoulders as he leaned against me to see the comic book on my lap.

I was still using my left hand to hold the comic and turn the pages while my right hand attended to Dally. I was reaching around him, around his waist, to get at him, easy enough to do with such a small kid and such a skinny little waist. My arm behind his back was forcing him to sit slightly forward and sideways with his weight against my side. The

Power Rangers were preparing for yet another of their many battles when I undid the button on Dally's jeans and then eased his zipper down and put my hand inside. He was wearing red Superman Underoos, same as always. Does he have several pairs? Or does he wear the same underpants every day? It wasn't easy to concentrate on the moronic story I was trying to read. Dally let himself slump more heavily against me and opened his legs even wider as I rubbed the front of his underpants, which felt just the slightest bit damp from the moist heat of his crotch and maybe even from earlier-in-the-day, not-quite-dried pee. JoJo must have been watching, although he seemed to be mostly looking at the comic book when I checked. But why did it matter? Just yesterday he was "making a movie" of his own brother Jimmy doing exactly what I was doing now. This was not Pepper or Ryan or some other more civilized youngster; this was Joey Huckfeldt, crazy JoJo who sucks the boners on snowmen and makes up songs about his little brother's wiener. Even so, I couldn't help thinking that I was doing something terribly reckless, one of those point-of-no-return decisions. After today, in other words, I'm no longer an "innocent" spectator; I'm a full-fledged, very guilty participant, with witnesses accumulating like ants at a picnic.

By the last page of the story, I had my hand inside Dally's Underoos and was playing directly with his stiff little prick. But then I was finished reading, and I wasn't sure what to do, so I did nothing, just stayed where I was with the boys against me. Mustn't forget about JoJo, who was still hanging against my other side like a friendly but fidgety puppy. I admit, again, that I wasn't sure what to do or how to proceed. I kissed the top of Dally's fuzzy cue-ball head and cupped my whole hand inside his underpants so that I was holding his balls (which feel just as velvety plump as they look). He brought both legs up onto the couch and cuddled backward against me, making himself more comfortable now that the story was finished, nothing further for him to look at, also easier and more comfortable for me to reach him in that position, to caress lazily inside his pants. I'll say one more time that I wasn't sure what to

do or how to proceed, so I took a chance that JoJo might be feeling neglected, that he might be hanging against me because he wanted some affectionate petting and caressing of his own. I took a chance, that is, and touched JoJo himself between the legs, giving the baggy denim at his crotch the kind of poke and pluck that he seems to enjoy so much. He looked down with a startled expression that I've never seen from him before. My first touch gained nothing but a handful of the very baggy denim (is it designed as a defense mechanism, like the loose skin on a dog's neck?), so I tried again and pressed my fingers into the fabric and found myself holding something that felt sizeable and solid. JoJo, such a flighty and hypersensitive boy, reacted as if I were trying to tickle him and rolled away laughing right off the couch and onto the floor. Dally glanced back to see why his brother was being so noisy (or, I should say, even noisier than usual). I said, "JoJo is going slightly insane, I think."

"That's right," JoJo himself yelled, "I might be insane!" He did a somersault away from the couch, which landed him practically on top of the racing set, then a somersault back, which landed him on my feet. "What's 'insane' mean? Happy?"

"That's close enough," I said, "and you're definitely the happiest kid I've ever known."

"I'm happy 'cause it comes natural," JoJo said, staring poker-faced as he bounced his bottom on my feet. His use of the phrase "comes natural" echoed Frankie's spiel to Pepper last night, a coincidence that seemed almost spooky when the phone rang at that same moment with a call from Pepper's mother. I took it on the extension next to the couch and vigorously shushed JoJo as soon as I heard Holly's voice. She said, right off, "I hope you're in a good mood, Jake, because I need a gigantic favor," then quickly informed me that her mother in Joliet had just gone into the hospital with pneumonia, was not doing well, might not make it. "I definitely need to be there," she said in a voice that sounded short of breath and tight with emotion. Holly seldom cries, and she didn't today, but she came close when she asked if I could "keep Pepper for two or three days" until she gets back home. If it wasn't for school, she

continued explaining, she'd take Pepper with her, but she can't do that now, and she can't trust anyone except me to care for him. Of course I agreed.

That was three o'clock of what suddenly became a very hectic afternoon. I said goodbye to JoJo and Dally and shooed them from the house as politely as possible. I didn't want to take my hand out of Dally's pants, believe me. And who knows what JoJo might have done if the phone hadn't rung? Still, in my mind and in my heart, Pepper always comes first.

Holly was ready to leave by the time I got to their house. I told her to go, that Pepper and I would stick around for a while and then lock up and return to my house for the night. She's not sure how long she'll be away, and again nearly started crying when she said, "It could be two or three nights, I don't know, and I can't even afford the time off, using all my vacation days." Pepper had already been kissed and hugged goodbye and was in his bedroom with his computer. I joined him there after Holly finally thanked me for the third or fourth time and left the house and headed, in her Suburu, to Joliet. The boy seemed to be in one of his quiet and pouty moods, maybe because of his grandmother's illness, understandable really. I stood behind him where he was seated at his desk, at his computer, and I massaged his bony shoulders and tried to make a bit of conversation. He still sounded a little stuffed-up from his cold, but he told me, when I asked, that he felt OK. What about the situation at school? Any more problems with bullies? No, he said, no problems.

I stayed behind him, massaging him. His hair has had almost three weeks to grow back since it was cut, but it's still curled short and tight against his scalp, with that one "rat tail" curl in back hanging all the way down to the collar of his T-shirt, a scraggly strand that's actually too long now to be called a curl. I twirled it round and round my finger while I talked to him, telling him that I've missed him, that I'm glad

he'll be staying with me. "We can have supper here," I said. "Your mom left a crockpot full of stew for us. Then we can go to my house."

"We're going to stay at your house?"

"Yes, of course we are."

"But I need to feed my fish," Pepper said. "And the cats."

"We'll stop by every day and do it," I said. "Same as last time."

"Won't they starve?"

"Why would they starve?"

"Maybe we'll forget about them."

"We won't forget, Pepper," I told him. I put my hands around his neck and pretended to strangle him. He pretended, in turn, to gag and choke. I laughed at him and suggested, along with his saxophone and comic books and other usual paraphernalia, that he should also bring his Nintendo 64 with him. "We can hook it up to my TV," I said. "Plus, your racing set is still up, ready to use."

"Who can I play with?"

"The Huckfeldt brothers are usually around."

"What about Frankie?"

I wanted to say, "Oh yeah, that reminds me: Did you and Frankie jerk off together last night over the phone?" Instead, I told Pepper what he already knew, that Frankie has been sick and hasn't come to my house since the big "underwear party" two weeks ago. "But he should be back pretty soon. Have you talked to him lately?"

"Last night, I think."

"You talked to Frankie last night?"

Pepper nodded, but said only that it would be good if Frankie shows up because he has a Nintendo 64 too and already knows the games, so they could play together. His earlier reluctance about coming to my house was now forgotten, it seemed. We had Holly's stew for supper and then, around seven o'clock, moved back to Whitman Street. When we proceeded to hook up the Nintendo 64, I suddenly remembered that JoJo's movie was still in the VCR, still cued up to the Jimmy-and-Dally segment. I thought about showing it to Pepper right

then, but decided no and took it out. (I've been wondering lately if maybe I'm being a coward with Pepper, if it's time to be a little bolder and more straightforward with him—more like Frankie, for example, who says whatever is on his mind. Is Pepper ready for that from me? And why did I scold Frankie last night simply for being himself, for being honest and having fun? Fear, I suppose. Always the fear.)

At eight o'clock, I'd say, the Huckfeldt boys showed up, which surprised me, it being a school night. Jimmy admitted that they'd seen Pepper arriving with me, and were wondering if I was "havin a party." I explained why Pepper was staying with me, but the boys were already preoccupied with the Nintendo 64. The racing set, I could tell, was passé, yesterday's thrill. I inquired, above the din of young voices, if anyone objected to my disassembling it to give us more space. No one even bothered to respond, so I spent the next thirty minutes taking apart the set and returning it to its box. What a relief to have that huge thing off the floor after almost three weeks!

I asked Jimmy about his visit earlier today with Anita. He was working his joypad in some kind of violent Doom game against both JoJo and Pepper. He was in that favorite position of his, that "bowing to Mecca" position with his elbows on the floor and his khaki-ed butt aimed in my direction. "I'll be fuckin her pretty soon," he informed everyone in the room. JoJo and Pepper laughed without taking their eyes or their attention from the screen in front of them. Dally could have been playing with the other boys (the Nintendo has four joypad ports, for four possible players), but he chose to lounge on the couch with me. He likes me a lot, I think, and was thoroughly delighted when I produced one of Pepper's Superman comic books and offered to read it, resuming our activity from this afternoon. There were also some copies of Spawn and Batman and Doctor Strange in Pepper's bag, but it was the Superman story that Dally most wanted to read. I said, "Hey, this goes perfect with your Superman Underoos, right?" Dally nodded and, picking right up on

my not-so-subtle hint, he undid his own jeans and leaned slightly forward to allow my arm around his waist, same as earlier.

I started asking him loud and obvious questions about his Underoos: They are Superman, right? How many do you have? What about Spider-Man? Do you have any of those? (The answers, by the way, were yes, a couple, yes, a couple.) I wanted to alert everyone else in the room that something was happening, afraid that Jimmy or especially Pepper might turn and discover Dally with his pants open and think. . . what? That I was MOLESTING him? I don't know exactly, but I wanted to mitigate the anxiety and the risk by creating something light-hearted and communal out of something furtive and shadowy. Look, I was trying to shout, look at Dally with his pants open and me with my hand inside, touching and examining his Underoos, all very playful, very pleasant, neither of us embarrassed or trying to hide anything. JoJo wouldn't care, of course; Jimmy wouldn't either, might even be amused; but Pepper, one could never know how he might respond.

My strategy worked, I guess. The Nintendo-playing boys all glanced back to see what Dally and I were up to. JoJo yelled that he himself has Batman underwear called Funpals which are better than Underoos. "I've seen them," I said. "Remember the big underwear party we had two weeks ago?"

"You know what, Jake, I almost forgot," the boy said. He was flat on his stomach as he worked the buttons and control stick on his joypad—and also as he worked his hips against the floor, same as I've described before, actually humping while he played. He kept straining to look backward over his shoulder, torn between his desire to continue playing the Doom game and his desire to see and hear the Superman story. During one break in the Nintendo action, he rolled quickly onto his back and opened his baggy jeans and told me, "I ain't wearin them Batman ones today, see, these here are just some regular color."

"Blue," I said. "A nice baby blue."

“Batman wears some blue stuff,” JoJo said, still harping on the same theme. He was between the other two boys on the floor. Jimmy gave him a swat to the head (and not a very gentle one) and told him to shut up about stupid fuckin Batman. “Anyway, I got the best underwear there is,” Jimmy declared. “They got dirty pictures on ’em, like dirty comics, men and ladies fuckin and shit.”

“Your parents allow you to have. . .?”

“Shit,” Jimmy scoffed, interrupting, “my dad’s got hisself some just like ’em! You’ll see, I’ll wear ’em sometime.”

Pepper, during all of this, said nothing. He looked at me and Dally; he looked at JoJo on his back showing off his baby-blue briefs; he looked at Jimmy talking about his X-rated underwear—but, I repeat, he said nothing, just smiled and softly laughed and smiled some more, mostly interested in the game of Doom that he was winning, and winning easily. JoJo, after being swatted by his older brother, rolled back onto his belly with his jeans still unzipped and continued playing, and also continued humping and squirming against the threadbare carpet, sometimes so exuberantly that he bumped against Jimmy on one side or Pepper on the other. I was doing my best to focus my attention on the Superman story. Dally, yawning sleepily, was curled against me with his legs up on the couch, reclining sideways on his left hip in a position that allowed me to feel him both front and back, my hand inside his Underoos slipping from his cheeky little ass up across his hip to his very stiff penis and then back again, over and over, back and forth. I myself was slumped so low that Dally’s head was actually on my shoulder, and I was nuzzling his hair and the top of his ear with my lips while I read the story, nuzzling and reading at the same time, all very intimate, smelling him, holding him, feeling him with my lips and with my hand, almost like making love.

We finished the comic book while the other boys were still involved in the Nintendo game (up to level twelve, I think I heard them



say). I asked Dally if he wanted another story, but he said no and then yawned again and put his head on my lap. This flustered me a bit, I must explain, because I had a very discernible erection inside my trousers and Dally rested his cheek directly against it. He must have felt it, especially since the pleasurable weight and pressure of his head made the damn thing tighten and twitch, a reflex I couldn't control, might as well have pulled it out and batted him in the face with it. But Dally didn't move his head away. The erection against his cheek didn't bother him at all.

I was enjoying myself, that's for sure, but it was getting late and the Huckfeldt boys, I thought, certainly must have been expected back home by their parents. When I mentioned this, Jimmy merely shook his head and laughed, "They ain't finished bar-hoppin yet."

"Tonight they're out?"

"Nothin to do at home, man."

"Do they go out every night?"

"Pretty near."

"Well, even so," I told them, "you should probably get home."

JoJo wanted to know, in his loudest voice, why Pepper can stay overnight and they can't. Ask your parents, I said, maybe you can stay some weekend night, sometime when I'm not working and you don't have school. "You know what, Jake, you're cruel," JoJo said. He rolled onto his back and started scissoring his arms and his legs as if making snow angels, which is exactly what he then explained he was doing, "only they ain't really snow angels, they's carpet angels!" His jeans were still undone and had slipped several inches down his hips, most of his baby-blue underpants exposed and showing—and bulging obscenely. Pepper laughed at the other boy's silliness and pointed at him and glanced at me to see if I was looking. I smiled back and tried to appear nonchalant about Dally cuddled against me with my hand in his pants, ho-hum, all very routine, yes, no big deal. Jimmy also sat and watched his brother's antics for a few moments, then poked him with a sneakered foot and told him to close his fuckin pants. JoJo scrambled to his hands

and knees, which caused the baggy jeans to slip entirely off his butt and sag floorward. “I can’t close ’em now ’cause they done busted,” he said.

“You lie, man” Jimmy told him.

“They done busted like a egg,” JoJo insisted. “See, they fell off!” He pretended to be a bucking bronco (I think) as he headed down the hallway to the bathroom, sing-songing, “I gotta pee, gotta pee, gotta pee, gotta pee. . .” The jeans were bunched around his knees and dragging behind him like a half-shed blue skin. Pepper, still laughing at him, made that same incredulous pointing gesture and then followed him to the bathroom (a little surprising, following him to the bathroom, but Pepper seems to like JoJo, much as he’s taken to Frankie). Jimmy watched them leave and said, “Pep, Peppy, Pepper! Pepper, Peppy, Pep!”—proving that JoJo isn’t the only Huckfeldt brother who can invent random and bizarre things to say. He, Jimmy, was sitting on the floor directly in front of the couch. His camouflage cap was backward on his head, turned that way for playing Nintendo. He took out the crumpled pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket (he was wearing what looked like an old black bowling shirt) and lit a cigarette. He was still coughing and sniffing today, but not so much as yesterday, and not enough to keep him from smoking. He never bothers asking permission, but I don’t mind. This weekend has taken us way beyond such trifling matters. Holding his cigarette, the boy knee-walked to the couch and grinned as if he’d just noticed what was happening between me and his baby brother. “You guys are cozy, man.”

“Dally is almost asleep,” I said, forcing myself to keep my hand right where it was on the little boy’s ass, waiting for Jimmy’s next comment, whatever it might be. He was holding his cigarette limp-wristed in his right hand and tweaking Dally’s nose with his left. “Hey, Dally, y’all like Jake, don’t you?”

The little boy rolled halfway onto his back and stretched lazily with his fists against his cheeks. “Yeah,” he said, “I like him, I do.”

“Is he nice?”

Dally nodded with his fists still pressed kitten-like against his cheeks. "He's real nice, yeah." My hand had twisted uncomfortably when the boy rolled himself backward, so I took it out and rested it on his bare tummy, beneath his untucked shirt. "My new best friend," I said, smiling down at him (and still acutely aware of my erection beneath his head). Jimmy said, "Definitely, man, he's your new best friend for sure, just look at him."

"But," I added with just a trace of Ozark twang, mimicking Jimmy himself from yesterday, "there ain't nothin perverted or sick about it."

"Aw, Jake, y'all is evil, man, y'all is bad."

"We were watching JoJo's movie before," I went on, pressing my point, "Very artistic."

"Is it exciting and shit?"

Dally unexpectedly replied, "It's a wiener movie," repeating JoJo's line from this afternoon. Jimmy and I both laughed. At the same time, I heard Pepper laughing from the bathroom, along with JoJo's loud but not-quite-decipherable voice. A moment later, the two boys came stumbling and laughing into the living room, JoJo in front holding up his still-unfastened jeans with both hands. He stopped in the middle of the room looking slightly crazed, his face flushed from laughing but his eyes still oddly serious, his hair mussed into wild cowlicks and ruffled bangs, his slightly rabbit-like overbite gnawing at his bottom lip. "You know what, Jake," he finally said, "we was in the bathroom and you know what?"

"What, JoJo? What happened?"

"We was in the bathroom and I tried to pee but I couldn't pee 'cause my pecker was too hard!" He stopped right then because the laughter from the other boys (and from me) drowned him out. Pepper, more than anyone, had an absolute giggling fit and fell into the La-Z-Boy with his hands covering his face. I blurted out, "OK, let's see it!" JoJo immediately stretched down the front of his blue briefs with one hand and showed all of us the hard thing inside, which unfortunately was bent down and sideways by the tight fabric and half hidden, difficult to see. One more tug on the briefs and it would have sprung up and out in

its full glory—but JoJo assumed we had seen enough, I guess, and ended the peep-show by finally closing and zipping his pants.

Within five minutes, like a storm that suddenly blows over, the Huckfeldts were gone. On their way out, though, I took special care to give Dally a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. When he smiled, I decided to give him a second kiss, this time on the lips, which made him smile even more. JoJo saw this and moved closer, so I gave him a hug as well, then a parting kiss on the forehead. Jimmy, by this time, was already out the door and halfway across the street. Pepper had been watching every detail of this interaction, huddled on the La-Z-Boy in his canary-yellow sweatpants and a red Bulls T-shirt that has a big 23 (Michael Jordan's number) on the back. I expected he might say something about the Huckfeldt circus just departed, but instead, as soon as we were alone, he asked, "How long will my mom be gone?" I said maybe two or three days, but don't worry, we'll be fine. Not long after, Holly herself called to see how we were doing. No news about her mother, no change, no progress. She and Pepper talked for a while, which seemed to ease his anxiety, and then she said good-night and promised to call again tomorrow.

Since he was already at the phone, I suggested that Pepper call Frankie and let him know what was happening. I listened as he tapped in the number from memory and said hello and started giving Frankie all the latest news. Suddenly, you'd think he was thrilled by the prospect of an extended stay at my house, very talkative and animated, responding like an emotional chameleon to Frankie's energy at the other end of the line. While the boys talked, I pulled out Pepper's bed and fitted it with sheets and a blanket. An especially frigid Arctic wind was rattling the windows as I did my work. After a few minutes I was given a turn on the phone and was pleased to hear Frankie sounding so perky. "You're in a good mood," I said. "No hard feelings from last night?"

"For what?"

"You know, when I gave you a hard time about. . . certain things."

“Duuude, no, I understand, it’s completely cool.”

“Good, I’m relieved.”

“I can’t believe Pepper is staying with you! And I’m not there!”

“Did he tell you about the Huckfeldt boys?” I asked, knowing that he hadn’t. “JoJo was even crazier than usual.”

“What happened?”

“He and Pepper went to the bathroom,” I said, smiling at Pepper himself as I told the story. “JoJo came out a couple of minutes later and announced that he couldn’t pee because, as he said, his pecker was too hard.” Frankie was laughing on the phone; Pepper was laughing next to me. “Things get wild when those kids are around,” I added. “You never know what might happen.”

“I need to get well fast,” Frankie said, still laughing a little.

“And,” I decided to mention, “JoJo has been making movies with a camcorder I bought after your last visit.”

“You bought a camcorder?”

“Yeah, a Sony,” I said, pointing at it (for Pepper’s benefit) where it sat on a bookcase near the TV. “JoJo was making a ‘wiener movie’ with it. That’s what he called it.”

Again Pepper started laughing, tickled by anything having to do with crazy JoJo, making it easy for me to discuss the Huckfeldts since everything they say or do can be dismissed as a joke, as tomfoolery and silliness. Frankie, meanwhile, wanted to know exactly what a ‘wiener movie’ is. “Well,” I began cautiously, “Jimmy was on the couch with Dally, and he started playing around with him, taking Dally’s pants down and feeling him. . .”

“In front of you?”

“Yeah, in front of me,” I said, smiling at Pepper as I talked, keeping the mood as light and comical as possible. “So Dally got a boner and JoJo recorded the whole thing. But it’s OK. I mean, Dally enjoyed it, he likes to do stuff like that.” I heard myself and realized how much I sounded like Jimmy. But, I have to admit, it’s the truth: Dally

does like it. “Lots of boners around here this weekend,” I said to Frankie, also to Pepper, making both of them laugh one more time.

“I can’t believe you have a video of all that,” Frankie said.

“Yeah, JoJo definitely made a video of it, his notorious wiener movie.”

“Has Pepper seen it?”

“No, Pepper hasn’t seen it,” I carefully repeated.

“Tell him not to watch it until I come over.”

“OK, I’ll tell him.”

“Dude, tell him now!”

I laughed and lowered the phone and, directly to Pepper, I said, “Frankie says you can’t watch JoJo’s movie until he comes over.” I should mention that Pepper was on the floor now with his back against the La-Z-Boy, a few feet from where I was sitting on the edge of his bed. “I can’t watch it?” he asked. “Is it a command?”

“Yeah, it’s a command from Frankie, who must be obeyed.”

“When is he coming?”

“Pepper wants to know when you’ll be coming over,” I said into the phone. Frankie said this weekend for sure, then requested a few parting words with Pepper. “I’m going to tell him to sleep in the nude,” he said. “Is that OK?”

“Well, I guess so.”

“I’ll make it funny, like you do, so it’ll be. . . it’ll be safe,” Frankie insisted, his excitement and his braces making him lispy. “He’ll laugh when I tell him, you wait and see.” Sure enough, a moment or two after getting the phone back, Pepper let out a quick laugh and made one of his panicky boo-hoo faces. All he said was, “Not really,” and then, “Yeah, I did at home,” and finally, “Is it the best way?” He didn’t know that I was eagerly decoding his comments, waiting to see what might happen later that night.

When Pepper hung up, it was still not quite ten o’clock, not quite time for bed, so he spent several minutes practicing his alto sax while I read today’s newspaper, first time all day I’d had a chance to look at it. I

turned up the heat to counteract the blast of Arctic cold shaking our windows. Pepper, when I asked if he was warm enough, widened his eyes and nodded while still blowing into the saxophone, doing his scales over and over. Time came, at last, to prepare for bed. I asked Pepper if he needed a shower. He answered no as he cleaned the spit from his reed. "Tomorrow then," I told him, starting to undress. Pepper nodded OK without a word of protest or any comical boo-hooing. "Good," I said, pleasantly surprised. "Anyway, I need a shower tonight, even if you don't." I got down as far as my boxers before heading to the bathroom, telling Pepper to "be ready for bed when I come back."

I returned, after about fifteen minutes, wrapped in a pink bath towel. Pepper was obediently in bed, just taking off his big Bart Simpson watch and then his glasses, both of which he laid on the nearby table next to several empty pop cans. He was bare above the waist, all of his T-shirts removed. The rest of him was hidden by the covers. Oh my god, I thought, maybe this is it! Outside, the dogs were woofing and baying in the windy night. "It's the dreaded Huckfeldt Hounds," I said, turning out the bright overhead light. Pepper grinned at the made-up name, just as he'd grinned at my use of "porch police" on our first day together in October. "Are they called the Huckfeldt Hounds for real?" he wanted to know. "Is that their name?"

"The dreaded Huckfeldt Hounds," I nodded, "just as noisy and crazy as the Huckfeldt boys."

"JoJo is the craziest of them all," Pepper observed, quite correctly. He was leaning sideways to grab one of his comic books from the floor, stretched out so that I could count every one of his ribs beneath the taut cocoa skin. Talking about the Huckfeldts, I guess, reminded me of the camcorder, which I picked up and showed to Pepper. "I should've taped you playing your saxophone," I said. "How could I be so forgetful?"

"It would've been horrible."

"Tomorrow night, assuming you're still here, I'll do it."

"It'll be horrible," Pepper declared once more. He had chosen an issue of Spawn and was peering at its gaudy cover (he's near-sighted, no glasses necessary). His eyes came up when I said, "Here's JoJo's wiener movie," and held up the cassette for him to see.

"Are we going to watch it now?"

"We have to wait for Frankie," I said. "Remember?"

"That's right, I forgot," Pepper fibbed. "Why is it a wiener movie?"

"Didn't you hear me describe it for Frankie? On the phone?"

"I forgot what you said," the boy fibbed again.

"It shows Jimmy playing with Dally. With Dally's penis," I forced myself to say. "You know, you saw Dally before, when he was here, he likes it."

"When I was playing Nintendo?"

"Yeah, when you and the other guys were playing Nintendo. And Dally was on the couch with me."

"Now I remember," Pepper said, as if his mysterious amnesia had just been cured. That settled, he announced that he had to use the bathroom, then quickly threw aside the covers and scurried out, thereby answering the question of whether or not he was naked. He wasn't. He was wearing his underpants, his usual white Fruit of the Loom briefs, gripping them by the waistband with both hands as if they might fall off. Disappointing, I suppose, that he wasn't quite brave enough to get completely nude, but even so, this was something noteworthy for Pepper, the first time he'd chosen to wear his underpants, and nothing but his underpants, in my company. He came scurrying back a minute or two later just as he'd left, straight across the room and straight beneath the covers without slowing down or saying a word. I'd been waiting for him to return before shutting off the television and the lamp next to it and then, as casually as possible, dropping my towel—Pepper's second time to see me naked, but his first to see me with a partial erection. I said nothing about it, just got beneath the covers with a jokey comment that "Frankie recommended I should sleep this way, so I'm trying it out." Bring it all back around to Frankie, was my thought; play connect-the-



dots for Pepper's benefit; let him think about it, consider it, make his own decision about "Frankie's recommendation." I picked up the copy of *Spawn* that was between us on the bed and asked Pepper if he wanted to read it. "Like you were reading for Dally?" he wondered.

"Yeah, we have time to relax and read it before going to sleep," I said. "Do you want to?"

"It's a new one," the boy nodded. "I haven't read the whole thing yet, just the beginning, maybe two pages."

"Where should I start?"

"You should start on the first page," Pepper decided. "In case I forgot something."

"OK then, move closer so you can see," I told him. He scooted sideways until his bare leg was against mine. I put my right arm around him, which brought our sides together, ribcage to ribcage, also bare, also warm, only his underpants keeping the two of us from being cuddled together entirely naked beneath the covers. I could feel those cotton briefs of his against my own hip as I started reading. I used my right hand to very gently rub his shoulder, his chest, his nipples. He seemed to snuggle closer as I felt him, no shying away whatsoever, no tenseness in the muscles beneath my hand. His hair was against my cheek. I turned my face into it while I read, kissing and reading and nuzzling as I'd done earlier with Dally, that delicious feeling of intimacy like making love, almost like making love.

Impossible to exaggerate how hard I was by then. This whole day was nothing but one cock-teasing episode after another, and by the time I ended up beneath the covers with Pepper I thought I might actually ejaculate right there and then with him beside me, no hands necessary. I forced myself, really forced myself to keep reading that comic book, doing my best to excite Pepper while also controlling my hand from venturing too far. But not just my hand: I was rubbing my leg against his—my right leg against his left—using my knee to feel up along his thigh, up as high as I could flex, up to the elastic at his crotch, just

brushing it, just barely touching it. Was I arousing him? Was he getting an erection from the stroking and caressing of my knee, my hand, my lips? I couldn't bend my leg high enough to know. But I had to find out. You finally reach a point, a reckless I-don't-care point where desire becomes lust, and lust becomes delirium, nothing less than delirium that obliterates logic and self-control and common sense. I paused to check the clock and count the remaining pages, but also and more truthfully to give myself the chance to adjust my hold on Pepper, moving my arm from around his shoulders to around his waist, the way I'd been holding Dally, while also moving the comic book (and my left hand with it) from between the two of us to directly atop Pepper's lap. "Three pages left," I murmured to him, my lips touching his ear. "Should we finish?"

He nodded and made an "uh-huh" sound for me to proceed. My right arm, of course, had nudged him a little forward and sideways so that he was leaning practically against my chest. I continued reading. I was feeling his stomach now, his belly button, making him flinch just slightly from the tickliness of it. My other hand, holding the comic, was in his lap and pressing down against the blanket and the sheet and the hardness beneath. That's right, yes, Pepper had a good-sized erection, and I could feel it. And he was letting me feel it. And he was letting my other hand roam freely down his stomach until my fingers were at the elastic of his waistband. I waited for him to stop me, to say something, but he didn't. We were on the last page of the comic when I slipped my roaming hand into the side of his underpants and down his hip and then under him so that I was holding his ass and fingering his crack, which made him lean his weight even more heavily against me as he tipped farther sideways. I found the puckered hole and tickled it with a single fingertip. I could feel his whole body tighten.

It was eleven o'clock when I finished reading, and the rational part of my brain knew that both Pepper and I needed to be up early, extremely early, next morning. But the rest of me needed release and relief—and so, it seemed, did this erect twelve-year-old boy beside me.

Finally, Pepper with a hard dick! Finally, Pepper allowing himself to be loved and touched and taken! How could I stop so long as he permitted me to continue? How could I stop? I put aside the comic book and replaced my freed hand exactly where it had just been on the covers between his legs. “Lots of boners today,” I said, repeating my earlier comment. “I have one, too.”

“You do?”

“Sure,” I said with an unconvincing chuckle. I lifted the blanket and sheet to show him, then let them drop back down “First Dally and JoJo, now you and me. It’s boner day, I guess.”

“I think so,” Pepper agreed. His head was back against my shoulder, and his two hands were clasped against his chest as if in prayer or quiet supplication. I asked if he was comfortable. Yes, he said. I used my right hand, the one feeling his ass, to push at his underpants from the inside, to stretch them downward from his hip, to get them off. “Maybe you’d be even more comfortable without these,” I said. “You can sleep nude. Like me.”

“The way Frankie does?”

“That’s right, exactly like Frankie.”

Pepper nodded against my shoulder and lifted his bottom just enough for me to slip the briefs down and off—all the way down, all the way off. I brought them out from under the covers and tossed them to the floor on his side of the bed. I wrapped both arms around him and simply hugged him in a tight and (I hoped) reassuring embrace, kissing at his hair, his ear, his cheek. I didn’t want to move; I didn’t want anything to interrupt this luxurious moment, to interfere with the reality of this boy resting sweetly and starkly naked against me. My Pepper, my best boy, my perfect and beautiful boy—I whispered all these endearments and more into his ear as I kissed him and as I held him, my hands holding his hands against his chest so snugly that I could feel the excited thump-thump-thump of his heart underneath. No music in the room, no TV, just the occasional barking of the hounds from outside and the cold rattling of the windows. I reached out finally with one hand and

pushed the sheet and the blanket down to our knees, uncovering myself, uncovering Pepper. His hard-on was maybe five inches, cocoa-brown like the rest of him but a little darker and redder from the blood swelling it, the whole thing curved slightly to the left so that it was pointing directly at me. Beautiful boy, I told him again, murmuring to him, one hand still on his chest, the other feeling his belly, his thighs, his hips, around and around the stiff prize in the middle without ever quite touching it. Beautiful boy, perfect boy, you look so nice, just relax, just enjoy yourself, this is good, this is fine, nothing to worry about—all this while I kept holding him, petting him, kissing him.

It was up to me, obviously, to somehow finish this. I told him, like a secret in his ear, “We need to do something with these boners.” Pepper shrugged, as if I’d asked him a question. I should say, at this point, that his balls look saggy enough and big enough to be mature, and that he has a few more whiskery pubic hairs (I’m almost sure) than the last time I saw him several weeks ago. I would assume, from these clues, that he can ejaculate, at least a little. I didn’t ask him; I should have, probably, but I didn’t. In fact, you might say I chickened out at that crucial moment and did a clumsy and juvenile jerk-off pantomime with one hand and asked, “Should we do this? Or do you want a massage? Or do you want. . .?”

Pepper shrugged again and wondered, in his quietest voice, “Is a massage good?”

“Sure, whatever you want,” I said, quickly realizing that I’d made a mistake. I shouldn’t have given him a choice; I should have gone ahead and started jerking him off, just like that, no questions asked. He would’ve let me, I’m sure of it; he would’ve let me and he would’ve loved it. But I guess that sounds terrible, saying that I shouldn’t have given him a choice. It’s just so goddamned hard to think straight, so difficult to decide what’s best and to remember that the boy is in charge, that Pepper is in charge, free to choose his own pleasures. Anyway, given the choice, he immediately rolled onto his stomach, obvious that he was relieved to take his boner off display. Very brave of him to get

naked; even braver to let me see that erection of his; but he's a bashful boy, and always will be, and was extremely happy to roll over and shut his eyes and play possum while I massaged him from neck to ankle, lingering on the cheeks of his butt as I worked down and then again as I worked up, those cheeks like two rounded loaves of firm brown bread, so cute, so perfect. Once, I gave his hip a nudge, seeing if he'd roll onto his back, but he was "asleep" by then with tightly shut eyes and with no inclination to continue our midnight escapade.

So be it, I decided, prepared to masturbate as rapidly as possible and then get to sleep. But Pepper suddenly surprised me. Without opening his eyes, he turned over and reached down and pulled the covers up to his chest, which also covered me in the process. The faintest trace of a smile was on his face as he snuggled against me. He sighed as if lost in a dreamy slumber. This was what he wanted, I guess: to be with me, touching, intimate, our bodies together, but not to be on display, not to be exposed above the covers, embarrassed, self-conscious. OK, I thought, no problem, I'm all for compromise. When I rolled toward him, our erections were suddenly touching. I stopped; I waited; but Pepper didn't move away. Under the covers we were free to enjoy each other in wonderfully new and sinful ways. This was his choice; this was his decision. I put my hand on his bottom and pulled him closer and started rubbing against him and kissing his face—all over his face, his eyes, his mouth. No response from him, of course, because he was the Sleeping Beauty in this new undercover arrangement of ours, and that was fine, I understood the rules, the code of silence that governed us. Feeling him so lusciously naked against me was enough; feeling his hard twelve-year-old penis against mine was enough, more than enough, but even better when I reached between us and touched it with my own hand for the first time, and then held it and felt the warm throb of it against my palm, and then rubbed it and fingered the meaty knob of it and rubbed it some more to make it twitch and tighten, and then held it with my own erection in the same hand while squeezing both of them and stroking both of them until the whole lunatic day climaxed in a gush that filled

my hand and left the two of us, me and Pepper both, with sloppy and slippery dicks.

Heavenly, yes, totally sublime—but a careless and messy oversight on my part not to have put a towel beneath us for the welfare of the sheets. I mumbled a few words to that effect and grabbed my discarded pink towel from the floor. I cleaned myself first. By the time I got to Pepper, his penis had already gone mostly soft. It started to stiffen again while I wiped it, but as soon as I finished, Pepper rolled away and pulled the covers up to his chin. “OK,” I said, leaning down to kiss his cheek, “good night, sleep tight, sweet dreams. I love you.” The boy made a soft and sleepy mewling noise as if disturbed from a pleasant dream. He seemed satisfied, content, but even now I keep wondering and asking myself: Did he have an orgasm while I was rubbing him? Did he ejaculate at the same moment I did? Very unlikely. Very improbable. But I don’t know. What I do know is this: He declared himself finished, quite clearly, by rolling away and pulling up the covers. He understands that the situation is his to control and manipulate, and I’m happy for that. It’s Pepper’s game, and we’ll play by his rules.

JAN. 20

So tired today, I could hardly drag myself out of bed and get to work, and then hardly drag myself back home and pick up Pepper outside his school. (Note: Since my day starts so much earlier than his, Pepper walks himself to school in the morning, same as last time he stayed with me, although it’s a more difficult trek for him now in the cold and snowy weather than it was in October. Still, it’s only a few blocks, and he manages OK.) Pepper admitted that he also was tired, to which I remarked, “Well, that’s what we get for being such naughty boys last night and goofing around.”

“I think we deserve it,” Pepper agreed from behind those big owlsh glasses of his. We were having tacos from Casa Sierra, our favorite

Mexican joint, watching TV as we ate. I asked, “Were you comfortable last night? Warm enough?”

“I was comfortable.”

“So you liked Frankie’s idea about sleeping nude?”

Pepper nodded and, with a mouthful of chicken taco, asked, “Did you like Frankie’s idea, too?”

“Very much.”

“How did we both know about Frankie’s idea?”

“He told both of us, I guess.” Pepper nodded again, satisfied with my obvious solution. “Should I call him and tell him that we liked his good idea?”

“Sure,” I laughed, “go ahead. He’ll be very jealous.”

“Why will he be very jealous?” “Because he wants to be here with us and sleep over and goof around, but he can’t.”

“Never?”

“No, I mean just not now, because of his flu.” “And then he can sleep over?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Why? Would you like for him to be here with us?”

“I think it might be a good idea,” Pepper replied, grinning as he chewed and chewed.

“Would we all fit in the same bed?”

“It’s possible,” he said, still cheerfully grinning and chewing like a bouncy imp beside me. Later, he did call Frankie and report that “me and Jake slept the new way last night, like you told us.” Then he laughed a bit shyly and said, in a string of responses, “No, nothing. I don’t. No, not that way. A little bit. Underneath. Really late. Maybe, I don’t know.” What did it all mean? I didn’t talk with Frankie myself (because Pepper hung up without passing the phone), so I’m not sure.

Holly called not long afterwards. She might be back tomorrow, and then return to Joliet for the weekend. No problem, I told her, do whatever is necessary. Pepper and I are fine.

The Huckfeldts were here after school, by the way. I let them play with Pepper and his Nintendo for about an hour (even Dally played this time), but then I sent them home, explaining that weeknights are bad for visiting because I'm tired and "need my rest." I sounded like a grouchy old man, I know, but I have to impose some restrictions before they decide to move in permanently. Of course tomorrow is Wednesday, my regular day off, but the Huckfeldt boys don't need to know that. (Note: Dally paused on his way out the front door, which confused me until I realized that he was waiting for a hug and a kiss, which I gladly bestowed.)

Pepper and I had our tacos after that; then he had his phone chats with Frankie and with his mother; then he did some drawing with his new art supplies from Christmas before taking out his saxophone for a brief practice. I taped him while he played, just as I'd promised, using a fresh cassette that I announced would be the start of "my new and improved Pepper collection." The boy smiled with the saxophone mouthpiece still between his lips. I smiled back and kept recording and said, "Won't that be fun and fabulous and awesome?" Pepper, still playing, shook his head and grimaced.

It was late enough by then for his shower, which he took without fuss or complaint, going into the bathroom fully dressed and with a clean pair of underpants in his hand. I could have gone with him, I'm sure, but I didn't want to be pushy, so decided to let him shower in private. Anyway, we'll have many more nights together, and many more showers. While he was gone, I looked at his drawings and discovered that he'd been reproducing a whole variety of talismans and amulets with his new art supplies (including his special pen for fancy gold-leafing), elaborate and intricate designs taken from his magic books. I gathered everything—pens and drawings and books—and laid them near his Nike gym bag, then prepared our bed. I was just finishing when Pepper himself came back from his shower, carrying his clothes, his hair damp, that clean pair of underpants the only thing on him. "I'm f-f-f-freezing," he pretended to stammer.



“You should’ve dried your hair better,” I told him.

“Would that make me warm?”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” I said. I hurried to the bathroom and brought back a towel and dried his hair for him while he stood beside the bed, his eyes aimed blearily (without their glasses) at the television across the room. “OK, now scoot beneath the covers and get warm,” I said. “You’re all goose-bumpy.”

“Is it officially bedtime?”

“Close enough,” I said, then finished my own business for the night—using the bathroom, checking the doors, turning out the lights. I waited to undress until I was back in the living room and beside the bed, and I kept going when I got to my underwear, saying to Pepper, “We’re going to sleep nude from now on, aren’t we?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” the boy said in his smiley, fibbing voice. All my clothes off now, I grabbed the camcorder from the little table on my side of the hide-a-bed and aimed it at Pepper. “All right, ladies and gentlemen, this is the big moment,” I narrated. “Pepper is reaching beneath the covers. We can’t see what’s happening, but. . . yes, here we go, ladies and gentlemen, Pepper has those famous Fruit of the Looms in his hand. He’s hold them up and showing us!”

“Do the ladies and gentlemen care?”

“Yes, absolutely, and they’re waiting for more. Will we get to see some skin? Will we get to record Pepper’s posterior for posterity?”

“No, no, no,” the boy moaned, doing his familiar weepy routine. I laughed and said, “Maybe we’ll get a peek! Pepper is trying not to smile. What is he hiding beneath those covers? Will he let us see?”

“No, no, no,” the boy whined again. “Nobody can look!”

“All right,” I shrugged, putting down the camcorder and crawling into bed, “but everyone is very disappointed.”

“Why is everyone very disappointed?”

“Because they wanted to see your sexy body.”

“No they didn’t.”

“Well, anyway. Should we read another story? Like last night?”

The boy nodded and reached quickly for another issue of *Spawn*. At the same time, I was thinking: Is Pepper honestly OK with all of this? Just two nights ago I was cautioning Frankie not to behave or speak too rashly around him. And now this! How did it happen? How did things change so much, so fast? “Snuggle up,” I finally said, “nice and close, nice and warm.”

Again, like last night, I put my arm around his lower back to reach him from the other side, to reach and hold the lean meatiness of his thigh—just holding his bare thigh for several minutes as I read the story, his head against my shoulder, this curly-haired Pan resting against me with his eyes focused intently on the pages in front of us. I kissed that curly head and slowly let my hand slip up his thigh to feel those things I saw yesterday but didn’t touch: the whiskery stubble of his pubic hair, the saggy satin of his scrotum and the pebbly testicles inside, then once more that whiskery pubic stubble as I moved my hand back up—and then, touching him there, I suddenly felt his penis rear back and stiffen against my fingers, hardening right across my knuckles as I kept my hand flat on his belly, his nervousness finally yielding again to arousal, to full and frank arousal. With my thumb and two fingers I gripped that bony little snake of his (not so little, really) and started rubbing it. He let out a breath almost loud enough to be a gasp, though not quite, just a forceful exhalation in response to my fingers touching that most sensitive part of him. I asked if I should keep reading, and he said yes in a too-loud voice, yes, there’s a good fight on the next page. So I kept reading and rubbing, reading and rubbing with my thumb and two fingers on the very head of his dick, the glans, rubbing and rubbing right on that exposed and ultra-tender knob of penile meat until I thought sure he must be ready to bust.

In fact, something did happen, but something of a mystery: After a good fifteen or twenty minutes of being jerked off, Pepper abruptly twisted his hips and flinched and then gently but adamantly pushed my hand from between his legs. I thought at first, naturally, that he was having an orgasm—but there was no tightening or spasming of his penis

between my fingers while I held it, certainly no ejaculation, no release of any seminal fluid, none at all. So what happened? I asked Pepper if he was OK, but all he said, in that too-loud and tense voice, was, “This is a good part right here,” and pointed to the panels at the bottom of the page. My best guess is that he simply got a sore dick from me rubbing it so long. Young boys can often have difficulty achieving a genuine orgasm, especially when they’re nervous, and Pepper seems to be having that problem.

I kept my hand on his thigh after that just to feel and enjoy the nakedness of him, my thumb actually in the crevice between his thigh and balls, one of those very warm and secret places on a boy’s body that feel especially private, especially forbidden. When the story was finished, we said good-night and then Pepper rolled onto his side facing away from me so that his back was spooned against my front, his bare behind right against my erection. I started thrusting slowly against him, my arm over him hugging him to me with my hand on his chest, on his hard breastbone and that strong thump-thumping heartbeat below. This time, tonight, I had a towel at hand for any mess that might occur, and by now I knew for sure that I’d need it, and soon. I was sliding my dick lengthwise between Pepper’s buttocks, a hot dog between two buns, no poking inside or penetration, just a quickening thrust between the meaty cheeks of this sleepy boy’s butt, Pepper’s butt, the very thought of it enough to make me crazy, so many months of wanting him and fantasizing about him suddenly made real in this madly delicious way, using the crack of his bare ass for the pleasure of my dick. Then, too soon, it was over, the unbearable sweetness of Pepper’s naked body making me ache and clench and finally burst so powerfully that my heart palpitated and my eyes ran with tears. God, what a mess I made all over the back of him! It took me a good minute or two or three to get everything cleaned off with the towel.

That was the end of it. We slept well and soundly for the rest of that night, both of us, Pepper and I.

(Note: I confess that these entries for the 19th and 20th of January were written today, which is Wednesday the 21st. There was no time to sit down and write on the days themselves, no time until now. Pepper is back home with his mother, and I finally have some free moments to myself. He'll be back this weekend, I think, when I'll resume this journal. In the meantime, I should also observe that Ryan Fox never showed up on Martin Luther King's Birthday, despite my invitation from Sunday. All I can say is—thank god! What would I have done with him? How could I have dealt with yet another youngster in my house? For now, I'd say, it's best if Ryan stays away. He's a gorgeous boy, but I have no time for him beyond an occasional trip to his swimming tournaments. Really, no time at all.)

JAN. 23

Holly has returned to Joliet for the weekend, which means that Pepper is here again for the next few days. While we were talking one morning at work, Holly mentioned something ominous, that she's been toying with the idea of moving to Joliet permanently—to help care for her mother when (or if) she gets out of the hospital; to work in the greenhouse that her parents, and now her sister, have owned and operated for decades; even, very simply, to provide herself “with a change of scenery” after so many largely dreary years in Sandburg. “But,” she said, “I wouldn't do it until after the school year. You know, for Pepper's sake, to make it easier.” Imagine such a thing! Joliet! Pepper would be three hours away—not like moving across country, I know, but still, a disturbing prospect.

One other note about Holly: I found it uncomfortably strange facing her and talking to her after my randy “honeymoon” with her son. She has such a naïve trust in my relationship with Pepper, such confidence that I would never “do anything wrong” with him, as she told me in October, that I now feel sort of low-down and dirty, as if I've betrayed

her. And yet, in all honesty, I see no betrayal in what I've done. Take away all the prissy and irrational moralizing and you're left with me and Pepper having fun together, enjoying each other, sharing pleasure. Nothing harmful about it, or treacherous, or wrong. Even so, talking to Holly the day after greedily fondling her twelve-year-old son's boner and shooting cum all over his back was a little unsettling.

Pepper himself seems happy enough to be back for the weekend. He brought his Nintendo with him again, and is looking forward to Frankie being here tomorrow night (Saturday, that is). Tonight was surprisingly tame, with a brief visit from JoJo and Dally devoted entirely to Nintendo-playing. Jimmy, as usual, was at the Lopez house, there to see Anita. Later, when Pepper and I were alone, I took a shower and invited him to join me, but he said no, he was clean enough and would wait until tomorrow. Come bedtime, I again had to "remind" him about sleeping nude. "Oh yeah," he said, same as last Tuesday, already hidden beneath the covers when he removed his underpants. We didn't bother with a story tonight. I just cuddled him and hugged him and planted nibbly little kisses on his neck and ear and cheek, letting him fall asleep undisturbed in my arms, letting him know that I don't need to devour him sexually every time we're together. Maybe he was expecting more, maybe even wanting more, and was disappointed by my restraint, who knows. But probably not. He was asleep quickly, and his penis was soft when I touched it, just once, to check. (Even after three nights together, I still can't stop marveling at the succulent reality of a naked Pepper, a Pepper with bare fanny and bare dick sharing my bed and willing to be stroked and fondled and aroused. It's too perfect.)

One brief addendum: JoJo pointed to the camcorder on his way out and announced that "somebody oughta make more movies 'round here!" I told him to go ahead and make as many movies as he wants, any kind, regular or wiener. He said, "You know what, Jake, them wiener movies don't come cheap"—just another of his weirdly cryptic observations.

Enough for tonight.

JAN. 24

It being Saturday, Pepper had to stay home by himself while I was at work. I dropped by at noon, during my lunch break, to check on him and to repeat my admonition from the morning: Do not allow the Huckfeldt boys into the house when I'm gone! The very thought makes me tremble. Pepper was keeping himself occupied with drawing and watching TV and playing Nintendo. We shared some microwaveable White Castle cheeseburgers for lunch, and then I went back to work. (Yes, it's against the rules to go home for lunch, unless home is on your route—but I needed to make sure that Pepper was safe and secure—so tough shit!)

Two things I noticed while I was there: First, the drawer in my bedroom had been opened, the contents disturbed, pictures and magazines rearranged as only I could detect. Second thing was the cassette of JoJo's movie, which had been moved from its spot on the bookshelf and then replaced. How could I tell? Because I'd left it at a very precise angle, for just that purpose. In other words, Pepper took advantage of my absence this morning to go through my collection of porn and to watch JoJo's wiener movie, predictable in both cases. It also means, of course, that he has now seen the Polaroids of himself sleeping with his shorts bunched up to expose his genitals, as well as the Polaroids of Frankie masturbating. I could have removed them beforehand to a different hiding place, yes—but I didn't, and I'm glad I didn't, because I think it's time for Pepper to see and know everything. Did he seem upset by his discoveries of the morning? Angry? Disturbed? No, not at all. He seemed fine.

When I got back this afternoon, Pepper was outside with the Huckfeldts, playing with the walkie-talkies I bought him for Christmas,

some kind of frantic war game that had all of them, even fourteen-year-old Jimmy, darting and hiding and chasing one another around and around our two houses, back and forth across the snowy street (a quiet residential street, so not really a danger). First thing Pepper said, when he saw me, was, “They didn’t come into the house! We were outside the whole time!” OK, OK, I said, I believe you, no problem, yelling to him from the porch. As it turned out, that was the last we saw of the Huckfeldts today. Their whole family left in the Chevy minivan a couple of hours later, maybe to the mall, maybe to a movie—whatever the destination, I’m glad to have them away for the evening, Pepper and Frankie providing me with more than enough stimulation.

Pepper and I were just finishing our dinner of pancakes and bacon (his request, an ideally sweet and salty meal) when Frankie showed up. He thoroughly mauled me with hugs and kisses, a pleasure to smell his hair again, and his clothing, that delicious mustiness of hemp and sandalwood and cherry incense always clinging to him. Pepper was next to be hugged, both arms at his sides, as always, when he finds himself in that condition. He’s almost as tall as Frankie, I noticed when they stood facing each other—my two loverboys together for the first time since the impromptu “underwear party” three weeks ago. Frankie was in his usual outfit of ski vest over flannel over tie-dye, plus his ratty-kneed jeans and black combat boots and his outlandish stocking cap. When he took off the cap, I saw that his darkish blond hair has been cut since the last time he visited, such perfectly straight and fine hair, maybe two inches shorter than before, just covering the collar of his ski vest (and his flannel shirt). He put the silly cap on Pepper’s head, which made Pepper smile, obvious that Frankie wanted to kiss him right then, all he could do to control himself. Pepper asked me, standing there in the cap, if Frankie was going to spend the night. I shrugged and looked at Frankie for an answer. He said, “Interesting that you should ask,” in a funny and lispy German accent. He took off his ski vest and rubbed his hands together to

warm them. His cheeks and nose were reddened from the cold. "I'm pretty sure I can stay," he continued, "if it's all right with you, Jake."

"Of course it's all right, but. . . what about your parents?"

"Dude, I have a plan," Frankie insisted. He grinned all dimply and squinty and yanked the stocking cap from Pepper's head, which then gave him an excuse for brushing and smoothing Pepper's hair with his fingers. He told us that he's been talking about Pepper and about the Huckfeldt brothers at home, mentioning them as he would any of his other "buds." There's no reason for his parents to suspect anything unusual about him staying overnight with some boy named Jimmy, for example, who even lives, very conveniently, on the same street as myself, so that Frankie is exactly where he's supposed to be, spending the night in a house on Whitman Street in Sandburg. "And they have your phone number," he said to me, concluding his explanation. "So if they call for some reason, which they won't, you're Jimmy's dad."

"Your parents have my phone number?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"What if they look in the phone book for the Huckfeldts?"

"First off, they won't. Dude, why would they? I'm just staying overnight with a bud, that's all. But anyway," Frankie shrugged, "the Huckfeldts aren't in the phone book, and they won't be until next year or maybe never, because they don't even have a listed number. I called information and checked."

"Wow," I said, "you've thought of everything."

"I'm a good spy, bro," Frankie grinned. He was pacing around and around the room during this discussion, twirling his floppy hat with one hand, then with the other hand, then again with the first. I have to admit, his strategy seems workable. There's no reason why his parents should be concerned or suspicious about their sixteen-year-old son staying overnight at a friend's house. Still, I suggested a final ploy to make the situation even safer, and Frankie happily agreed: He called home and told his mother, who answered the phone, that he's at Jimmy's, and that Pepper is also here, and then gave the phone to me—to Jimmy's father,



that is. I said hello, said that everything is fine and that Frankie is welcome to stay overnight, did a little more blah-blahing about nothing in particular, then said goodbye. So, from now on, Mr. and Mrs. Patallero know me as Jimmy's father; Mr. and Mrs. Fox know me as the mailman with an ex-wife and son I never get to see and several anonymous nephews and their various friends; the Huckfeldts, meanwhile, know me as Pepper's and Frankie's uncle, although the Huckfeldt boys themselves certainly realize by now, and don't care, that Pepper and Frankie are friends of mine, not nephews. Confusing? Yes, unfortunately it is, and one of the many reasons for writing this journal—to keep my stories and lies in order, to avoid confusion in my own mind.

Frankie, once everything was arranged, became nearly as hyper and overexcited as JoJo often is, saying again and again, “I can't believe it, this is so totally choice, I can't believe it, dude, getting to stay here, I can't believe it. . .” I eventually grabbed him in a loose hug to corral him and calm him. He said, as he did once before, “You should kiss me and make me shut up, Jake!” Pepper was watching us, which made me a little self-conscious about kissing Frankie like an actual boyfriend, but I did, slightly open-mouthed and hard enough to be a true shut-up smooch. “OK,” I finally said, “what happens now?”

Pepper shouted, “Nintendo comes first!” He was already on the floor, kneeling at his controls. I asked Frankie if he wanted anything to eat, but he said no, just a Cherry Coke would be enough, then changed his mind and grabbed a box of Twinkies from the kitchen to munch while he played. Pepper chose the same for himself, both boys drinking Cherry Cokes and eating Twinkies while they boisterously worked their controls. I told them, while they were playing and chattering, that I plan to visit Doc tomorrow and that I'd like for both of them to come with me. Sure, Frankie said, we should all go see Doc! Pepper wanted to know, Will it be fun? There's a good hill for sledding, I said, and a pond for skating, plus all sorts of places for hiking and exploring, so you should have a good time, yes, definitely. Both boys nodded and

continued playing, our discussion apparently finished. So I hope Doc is in the mood for visitors tomorrow!

### LATER—SAME DAY

My oh my, such a den of lewd and wicked delights I've conjured here!

But I should go back and begin this entry at its crucial point, when the boys finally decided to end their Nintendo marathon. It was nine o'clock by then, maybe a little after, late enough for me to stop wondering if we might be going out for a movie or a trip to the mall or somewhere more exotic—Sinbad's Arcade or Red Dog Comix, for example. Tonight we obviously were not going anywhere. Both boys had their shoes off and their snacks at hand and seemed perfectly happy to spend the whole night at home.

I passed the hours watching them, doing dishes, writing in this journal, taping with the camcorder. The boys seemed hardly aware of my presence. Frightfully hypnotic, those video games. Three hours, though, was enough Nintendo for one sitting, even for Pepper and Frankie. They stretched and yawned and gazed around, both of them, as if coming out of trance. At my suggestion, we ordered some submarine sandwiches from Luigi's. The kid on the phone said it would be "thirty or forty minutes" before our food was delivered. When I reported this to the boys, Frankie instantly proposed an idea for filling the time. "Dude," he said to Pepper, "have you used Jake's new shower yet?"

"Last week," Pepper nodded. I realized, at that moment, that I'd never even asked his opinion of it last Tuesday—but he now told Frankie that, yes, it's awesome, the best shower in the world. "We should use it before the food gets here," Frankie said. Pepper agreed, but then declared, "I get to use it first!" The look of squinty befuddlement on Frankie's face almost made me laugh. In fact, I believe I did laugh a little when Pepper suddenly rushed from the living room and left me and Frankie alone, staring at each other. "I think he misunderstood," I said.

“That’s too funny,” Frankie said with a goofy, lopsided smile. Still on the floor where Pepper had just abandoned him, he started taking off his clothes—first his socks, then his various shirts, then his blue jeans. “But dude, seriously, he’ll let me join him, just wait and see.”

“I’d like to see, very much,” I said, grabbing the camcorder as Frankie finished stripping and headed to the bathroom. I was right behind him, and gave his skinny white butt a vigorous pinch that made him yip and smile and turn toward me. We were outside the half-open bathroom door when the shower came on with a powerful whoosh from inside. I backed Frankie against the wall and, wham!, we were kissing and kissing in a giggly frenzy that startled both of us, even better because Pepper was just a few feet away behind that partially opened door. “Jake, bro, this is too much, totally,” Frankie breathed into my mouth. “Kinky, right?” I had the camcorder in one hand and was holding his bare hip with the other, still pressing this pale and naked teenager against the wall with the weight of my fully clothed body. He was on his toes and straining forward against me and rubbing himself stiff against the front of my trousers. Why were we doing this? “Enough, enough, enough,” I finally mumbled to Frankie, to myself, like a mantra to restore my own control. “Pepper’s already in the shower.”

“Yeah, I can hear him.”

“But now you’ve got a boner. Sorry. My fault.”

“That’s OK.”

“This whole situation is crazy,” I said. Frankie’s eyebrows are so dark and full and handsome, I couldn’t resist brushing my thumb across one and then the other, which is also when I noticed, for the first time, the little lengthwise scar that he has on his forehead, very near the hairline and maybe an inch long—from accidentally bicycling into a mailbox when he was seven or eight years old, he told me while we stood there in the dim hallway. This brief discussion gave his dick a chance to soften and droop, not entirely but enough to keep him from having a raging hard-on when we finally entered the bathroom. Pepper’s clothes were piled on the floor near the toilet. Frankie knocked on the

frosted glass of the shower door that's fitted to the big new tub (a sliding door that turns the tub into a shower stall). Pepper yelped from inside and hollered, "There's nobody home!" Somehow I don't think he was surprised to see us. I had the camcorder aimed and recording when Frankie slid the door open; and when Pepper yelped again and stood facing me with both hands clutching the bar of green Zest soap to his chest; and when Frankie laughed and stepped into the tub and Pepper backed away, out of sight behind the frosted glass, to give him room. "Come on, Jake, we can fit one more," Frankie yelled to me. I said thanks but no, someone has to stay dressed and in charge, at least until the food is delivered. I then told them to have fun and withdrew to the living room.

I kept watching the clock and waiting, both for the sandwiches and for the boys. Exactly eighteen minutes passed before the shower was shut off. I waited another few moments, then returned with the camcorder to the bathroom, where the two boys were standing naked and very wet and just beginning to dry themselves. "Well, well, look at this," I said, recording everything. "How was your shower?"

"Dude, awesome beyond words," Frankie smiled, not even trying to hide his waggly, half-erect penis as he dried himself. Pepper nodded, keeping his towel carefully in front of him as he patted and wiped his arms and chest and stomach. I asked, "Did you use the steam bath?" No, not this time, Frankie said. Pepper asked, in that silly way of his, "Did we forget to use it?" Frankie laughed and started drying Pepper's back. "I think so, bud, we both forgot."

"This looks perfect," I said, still recording. "My favorite boys in all their natural splendor!" Frankie grinned gleefully into the lens with his eyebrows arched and his cheeks deeply dimpled, such a happy chipmunk face. Pepper, at the same time, kept the front of himself covered by the towel and responded with a sad-clown grimace and a slow shake of his head. "OK," I relented, "that's enough movie-making for now, I guess." Once more, I left the two of them and returned to the living room to await the deliveryman. Only two or three minutes later, Frankie came

racing out (still without a stitch) and said, “Pepper forgot his shorts. The white ones. He needs them.”

“And you’re his errand boy?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“What happened in the shower? Anything?”

“Oh, Jake, it was great! He let me wash his back and even his butt,” Frankie told me in an urgent, whispery voice. “He seemed to dig it pretty well.”

“What about your boner?”

“It was so hard, I’m not kidding!”

“And Pepper saw it?”

“Dude, he couldn’t miss it!”

“Did he say anything?”

“He saw it, he looked at it, but he didn’t say anything.”

“Did he get hard himself?”

“No, no, he didn’t,” Frankie said as I handed him the white Nike shorts that Pepper had requested. “It was just like a regular shower for him, I guess, which is disappointing. But dude, he is so cute, I mean so seriously cute!”

“Hey, I agree, believe me.”

“Everything about him is so choice,” Frankie went on, funny to watch him standing there bare-assed and oblivious as he jabbered. “His body and his face and his hair.”

“He’s scrumptious in every way, you’re right.”

“And his cock.”

“That’s a good word.”

“It’s really nice.”

“To say the least.”

“It’s not just a little one, like a little kid’s. I mean,” Frankie struggled to explain, his hand out with the fingers spread as if holding something of significant heft, “it’s a real cock!”

“You’d better take those shorts to him,” I laughed. “He must be waiting.”

“Shit, I almost forgot.”

“Should I get my robe for you to wear?”

“Dude, yes, excellent idea,” Frankie said, on his way out. I was referring to a bright gold corduroy robe of mine that Frankie had seen and admired on one of his earlier visits. I went to my bedroom and found it and brought it out, just in time to hand it to Frankie himself as he and Pepper emerged from the bathroom. The robe is long, even on me, and hung almost to Frankie’s ankles—and, as I said, it’s a garish golden color that undoubtedly appeals to the boy’s outré sense of style.

When the deliveryman from Luigi’s showed up, I was getting the hide-a-bed ready for sleeping. The porch and the sidewalk and the street, I was surprised to discover when I opened the door, all were covered with fresh snow that was still falling in giant, feathery flakes. I gave the young man a generous tip and then called the boys to the door for a glimpse of the snow. “It’ll make for ideal sledding tomorrow at Doc’s,” I said. As we were looking outside, Holly called from Joliet to let us know that she’ll be home tomorrow night. Her mother, she said, is doing better, but might never be able to care for herself as she did before. “That’s why I’m thinking about moving here,” Holly added. “One of the reasons, at least.” She then talked to Pepper for a couple of minutes. I was tempted afterwards to ask him about his possible move to Joliet, but I figured no, not tonight, let’s just enjoy our time together and have fun.

Frankie suddenly remembered JoJo’s movie while we were eating our sub sandwiches. How had we forgotten until then? Too many other diversions, I suppose. Of course Pepper had already watched it on the sly, but he revealed nothing about that and I saw no point in divulging his secret. He was sitting cross-legged on the end of our pulled-out bed, wearing his baggy white shorts. No underwear, no shirt, just the shorts and his big copper-rimmed glasses. He had his sandwich on its waxy white wrapping paper on his lap, picking and nibbling at bits of meat and cheese and bread while refusing to touch the “evil” ingredients of lettuce and peppers and tomatoes. I took some of the discarded veggies for my own sandwich, and Frankie took the rest.

As for JoJo's movie: I put it in the VCR and returned to my spot on the hide-a-bed, seated upright against the pillows with my feet next to Pepper. Frankie was lying belly-down on the other side of the mattress with his feet against the pillows and his head next to Pepper, just the reverse of myself. The first several minutes of the "movie" were a tedious hodgepodge of household objects and activities all randomly recorded by JoJo, nothing of interest except for the cameo appearance, very near the beginning, by Ryan Fox. He had just lost several races on Pepper's Indy set to Dally and JoJo and was sitting on the edge of the La-Z-Boy with his arms crossed and his face looking crabby and petulant, scowling at the camera. Frankie pointed to the screen. "That's Ryan?"

"That's him," I said, freezing the frame. "From last Sunday. After his swimming meet."

"Awesome hair!"

"Yeah, very blond."

"He looks amazing," Frankie said in sort of a reverent murmur, his mouth crammed with sandwich. "Any more of him?"

"No, not yet, unfortunately," I answered, wondering what Pepper was making of this discussion between Homo Jake and Homo Frankie, the two of us salivating over a boy even younger than himself. He was peering at the screen and nibbling a bit of ham and bread, but he said nothing, and seemed to be hardly paying attention. Finally we got to the Jimmy-and-Dally segment. "The good stuff," Frankie snickered, laying down the remainder of his sandwich so that nothing might distract him. The scene, by now, was very familiar to me: Jimmy putting his middle finger into Dally's mouth for the little boy to suck; Jimmy opening Dally's pants, taking down Dally's Underoos, giving Dally a boner. Frankie marveled and laughed and shook his head at every detail, like the first time he saw *You Are Not Alone* at Doc's house. When the camera zoomed in for a close-up of Dally's erection being handled and stroked, he slapped his forehead and said, "Whoa, dude, there it is! That's amazing!" I was finished with my own sandwich by this time and

had my left hand beneath Frankie's robe, petting the frizzy soft hair on his bare calves. He glanced at me and at Pepper beside him and he said, "It's kind of little, though. Dinky."

"He's only eight years old," I pointed out. "It's a good size for his age. More than average, probably."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Frankie conceded. "For a little kid. But it's not a real, you know, cock."

"Such foul language," I joked, afraid that Frankie might be getting a bit reckless. Pepper looked at me, wondering perhaps if I was genuinely upset. He was chewing when he looked around, and grinning sort of cautiously. Frankie again pointed to the screen. "It's like simple biology, bro. A little guy like that is wienie-sized." He paused to laugh because Pepper was laughing. "But all of us, right here, we're like, dude, cock-sized!" Pepper laughed again, glancing at me each time to observe my reaction. Then, to my surprise, he asked, "How old do you have to be?"

"Dude, for what?"

"To have a real one?"

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen," I said, jumping in. "Whenever puberty arrives, you never know."

"Puberty," Frankie echoed, as if to savor the word. "That's when your wienie turns into a total and real cock!" Take it easy, I kept thinking, don't go over the edge and make Pepper feel uncomfortable. You don't have to keep saying "cock" over and over just to shock him. But then Pepper startled me again by asking, "What makes it a real one?"

Go ahead, Frankie, I thought to myself, answer him. Both boys, just then, peeked over their shoulders at me and laughed in a way that seemed suddenly and charmingly self-conscious. Frankie said, to Pepper, "Yours is real, dude, you know," and he made that same gesture as before, his hand out and his fingers spread as if holding something weighty, "like this, you know, like nice, like. . ." Flustered, he put his head down onto his hands and made a gurgly laughing noise. Pepper let



his own head loll forward and made a similar noise of gurgling laughter, just as sweetly flustered as Frankie, both of them at an embarrassed loss for words. Time for old Jake to step in, I figured. “Here’s Jimmy’s big joke,” I announced, that point on the tape where he calls out, just to be funny, “Dally done spermed for real!” Frankie and Pepper went back to eating their sandwiches as they watched those final few moments of JoJo’s movie. Frankie, my hand now on his bare ass beneath the robe, wanted to see it again from where “Jimmy and Dally start doing their stuff.” Pepper didn’t object, so I dutifully rewound the six minutes of X-rated footage and played it one more time.

Both boys finished their sandwiches while we were watching the replay. (More precisely, Frankie finished his sandwich and Pepper left his in a torn-up, picked-apart mess, like something ravaged by a pack of rats.) Pepper stayed where he was on the end of the bed, but Frankie scooted himself backward several inches so that I could feel his ass more easily, then he spread his legs to open the crack for my finger, inviting me to poke inside, welcoming my finger into him. This was all happening beneath the robe, of course—but Pepper realized, I’m sure, that something was going on behind him.

After the second showing of JoJo’s movie, Frankie insisted that we watch the footage I’ve shot until now for my “Pepper collection.” I asked Master Robinson himself for his permission. He shrugged and said, “It’ll be horrible,” but then proceeded on his own to fetch the tape from the camcorder and put it into the VCR, replacing JoJo’s movie. He detoured to the bathroom and the kitchen after that, returning with a can of root beer as the tape was already playing, showing him with his saxophone. Frankie was controlling the remote. Pepper stood on Frankie’s side of the bed, off to my left, just standing there with his can of pop and watching the video of himself practicing the scales on his sax. Frankie moved himself sideways, and me with him, to make room for Pepper on that edge of the mattress. “Dude, you can lay here,” he

said, “beside me, come on.” Pepper took a sip of root beer and nodded and then accepted Frankie’s invitation and climbed aboard.

So there we were: Frankie beside me with my middle finger up his butt, and Pepper beside him, also flat on his belly, with his chin resting on his crossed arms. We all watched as the video jumped from Pepper’s saxophone practice to Pepper in bed last Tuesday night—taking off his underpants beneath the covers, holding them up, saying “no, no, no” while I urged him to show us more. Then abruptly we were watching Frankie as he stepped into the shower. We could see Pepper standing in the tub with the green bar of Zest clutched to his chest, a shot of him fully and frontally nude before he stepped away behind the frosted glass. Quickly, Frankie hit the rewind button and froze the frame. “Dude, such a stud,” he said, laying one arm across Pepper’s shoulders. “Look at you!”

“So ugly,” Pepper whimpered in his boo-hoo voice, hiding his eyes (glasses and all) with both hands. “Make it disappear!”

“Stud boy,” Frankie said in the deepest, most macho voice he could manage. He nudged and rubbed the back of Pepper’s head. “That’s a total cock, bud, right there, the real thing!”

“You’re embarrassing the poor lad,” I joked. “Be merciful.”

Pepper tried to sob, but mostly it came out as laughter when he said, “You have to be merciful to me!” Frankie finally relented and let the tape continue. He kept his hand at the back of Pepper’s neck, playing with that scraggly brown rat-tail curl that I also find so irresistible. The last segment on the tape showed the boys drying themselves after their shower. Pepper had done a very skillful job of keeping himself covered in front with his towel, but we could easily see every bit of Frankie, including his very conspicuous and waggly half-boner. “Oh my god,” he said about himself, “that’s so nasty!”

“Good nasty,” I asked, “or bad nasty?”

“Bad nasty,” Pepper volunteered with a teasing smile, glad to have the attention focused on someone else. Frankie said, “Hey, that’s cold-blooded,” and tugged gently at Pepper’s rat tail in playful retaliation. Pepper responded with plaintive and whimpery cries of “ow, ow, ow!” as if genuinely in pain. I interrupted to observe, “You know, this video could become another wiener movie if we’re not careful.”

“But it’s weak,” Frankie said, rushing and lisping over his words more than I’ve ever heard him. My finger was all the way into him and making his hips go hunched and rigid beneath the robe. Pepper, I continued thinking, must have known what was happening, especially when I tried sliding my finger and it produced a lewd and rude suctiony noise that made him turn his head and look. I stopped, but he could see where my left hand was and could figure out, easily enough, what it was doing beneath the robe. He’s still a rather virginal little critter, but he’s not an idiot. I diverted attention by asking, “Weak? How is it weak?”

“Because, dude, because,” Frankie rushed to answer, “I had a totally better boner in the shower! Pepper saw it. Right? Remember?”

“It can get pretty big,” Pepper verified in a strangely serious way, reminding me suddenly of JoJo and his funny-but-serious demeanor. Frankie nodded and said, “Like now, I’m telling you, look here!” He rolled backward against me so that he was facing Pepper, nearly spraining my finger and wrist in the process, and then he opened his robe and flashed the other boy, showing him, I could only imagine, an extremely red and throbbly erection. Pepper took a good look but then put his face down against his arms and made more of those gurgly laughing noises, as if mortified beyond speech. The video ended just then—only about twenty minutes of footage so far—and as soon as it did, Pepper insisted that we look at his magic books. Why, I don’t know, probably just the first idea to pop into his nervous and fuddled mind, as well as something convenient and close at hand, easy for him to sit up and grab them from the nearby table and then flop down again, on his belly, beside Frankie. “The Wizard’s Reference and Sorcery and

Enchantment,” he announced. “These are the awesomest magic books ever!”

Frankie was happy to peruse the books (booklets, really) with his favorite young buddy. In fact, now that his robe was open and loose, he spread it and offered to share it with Pepper, “if you’re cold.” Pepper said he wasn’t really very cold, but Frankie put the robe over him anyway, like Dracula covering a victim with his cape—but a cute Dracula, a sweet Dracula. That left the two of them pressed together side by side beneath the spread-out gold corduroy, Frankie directly and nakedly against Pepper. Then, getting even chummier, Frankie lifted his leg and rested it across Pepper’s, which brought his erection, of course, firmly against the hip of Pepper’s Nike shorts. Lifting and stretching that leg to the side also opened his rectum even wider to my finger, so I obliged the boy and started finger-fucking him for real, once again producing that rude squishing sound which was now, however, partially obscured by the blaring of MTV from the television. Not entirely, though—and between that squishy noise and Frankie pressed shivery against him, Pepper must have been keenly aware of the sexual mischief underway between the two friends who were sharing his bed.

But a brief bit of this particular arrangement was enough for me. Honestly, inflicting such exquisite agony on Frankie with no chance, right then, of climax or relief for either of us—well, it seemed needlessly frustrating. So, as gently as possible, I withdrew my finger and allowed the boy to unclench and relax, at least a little. “I’m off for a quick shower,” I told him and Pepper. They nodded, but were engrossed in reading the more interesting spells and incantations from Pepper’s books. “Here’s a good one,” Frankie said, still sounding slightly tense and breathless. “For gaining someone’s love. It says: Take a very hot bath. Afterwards, cover yourself with sugar and flour to absorb the moisture. Wipe it off with a cloth, then scrape the moistened flour and sugar thus obtained into the food or drink of him you wish to charm. Dude, that’s cool!”

“Does it sound messy?”

“Nah,” Frankie said to Pepper’s facetious question. “Here’s another one: Pronounce three times your name and the name of him you love. Then take off all your clothes and steal into the room where he lies sleeping soundly. Clip from his head a lock of hair and if you escape without awakening him or meeting anyone, you will obtain absolute mastery over his affections. But,” Frankie cleared his throat and turned the page as I headed from the room, “if you are caught, the spell will be reversed and you will suffer. You must wear his hair in a bag around your neck or waist or twisted in a ring. Duuude! I dig these books! They’re too cool!”

That’s all I heard of that conversation before I lost the boys’ voices beneath the raucous cacophony of music videos and, eventually, the noise of the shower. It was one of those moments, alone in the bathroom, when I wondered rather numbly at the dramatic turn of my life since October, from monkish and contented chastity to an almost daily routine of naked boys and naughty young boners—and, admittedly, all the risks and fatigue and chronic anxiety that boys and boners bring with them. Sometimes I miss the quiet and safety and serenity of my pre-October life. Sometimes. More often, as now, I’m too flushed with pleasure and excitement to think beyond the pandemonium of the day.

Was I stalling in the shower? Was I lingering in there and allowing myself to imagine what the boys might be doing in my absence? Sure. No doubt. I was curious what a horny and uninhibited Frankie might attempt with Pepper while I was gone. This, in fact, is what finally happened: I finished in the bathroom and wrapped myself in a towel and, with a spare towel in my hand, returned to the living room, where everything appeared the same as I’d left it. The TV was still blaring. The boys were still on the bed with the big robe spread over them. But then I noticed that the magic books had been set aside onto the floor. And I noticed that Pepper’s head was down, his cheek resting against his folded arms, his eyes shut behind his glasses. And I noticed, stepping closer, that his white shorts had been pulled down and were gathered

around his ankles. Frankie, just then, saw me and smiled. His leg was still thrown across Pepper but now he was up even tighter and closer against him, nearly on top of him and humping slowly and playing an eager game of touchy-feely beneath the corduroy robe, getting his hand wherever he could reach all up and down the accessible parts of Pepper's body.

Not saying anything, I dropped the towel from my hand and the one from around my waist and took the "Pepper collection" cassette from the VCR, then put it back into the camcorder and started recording. Frankie watched me and smiled again with his cheek pressed against the back of Pepper's head. Pepper himself was still unaware of my presence in the room, no way to see me with his eyes shut and no way to hear me with the music videos booming so loudly. Frankie, clever accomplice that he is, paused just long enough to remove the robe and discard it, generously providing me with a perfectly clear view of both himself and Pepper as he went back to work, busily touching and humping, his boner now very much visible against the right cheek of Pepper's bare behind. I just stood there beside the hide-a-bed, naked, saying nothing, recording and recording this performance in front of me. Frankie kept glancing at the camera, smiling, nodding. After three or four minutes of this, he again provided generous assistance by sliding his hand under Pepper's stomach and then rolling both himself and Pepper backward, like a wrestler trying to put his opponent's shoulders to the mat. The maneuver left Frankie himself largely blocked from view, but it abruptly and stunningly exposed the whole front of Pepper's body, the full bare length of him stretched out and pinned, so to speak, against Frankie's body behind him, with Frankie's hand on his stomach holding him in place. His balls—Pepper's balls—were hanging saggy and sideways against his bottom thigh and his excited dick was aimed rigidly in my direction.

Outside, the Huckfeldt Hounds began suddenly woofing and yelping, probably in response to the Huckfeldts themselves returning from their long family excursion. The outburst of noise, whatever its

cause, was enough to make Pepper open his eyes, which widened in genuine shock like I've never seen before when he discovered me standing there with the camcorder. I have to say again, and truthfully, that I've never seen the boy look so shocked and abashed as he did at that moment, no phony whimpering or boo-hooing this time, not a word or sound of any kind as he saw me and then clamped his eyes shut again so tightly that his whole face became a clenched fist. I immediately lowered the camera and shook my head at Frankie, as if to say, "No more of this, no more, enough." What I actually said, and very loudly, was, "Well, OK, it's late, time for bed, time for everybody to hit the hay," letting Pepper know that I was finished and that he could now relax and have fun beneath the covers, safely concealed.

To that end, I temporarily took control from Frankie and said, to possum-playing Pepper, "Come on, sleepy head, let's turn around and cover up." I removed his glasses, and I removed the shorts from around his ankles, then gently lifted him and turned him and repositioned him with his head on the pillows. He kept his arms in front of him and his hands folded demurely between his legs (to hide the pesky and impolite stiffness of his penis) until he was comfortably tucked beneath the covers. Frankie had taken advantage of this break in the action for a last-minute pee, and now came racing back into the room. He asked, a little uneasily, if everything was OK. "Yeah," I whispered, "Pepper just gets shy when he's on display. It wasn't fair for me to sneak up on him like that. But he'll be fine now."

"So, I mean, can we do more stuff?"

"Under the covers, I'd say yeah, sure, whatever feels good."

"Dude, cool," Frankie grinned. He climbed excitedly into bed as I did my usual lights-out, doors-locked routine. I left the TV on for a bit of light and noise, better than absolute silence and darkness, it always seems to me, for a pleasurable midnight debauch. By the time I joined the boys in bed, beneath the sheet and the blanket, they were spooned together in a cozy cuddle, Frankie behind Pepper. I said to Frankie, as I rolled against his back to complete a triple-spoon, "I've got some towels

here. If you need one.” His hair, for a change, smelled not of incense and hemp but of herbal shampoo. I reached over his hip and found his hard-on and commenced, with no further dawdling or foreplay, to masturbate him, my knuckles rubbing across Pepper’s bare bottom on every stroke. Frankie, I could tell from the rhythmic movement of his own left arm, was doing the same to Pepper, vigorously masturbating him while kissing at his hair and cheek. Maybe five minutes passed, maybe even ten—Frankie kissing Pepper and jerking him off while being kissed and jerked off by me, the vaguely anxious thought repeating itself in my mind, over and over: What if Pepper has a real orgasm this time and I can’t see it or feel it or enjoy it? Not fair, I kept thinking, not fair for Frankie to gain the spermy reward after my many months of feverish expectation and effort.

Actually, however, that didn’t happen. After ten minutes or so, Frankie was shivering nearly out of control. I’ve forgotten to mention that I had my dick up his ass, where my finger had earlier been, and was fucking him while jerking him off, making him ache and moan and hunch until he finally announced, in a desperately loud voice, “I’m gonna cum! Dude, right now!” I pulled him back toward me and got the towel in place just in time to catch his gusher, Frankie moaning “shit, shit, shit” like someone being tortured, which he was, in a way, with my dick still ramming into him. I would have stopped but it was too late, I couldn’t, my own load was about to shoot, the spasms already starting, the stuff coming out, really coming out, pumping into Frankie’s bowels.

In the few moments we spent disengaging and wiping off and catching our breaths, Pepper rolled away onto his belly to signal, as he’d done once before with me, that he was finished for the night. What a week this has been for him! Just this past Monday, only five nights ago, he was sleeping nude with me for the first time, being fondled for the first time, experiencing touching and lovemaking for the first time. And now, since then, all this! It must seem overwhelming to him, confusing, like trying to learn the many rules and moves and skills of a tough new sport. I told Frankie, for that reason, to let him be, to let him sleep. We



were whispering, Frankie and I, in a bit of serious pillow-talk. He was frustrated, and understandably so, that Pepper hadn't achieved any type of satisfying climax. "I know, I know, but there's nothing you can do to force it," I commiserated. "We all need to be patient."

"Dude, but what happened?"

"Nervous young boys often have trouble, you know, achieving orgasm. I've seen it before, believe me," I whispered. "Pepper needs a little time to relax, that's all. Everything is happening very quickly for him."

"That's true, I guess."

"He's being very brave, really."

"Yeah, for somebody so shy."

"Exactly. He'll be fine, don't worry."

It was midnight by then, and time for sleep. Tomorrow we'll go to Doc's.

(Note: I confess, once again, that I've been writing these entries in bits and pieces as I manage to find some free time, often a day or two after the event. This will happen frequently, I assume, but I'll mention it this last time only, and then no more.)

## LATER—SAME NIGHT

At three o'clock this morning, Frankie treated my mouth to a liberal dose of jism. We were uncovered, and the room was dark, but not so dark that Pepper couldn't have seen the exhibition beside him, Frankie on his back with me sucking and sucking at his cock until he tensed and trembled and ejaculated. Pepper, you see, was on his side and facing us and, I'm fairly certain, watching us through not-quite-shut eyelids. If I'm right, then he got a helluva show; he saw a long and slow and top-quality blowjob that must have been wickedly entertaining—and very educational.

JAN. 25

I slept late this morning after so much activity throughout the night. How easy it was ten years ago, or fifteen, or twenty, to tolerate these unholy stresses and strains! And how difficult now!

But I need to back up: Around dawn, when the room was just beginning to brighten with pearl-gray light, I woke and opened my eyes and discovered, groggily at first, that the boys were also awake, moving just a bit under the covers, engaged in some kind of covert activity. I was careful not to move, not to disturb or alert them. Little by little, I came to realize what they were doing. It was my turn now to play possum and watch the show through half-lidded eyes. Pepper was on his back and appeared to be gazing languidly at the ceiling—yes, his eyes were open—while Frankie leaned over him and kissed him boldly right on the mouth. Pepper wasn't actually kissing back or moving his own lips, but his lips were loosely parted, and he seemed willing enough to let Frankie cover him with one sloppy smooch after another. At the same time, I figured out eventually, he was using his hand on Frankie, on Frankie's dick—not entirely his own idea, however—Frankie offering constant advice and encouragement in an urgent mumble, using his own hand (I think) to keep Pepper's hand in the right position and at the right pace and pressure, mumbling things like “squeeze it harder” and “dude, that's so good” and “just like that, just like that”—all the while still rabidly kissing Pepper's uncomplaining mouth.

Then, for the third time since midnight, Frankie went into that fierce orgasmic shiver of his and ejaculated, which I know for sure because he was moaning “shit, shit, shit” again and then mumbling, to Pepper, “That's too excellent, that's the fucking best, dude, I came like crazy.” Pepper responded with that same gurgly, embarrassed laugh he used last night. Frankie stared down at him with a quiet and gaspy laugh of his own and said, “Shit, bud, I forgot the towel!” Pepper asked, “Is that important?” Frankie answered, “Did I get some on you?” Pepper

said, “Just here,” and held his hand above the covers. Frankie grabbed him by the wrist and wiped the hand roughly and playfully on the top blanket, then cleaned himself in the same crude way, using the sheet to wipe between his legs. Both of them found this amusing, good giggly fun, and Frankie even murmured, “Jake would freak!” Well, of course, Jake wouldn’t freak, but I kept my mouth shut and waited patiently for the final act of their little show.

But the show was almost over. Pepper yawned and glanced at me (did he know that I was awake and watching them?) and then he said, a little louder than you might expect, “Should we sleep now? I’m really tired.” Frankie asked him, much more quietly, “Don’t you want to finish yourself? Are you sure?” Pepper repeated in his too-loud voice that he was really, really tired (and, come to think of it, he probably was). He started to roll away onto his side but Frankie said, “Wait, bud, another kiss, just one more!” Pepper shrugged against the pillow, being admirably patient, then gazed blinking into Frankie’s face as his mouth was once again very wetly and hungrily kissed by this other boy.

It’s remarkable, this budding romance of theirs. I’ve known many boys who messed around together, jerked off together, that sort of thing. But it was all done in the usual context of hetero horseplay, the traditional boys-will-be-boys type of fumbling and groping and giggling that ends in busting a nut and nothing more—no passion, certainly, and no tenderness, no creepy homo stuff like cuddling or kissing. But Frankie is openly gay, and it’s gay Frankie who’s responsible, bless him, for this rare treasure in my life, this rare and lucky thing I’m witnessing between him and Pepper. All the more remarkable because I’m convinced that Pepper is hard-wired psychologically as a heterosexual, and that he’ll grow up to lust for girls and get married and have kids, the whole hetero package. But for now, as this funny and sweet and pretty twelve-year-old that I know and adore, he’s cautiously but happily become part of something I’ve never witnessed before: two young boys in love, crazy about each other, authentic kiss-and-hug boyfriends

becoming true bedtime lovers. Yes, it's Frankie who's doing the actual kissing and lovemaking, I know. But Pepper is letting it all happen, collaborating, enjoying his new and (to me) astonishing role as Frankie's little boyfriend. (Is he my boyfriend, too? Sure. But that's different. No big deal. I'm a grown man, not another boy.)

Everything I've just written became even clearer to me this morning when I woke up for good around nine o'clock. The boys were still in bed beside me, still drowsy and dozey even after I tried rousing them with affectionate poking and teasing. Both of them agreed that it was "too early" and snuggled even closer beneath the warmth and security of the covers, as if seeking each other's protection against Jake the Ogre. Frankie was on his side, facing Pepper, just as he'd been earlier during their dawn interlude. Pepper was on his stomach and had his curly head turned toward Frankie on the pillow that they were sharing. Two things about that: First, they didn't need to be sharing one pillow, but they were. Second, Pepper could have had his head turned the other direction, but didn't. It was his choice to be face to face and eye to eye with Frankie. And it was his choice, as I dressed and stood watching from beside the bed, to stay right there, content and unmoving, when Frankie snuggled so close that their noses and their lips actually came together, touching; and when that touching became kissing, sweet little nibbly kisses from Frankie like a continuous and very gentle chewing against Pepper's motionless but compliant mouth. He kept glancing at me while this was going on. Pepper, I mean. As he was snuggling naked with this other boy, and as he was being so lovingly kissed and caressed (yes, Frankie's hand was all over the back of him, on his legs, on his ass)—during all of this, Pepper kept lifting his eyes and looking at me, as if searching for approval or encouragement in my face. I smiled to him each time his eyes found mine.

Was I jealous? Was I just smiling to be polite? No, not at all. I feel excitement and affection when I watch the two of them together, not

jealousy, not resentment. I'd like to see Pepper do more with Frankie, not less; like to see him share more fully in their lovemaking; like to see him do some kissing and caressing and ejaculating of his own. When I smile encouragement to him, I mean it, I truly do.

#### LATER—SAME DAY

The boys finally got themselves up and dressed and ready for the day after nearly an hour of their kissy-kissy cuddling, just as I've already described it. No actual sex this time. (Frankie, by the way, has mentioned nothing to me about his dawn jerk-off session with Pepper. He might eventually, or he might not. Maybe we all need our little secrets.) A quick breakfast of cereal and milk and juice, and then a phone call by Frankie to his parents to say he'd be home after supper, and then we were off to Doc's, Frankie in his red Honda trailing my white Volvo as we left Sandburg and headed into the snowy countryside.

The streets in town had been plowed overnight, but the rural roads were still covered with three or four inches of fresh, powdery snow, some light flurries continuing to swirl from the gray clouds overhead. I made my way slowly and carefully over the hills and around the many snaking curves, partly for my own safety but mostly to force Frankie, following me, to drive just as slowly and carefully as myself. Because of the tricky conditions, I had Pepper with me in my Volvo, safer that way in all respects, it seemed to me. He spent most of the trip playing with the radio, or with his Gameboy, but I did try to engage him in some friendly chitchat. I asked, first thing, "Are you having fun with Frankie?" Pepper nodded, so I asked, "Are you glad he stayed overnight?" Pepper nodded again. Then I asked, "Should we have him stay again in the future? Would that be good?"

"I think so," Pepper answered, finally responding with more than a nod. "It would be a pretty good idea, probably."

"You guys have become just about best friends," I said. "Right?"

“Just about.” “Were the sleeping arrangements OK last night?”  
“What are sleeping arrangements?”

“I mean, were you happy with all of us in the same bed? Was it OK?”

“I think it was OK,” Pepper said, fiddling with the radio at that point, skipping from station to station. “Were you happy with the arrangements?”

“Yeah,” I smiled, “I like sleeping with my two favorite boys. So. Next time. Should we do it the same way?”

“Is it up to me?”

“Sure, whatever you want.” “Well,” Pepper said, his brow furrowed in apparently deep and serious consideration, “I think we should do it the same way.”

“Nude? Again?”

“Yeah.” “Good, I’m glad.”

“It’s the awesomest way in the world for sleeping.”

“Really? I didn’t realize it was that good,” I teased.

“Yeah, it’s the best way for sure.”

A little later, maybe halfway to Doc’s, I said, “You know, I’m sorry I surprised you last night with the camcorder.”

“Did you surprise me? When?”

“Last night. When I came back from my shower. Remember? You and Frankie were on the bed, and Frankie took the robe off, and you were both naked.”

Pepper was playing busily with his Gameboy while he listened, evidently suffering from another spell of amnesia. “Did you record it?”

“Yeah, I did. Was it all right? Do you forgive me?”

“Was it for your Pepper collection?”

“Of course.”

“It’s almost a Pepper-and-Frankie collection now,” the boy remarked. I glanced at him beside me, his head down over his Gameboy. Such a delicate, little-fawn profile (or should I say “faun” instead)—those pointy ears, that fine chin, those silk-comb eyelashes looking

especially long against the bright backdrop of the window beside him. I said, "It's sort of a Pepper-and-Frankie collection now, you're right. So, anyway, I won't sneak up on you again, like last night, I promise."

"What was it you recorded? Something horrible?"

"No," I laughed, "I think it was very nice, very. . . sexy."

"What was it?"

"Well, it was you. . . it was you and Frankie," I said, pausing, but determined to be candid, "and, like I told you before, Frankie removed the robe, and you were both naked, and Frankie was being very cuddly and sweet, you know how Frankie is, how much he likes you." I paused again, in case Pepper cared to respond. But he just kept playing with his Gameboy, nothing more, so I carried on with my clumsy account. "And Frankie was cuddling and cuddling, and then you guys rolled over, remember? And you, my young friend, had a simply gorgeous boner." That finally brought a response from Pepper. He let his head drop forward and did a full "boo-hoo waaah!" chorus of loud and comical despair, grinning as he sobbed. I added, "Just gorgeous. Big old thing. Remember now?"

"I can't remember," Pepper sobbed, but then broke into a helpless gush of laughter at his own ridiculous lie. I touched his cheek and called him "such a silly boy" and then (a very spur of the moment act) I gave him a friendly tweak between the legs, getting sweatpants and underpants and fleshy-soft penis all in one gentle pinch. Pepper let out a startled yip that was partially genuine but mostly pretend, then returned his attention, still grinning, to the Gameboy.

We got to Doc's house by noon. I hate to write this, but my old friend looked unusually run-down and unkempt today. He was in his favorite chair when we arrived, smoking a cigarette (I brought him another carton from the tobacco shop). A paperback book was resting upside down on his lap. He smiled as we stomped through the door. "Welcome, welcome," he said, standing to greet us. "It's the whole gang today, I see. Even Khalid! Or Pepper, I should say."

Frankie hurried forward to hug him and say hello, hard for me to remember at times that it was the two of them, Frankie and Doc, who began together as friends, with me as the third wheel, the tag-along. So rapidly, that whole situation has changed. Now it's Doc who seems very much divorced from the flow of events, hopelessly out of touch with everything I've seen and thought and experienced since Christmas. How can I begin to tell him about the Huckfeldt brothers, about the camcorder and JoJo's wiener movie, about the romance between Frankie and Pepper? Funny thing is, it was Frankie himself who told Doc today, for no apparent reason, about our "underwear party" from three weeks ago. "You know," the boy said, "like in your story about Tino and Danny. Remember?"

"Ancient history," Doc said in a dismissive way that I found almost shocking, certainly disturbing. Frankie, such a sweetheart, didn't even seem to recognize Doc's response as brusque or off-putting. He just kept talking and smiling and helping me put groceries into Doc's cupboards and refrigerator—groceries that included ground beef and buns for hamburgers, also potato chips and pop and ice cream, more than enough to feed the boys after our activities outside. Doc, to his credit, was happy to show the boys around the surrounding woods and hillsides, and to provide them with ice skates and a Flexible Flyer sled that hadn't been used in many, many years. The ice skates were for the frozen-solid pond near his house, maybe a ten or fifteen minute walk through the trees, heading north. The big hill for sledding is much closer, actually within sight from the house as you look east through the terrarium-like wall of windows. The boys were chattery and excited about this whole wintry playland suddenly available to them. They spent their first hour or so on the big hill, just a few seconds to whoosh down on the Flexible Flyer and then a good minute to trudge back up to the top, then down again in a careening fantail of snow. Mostly they went down one at a time, but often they hunkered as a two-boy team on the old sled and rode down together, each trip ending with them sprawled laughing and tangled on the snowy ground.



As for me, I went down the hill one time, stood and watched the boys, then accompanied them to the pond that Doc had already shown them earlier. (Doc, by the way, was back at the house by this time.) It seemed to take forever to get myself and the boys fitted with skates, but eventually I did get them on their feet and actually skating on the ice—nothing new for me, I’m a decent skater, but the first time for Frankie and Pepper, both of them looking very knock-kneed and clumsy until they’d made several turns around the pond and started to find their balance and their comfortable stride. They suffered many jarring falls onto their backsides but took all of those spills in good humor, down but then quickly up again and skating round and round, often hanging onto each other as they went, actually holding hands at times. In fact, I found that Pepper was even willing to hold my hand when I offered it, and not just when he needed it early on for support, but also later, after he’d found his balance, an unusually free and frank (for him) gesture of affection.

When the boys tired of skating, it was back again to the hill for a bit more sledding, then back to the house as daylight faded to a dim and icy dusk. Actually, our first stop was the shed behind the house. It’s a big square outbuilding made of corrugated steel, green like the main house, built by the original knife-making owner of the property to hold his workshop and forge. Doc and I still refer to it as “the workshop,” and he’s used it often throughout the years for woodworking and other jobs, as well as storage for things like the skates and the Flexible Flyer sled. It even has such spartan amenities as an old Zenith radio, an electric heater, some folding chairs, a tiny refrigerator, an army-surplus cot with some worn blankets and pillows. “You could almost live out here,” Frankie remarked—and he’s right, you could.

Back in the house where Doc was waiting, the boys sensibly decided to take off their shoes and socks and pants and leave them near the wood-burning stove to dry. “Another underwear party,” I said to

everyone assembled. Doc surveyed the scene with cigarette in hand. He was smiling, but massaging the side of his head as if to relieve a pain. “Very cute,” he said. “Nice.” I asked if he had a headache, but he shrugged away my question and lit another cigarette, then gave me a hand in the kitchen when I started cooking the hamburgers for dinner.

All in all, it was a successful visit, and both Pepper and Frankie agreed that they had a great time. Frankie, for the record, drove home straight from Doc’s after saying goodbye with his usual hugs and kisses for everyone, including Pepper, who actually laughed from surprise and turned his face away at the last moment, forcing Frankie to kiss him on the cheek instead of the mouth. (It pleases me, in a strangely selfish way, that Pepper can be just as fussy and inhibited with Frankie—in public, at least—as he can with me. In other words, it’s not something about me that makes him that way, which I find a relief.)

Holly was back by the time we returned to Sandburg. Her mother is off the critical list and doing well enough for Holly to remain at home for a while. The death vigil, in other words, is over for now. Pepper won’t be visiting as much, needless to say. But what a week for him! And for Frankie. And for me. No going back for any of us, that’s for sure. But especially for Pepper, who made a few intriguing discoveries about his body and its pubescent desires and the thrill of someone else’s hand between his legs, on his dick, feeling his boner. Impossible for him to forget those new thrills and sensations. He’ll be back for more.

## FEB. 1

Another gray and frigid Sunday. It’s been a slow week, mostly uneventful. The Huckfeldts, I discovered, went to a professional wrestling show last Saturday, when Frankie and Pepper were here. Last night, they went again, the whole family. Big wrestling fans. Frankie

also had a “family thing” last night, as he called it. Pepper, meanwhile, went to his friend’s house to play video and computer games. Now, you’d think Pepper and Frankie might have been eager to come back here and pick up where they left off last weekend. But life never follows a straight or predictable path.

Instead, I ended up at the high school, right here in Sandburg, where Ryan’s latest tournament was being held. I was working yesterday, so could only manage today’s half of the event, same as last time. Ryan finished with no victories for the entire weekend, definitely a shocking failure for him. He seemed genuinely upset and depressed afterwards, different from his usual brattiness, strangely quiet as I drove him home from the high school. His parents didn’t attend today, which no longer comes as a surprise, so I was his choice, once again, for a ride. His parents, however, did show up yesterday to watch him, Ryan told me. “And I didn’t even win,” he added, a tremble of emotion in his usually brash and husky voice. (Have I ever mentioned the lovely and very butch huskiness of his voice? I wonder if it has something to do with his chronic tonsil problems?)

“You can’t win ’em all,” I said, expecting one of Ryan’s surly comebacks. All he said, though, was, “Well god,” in that same tearful way, looking at me as if I’d just insulted his dignity. Feeling suddenly sorry for him, I tried to be more sympathetic, saying, “I mean, it’s no big deal, you’ll kick butt the next time, right?”

“I will, I know.”

“You shouldn’t get so upset.”

“I know,” Ryan admitted, like someone hearing familiar advice.

“I’m sure your parents are proud of you.”

“My father was very disappointed.”

“Oh, come on, I can’t believe. . .”

“He was very disappointed in me,” the boy insisted. His chlorine-reddened eyes were shimmery with tears. Jesus Christ, I thought to myself, he’s actually crying! We were on Whitman Street, thank goodness, so I parked the car and took Ryan inside. He didn’t argue or

need any coaxing. It was as if he'd expected us to stop at my house—part of our routine, I guess, whenever I drive him home—first my house, then his. “Well, anyway, you’re still the champion to me,” I said when we got inside. Ryan, more like his old self, rolled his eyes and made a sarcastic “oh wow” face. I laughed and nudged his shoulder and then pulled off his stocking cap, the orange one embossed with the snarling tiger mascot. “Tiger boy,” I called him. He smiled a little at that, wiping the teariness from his eyes. Static electricity (from the hat I’d just pulled off his head) was making his golden-blond hair stand up in wispy strands. I called him “tiger boy” again, liking the sound of it, then offered him a soda from the kitchen, which he accepted.

As we walked through the house, I noticed that Ryan was limping slightly, giving a funny and gimpish lurch to his usually dainty tiptoed stride. I asked him about it, and he touched the inside of his left thigh and told me that he had a pulled groin muscle. I said, “A pulled groin muscle? When did that happen?”

“I slipped on the deck of the pool.”

“Today?”

“Yesterday,” Ryan said, “during warm-ups.”

“Well damn, no wonder you didn’t win anything!”

“It’s no excuse, my father says.”

“Of course it’s an excuse! And a valid one! No disrespect to your father, but. . .”

“A real man doesn’t make excuses.”

“Oh lord,” I mumbled, then asked, “Does it hurt bad?”

“When I walk, mostly.”

“Let me take a look,” I said, kneeling in front of the boy. He was wearing an expensive-looking parka, unzipped; a purple velour polo shirt; a pair of jeans with a red stripe down the outside of each leg. I touched the denim at his thigh. “We can see if it’s swollen or discolored.”

“You’re not a doctor,” Ryan said.

“But I’ve had groin pulls before. In high school. When I ran track.”

“You ran track?”

“I was a sprinter. The hundred-meters was my specialty.”

“Really? Did you win a lot?”

“Yeah, I did, I was pretty good.”

“You must be lying,” the boy said—joking, I think. “But you can look for a second.” He was holding a can of root beer, so he used his free hand to unfasten his jeans (he wasn’t wearing a belt) and to push them down far enough to show his white Jockey briefs and to bare his sore thigh. “See, you can’t tell anything. You lied.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I said, happily accepting his challenge and pressing at his very pale inner thigh with my fingertips. To be honest, I had no idea what I was doing or what I was looking to find. My story about running track and having groin pulls was true, but beyond that, hey, I was just improvising. Ryan didn’t seem at all bashful about having his pants down; he’s a young athlete, remember, constantly in and out of locker rooms and showers, always undressing in front of boys and coaches from his own and other schools, blasé about communal nudity. Given that, I took a chance and told him I needed to see more, that his underpants were in the way, that we should lower them for just a moment. “Underpants are for girls,” he corrected me. “Don’t you know that?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Girls wear underpants, and these are underwear.”

“I didn’t realize there was a difference,” I smiled. As we talked, I went ahead and cautiously slipped the Jockey briefs down his hips, then pressed again at the very lean white flesh of his inner thigh and up along his groin, my fingertips just skimming the side of his pink and wrinkly scrotum. “Don’t worry,” I said, “I won’t touch your. . . your thing.”

“OK,” Ryan said. He took a sip of his root beer. I kept probing at him, stalling for more time, staring at his dick right there in front of my face. It’s a perfect toy-sized penis, just what you’d expect on a virile ten-year-old cub like Ryan: about two or even two and a half inches of soft

but solid boymeat with a rosy mushroom tip (yes, circumcised) and a delectable pair of young testicles sagging lopsided (left one lower than the right) in their pink and wrinkly sac already mentioned. Those are the words that best describe Ryan's body and all of its naked parts: pink, pale, rosy, blushing—but also lean, firm, tight, hard—the ideal yin-yang balance of the delicate and the tough, everything most tantalizingly evoked by the term Pretty Boy. That's Ryan Fox. (Note: I just referred to Ryan as a ten-year-old. Of course he's still nine, but his birthday is only three weeks away. Anatomically, you'd have to consider him a ten—in every sense of the term!)

Finally, like it or not, I had to end my bogus examination. “No swelling or contusion,” I pronounced. “How does it feel when I press here?”

“OK.”

“Or when I squeeze here?”

“OK.”

“Well, I guess it's not too serious.”

“It'll be all right,” Ryan agreed. He started pulling up his underpants with his one free hand, sort of a clumsy maneuver, so I took over and did it for him, then pulled up his jeans and refastened them as well—strange to be dressing, as opposed to undressing, a boy—and yet, still very erotic fiddling with his underwear, his pants, his zipper. When I finished and got to my feet, I impulsively gave him a kiss on the forehead and said, “OK, tiger boy, that's it.” He wiped away my kiss with the back of his hand and scrunched his face in (playful?) displeasure. He wanted to know where the racing set was, so I told him that I took it back to Pepper's house. He then asked about Pepper himself, and then about the Huckfeldt brothers, especially JoJo (or “that Joey kid,” as he calls him). I offered a few vague answers, not sure what he wanted to know. “That Joey kid is stupid,” he finally told me. “He's nuts.”

“You mean at school?”

“Duh, yes, at school!”

“Tell me why.”

Ryan was still wearing his heavy parka and pacing around the living room, even though I’d invited him (twice) to take off his coat and have a seat. “Because he doesn’t know anything, not anything, in geography and English he’s always goofing around and he never knows the answers.”

“He’s not a very good student, I guess.”

“And in gym class, you should see him, he’s a spaz, he can’t do anything.”

“He’s very hyper.”

Ryan went on about how clumsy Joey is, how noisy he is, how geeky he is, then asked, “What happened to his stupid movie?”

“It’s a work in progress,” I said to the boy, wondering for an instant, but just an instant, if I should show it to him. Right about then, as if cued by some omniscient stage manager, the Huckfeldt brothers themselves came rushing in. (Unless I lock the door, they always feel free to enter uninvited, treating my house as their own—which is flattering, I suppose.) That’s when they told me, JoJo and Jimmy together, that they went to another wrestling show last night. Dally nodded in vigorous confirmation. I asked him, “Did you have fun?” Dally grinned and said, “Oh yeah, I sure did!”

“I’ve missed you,” I told him, putting my arm around him. His jacket was icy cold, his freckly cheeks bitten red by the frigid wind. “We need to buy more comic books to read together.”

“Right now?”

“No,” I laughed, “sorry, not today. But soon.”

“Good,” Dally said, then turned and startled me with a hug, both arms around my waist, his John Deere cap pushed askew as he laid his head against my chest. I happily hugged him back. He looked up at me and said, “I bet you can’t pick me up!” You know, a backward request, actually meaning, “Please pick me up!” So I did, with one forceful hoist that made the little boy (light as a sack of laundry) giggle and grin and grab me around the neck. JoJo couldn’t stand being left out, so dared me

to lift him as well. I put Dally down on his feet and gave JoJo a hoist with my hands under his armpits. He whooped and wrapped his legs around my waist and commanded me, in a shout, to swing him! swing him! swing him! He and Dally both have that stale pissy odor about them, but JoJo is the more pungent of the two, as I might have mentioned once before. So, obediently, I swung him round and round, not the easiest thing to do with a lanky and fairly heavy eleven-year-old, especially when he leaned backward and spread his arms to pretend he was flying. Dally wanted another turn after that, to “fly” like his older brother, much easier to do with him than with JoJo. Then Ryan piped up with the same “I bet you can’t lift me” tactic as Dally. He had been standing and watching until that moment, silent except for a brief exchange of insults with JoJo right when the brothers came in. (They call each other “Fox” and “Huckfeldt” and seem to share a genuine dislike.) I grabbed Ryan and lifted him after finally persuading him to remove his parka. I held him, same as Dally and JoJo, with my hands clasped around his butt. He held onto me with his legs and leaned backward as I swung him in rapid, dizzying circles. Actually, I was afraid to swing him too vigorously because of his sore groin, but he enjoyed himself anyway and even, no kidding, broke into a big grin that showed his gappy front teeth and gave him a dimply, kittenish look I’ve never seen before.

What was Jimmy doing this whole time? Mostly just watching, sitting on the La-Z-Boy, using a plastic Budweiser cup as a spittoon for his chewing tobacco. That’s right, he had a wad of Red Man chewing tobacco forming an ugly lump in his cheek and was spitting drools of brown saliva into the cup. I told him that he looked disgusting, but he only chuckled and shrugged and kept on chewing and spitting. Today was his first meeting with Ryan. Last time he was at his girlfriend’s house when I brought Ryan here for a visit. (I’ve already reported, I believe, that his girlfriend’s name is Anita Lopez. According to Jimmy’s latest information, she “gives mighty good head” and she’s “a gulper.” Girls, he says, can be either “spitters” or “gulpers”—and Anita, he



smugly repeated, “gulps every fuckin drop.” Wow. Lucky girl!) His first reaction, seeing Ryan, was to ask, “Is he another one of them nephews of yours?” No, I said, he’s a friend of mine. Ryan himself, finished with his turn in my arms, said to Jimmy, “Don’t you know that Jake is my mailman?”

“How the fuck would I know that?”

Ryan glowered at the older and larger boy. “You would know if you were smart,” he said.

“Oooh, you’re real tough!”

“You’re stupid like your brother!”

“Shut up, you little asshole!”

“Suck my dick!” Ryan yelled at Jimmy, who was still on the La-Z-Boy, still chewing and spitting while he and Ryan exchanged their vulgar taunts. I told them to stop fighting. Dally, in the meantime, had demanded another spin and was back in my arms. I gave him a good swing-around and then expected him to hop down, but he kept his legs around my waist and his arms around my neck and hung there staring at my face as if studying me, waiting for something. I laughed a little self-consciously under his relentless stare and finally, to break the spell, gave him a kiss on the lips. He immediately puckered for more, something bold yet innocent about the gesture that made me laugh again as I gave him another kiss, and then another and another, not big or sloppy ones, just quick peck-peck-peck kisses that the boy cheerfully returned as if we were playing a funny new game.

JoJo, relevant to nothing at all, suddenly yelled, “Nobody ever makes a fuckin movie about me!” He was standing near the television with the camcorder in his hands, holding it at arm’s length and aiming it at his own face. And he was right—until today, no one had bothered to record JoJo himself. I’ve been too busy, I guess, to think about it. So I apologized and offered to shoot some footage of him, but Jimmy intervened and grabbed the camcorder (after setting aside his Budweiser cup of tobacco spit) and started doing the job himself. I told him to use the cassette from on top of the TV. “It already has JoJo’s other stuff on

it,” I said. Dally was still hanging like a monkey around my neck. Ryan, now that his confrontation with Jimmy had ended, was getting into his parka and letting me know, over and over, that he had to go home for dinner. OK, OK, I said, just another minute, hold on, be patient. I couldn’t leave with JoJo about to perform for the camera.

He didn’t know what to do at first (JoJo, that is)—so he just darted around the room, bounced on the furniture, turned somersaults, made outlandish faces. “Don’t be such a goddamn idiot,” Jimmy finally told him. “Do somethin else, somethin good!” It should come as no shock that “good” (to a boy) means “dirty.” Especially to a Huckfeldt boy. JoJo was wearing his usual baggy jeans, with no belt. He had already taken off his ratty jacket and his stocking cap (a green and brown one that he started wearing a few weeks ago instead of his baseball cap). Now, responding to Jimmy’s directive, he unbuttoned and unzipped the baggy jeans and let them fall around his ankles and then said “oops” as if taken by surprise. Dally laughed at his brother’s slapstick. JoJo did sort of a shuffling duck-walk with the pants around his ankles, first one way and then the other, back and forth across the room like one of those targets in a shooting gallery. He was wearing the same baby-blue briefs I’ve seen before, but today he had them on inside out, with the tag showing in back. Dally again laughed at him, which encouraged JoJo to act even crazier. He got down in a squat and rocked forward, as though to do another somersault, then pulled his underpants down and lost his balance and ended up on his face, tipped all the way forward with his bare ass in the air for everyone to see. Jimmy was laughing now as well, but kept the camcorder aimed and steady and continued taping.

Ryan shook his head and mumbled, “This is so stupid!” I assured him again that we’d be leaving in a minute. I was a little nervous about what he was witnessing, but not much; it wasn’t my doing, after all; I mean, I was just standing and watching, same as him, a helpless spectator to JoJo’s shenanigans. And even Ryan, I’m convinced, wanted to smile when JoJo reached back and started smacking his own butt like a pair of bongos. In that full-moon position of his, we could see the back

of his balls and we could also see the pink slit of his anus. "Spank him," Dally suddenly shouted to anyone interested. I suggested that he do it himself and then set him down and watched as he rushed across the room and gave his brother's behind some rough, loud swats. JoJo made a comical yip-yipping like a whipped dog and tried to escape. Dally followed him and laughed and kept swatting.

But JoJo wasn't quite finished with his crude burlesque. There was an infomercial on TV showing a woman with some kind of cosmetics package, and JoJo jumped up when he saw her and pressed himself directly against the television and began humping the screen. He was bare below the waist, of course, with his jeans and underwear at his feet in a puddle of blue fabric. After a bit of this, only a few seconds, he turned and faced us and showed everyone his naked front. He's a real eyeful, that boy, believe me. He was still mostly limp, but he has one of those dicks that always looks slightly hard, a thick and meaty thing that protrudes like a snout, sticking out more than it dangles down. No pubic hair. He's only eleven years old. But there's something about the stark cleanness of his crotch that makes his big penis and (as I correctly predicted) his big balls seem precocious and raw and wonderfully indecent. His brothers were still laughing at him. JoJo, poker-faced, said, "Oops, don't look at my pecker! This here is private property!"

"Idiot," Ryan mumbled.

Jimmy, without lowering or moving the camcorder, said, "Shut up, asshole! You ain't even got no wiener!"

"You can suck it," Ryan snarled back, much the same vulgar repartee as before. Meanwhile, Dally had liked JoJo's earlier joke so much that he impulsively lowered his own pants and underwear and parroted, "Oops, don't look at my pecker!" He and JoJo stood there posing side by side, then started poking and pinching at each other, laughing louder and louder. It's not surprising, I guess, that Dally's penis looks like a smaller version of JoJo's, that same kind of firm nozzle that sticks out even when it's limp (unlike Pepper's, for example, which dangles noodly soft). I would imagine, while we're on the subject,

that Jimmy has that same Huckfeldt wang in his pants, that same thick nozzle of meat, only bigger and hairier and even more hound-dog nasty.

Ryan again demanded that I take him home. This time I couldn't ignore him. I told JoJo and Dally that they had to end their movie. JoJo, pulling up his pants, asked, "Jake, hey Jake, was it a good show?"

"Oh yeah, very entertaining," I smiled.

"Here you go, man," Jimmy said, handing me the camcorder, "some exciting shit for y'all to look at ." His brothers were ready to go. Dally, though, had carelessly forgotten to close his fly, so I took a moment to zip him up before he left. Such a loveable little guy, he made sure to grab me around the neck and give me a hard kiss goodbye, right on the mouth. JoJo, never to be overlooked or outdone, grabbed me and kissed me in exactly the same way, even adding a loud "mmmwhah!" cartoon-kiss sound effect for good measure. I looked at Jimmy as he was leaving and I laughed, "Do you want a kiss, too?"

"Fuck, you're crazy," he said, then spit into his Budweiser cup.

"You'd have to get rid of that disgusting tobacco, anyway."

"Yeah, sure, forget that shit," the boy grinned and chuckled, then followed his brothers out.

Ryan was waiting behind me, frowning impatiently. I hustled him out to the car, where I apologized for the Huckfeldts being so wild and disruptive. "They seem to ruin every one of your visits," I said.

"That Joey kid does stuff like that all the time," Ryan said.

"What stuff? Where?"

"In the locker room! At school! He's always acting like a total jerk, and dancing around, and being stupid."

That's right, I thought to myself, Ryan and JoJo have gym class together. They see each other naked every weekday. I can safely say, I think, that Ryan was not upset by anything he observed today at my house. He's a jock, as I've pointed out before, accustomed to locker-room behavior and all of its rowdy, crude, gross-out manifestations. He's not likely to be shocked by other boys dropping their pants or

mooning or flashing their dicks. He might find it stupid or foolish, especially when JoJo's involved—but certainly not shocking, certainly not disturbing in any way.

## LATER—SAME DAY

I got a phone call this evening from Frankie, wanting to know if Pepper had been here. Later, I got a call from Pepper, wondering the same about Frankie. No, I told them both, so “why don’t you guys call each other and talk?”

“We will,” Frankie said.

“We will,” Pepper said.

I guess they just wanted to say hello to me before they talked to each other, which is sweet, and which I appreciate. I also asked each of them, “When are you going to be visiting again?” Frankie said sorry, but he has a party next Saturday, everybody’s going to be there, all of his best buds, he can’t miss it. Pepper said he doesn’t know, maybe Saturday “if you want me to.” So, we’ll see what happens.

Didn’t visit Doc this weekend. Makes me feel guilty, like a neglectful son. Maybe I’ll drive out there Wednesday to check on him.

## FEB. 4

I went to see Doc today. He spent an hour telling me all about the Kurt Randall case, as if we hadn’t already discussed it several times. His main point, over and over, was that I need to be careful. That’s fine, but why is he so obsessed with my welfare? He’s concerned about me, I know—but is it possible that a lifetime of stress and paranoid anxiety has finally driven him a little buggy?

He had another headache today. I told him to take some aspirin (or Tylenol, or whatever), but he doesn’t even have any! Not necessary, he

says. Probably just too much caffeine and too many cigarettes, he says. Nothing to worry about. I asked him (to change the subject) about his Morocco story. “Are you working on it? Is it finished?”

Doc shook his head. “Jacob, Jacob, I can’t be bothered with such nonsense.”

“Nonsense?”

“It’s ancient history,” he said, same as he’d responded to Frankie when we came to visit him in January. “Not worth the effort. Pointless.”

“Your stories have never been pointless. And, anyway, I thought you enjoyed writing these new pieces, the ones about Portugal and. . .”

“Long ago and far away,” Doc said in that same weary, dismissive fashion. Why is he behaving like that? It’s just not like him, not like him at all. He spent the rest of our time together drifting from tirade to tirade, spending most of his energy on a rant about feminism, his main point being: that boy-love, always subterranean but always thriving, has been disastrously eroded over the years by the feminist agenda. “Think about it, Jacob, think about it,” Doc said. “In a culture that prizes and celebrates the Masculine Ideal, where male sexuality is the dominant mode or standard, boy-love will always flourish, inevitably, organically, as a natural outgrowth of male interaction, of men and boys enjoying one another as friends.”

“But?”

“But,” Doc said, rubbing the side of his skull, “when a culture is feminized, when masculinity is devalued and seen almost as a pathology, a condition to be fixed by counseling and therapy and sensitivity training. . . well, then male sexuality is seen as a pathology as well, something that needs to be feminized along with everything else.”

“And,” I said, “boy-love is dragged from the shadows as the sacrificial lamb.”

“Zealously, fanatically dragged from the shadows where it’s been thriving for millennia. And often thriving in the brightest of sunlight and public consent, of course, let’s not forget.”

“Because it’s now considered the darkest and most disturbing of male appetites.”

“Exactly,” Doc said. “The darkest aspect of male sexuality, wholly unfeminine and therefore seen today as deeply pathological, a demon of masculinity that needs to be exorcised. It’s a frenzy of sexual self-mutilation that we’re seeing. Hysterical self-loathing. A culture of public confession and contrition. All youthful sex now perceived, thanks to feminist propaganda, not as initiation but as violation. Everyone a victim. Weak. Frightened. Pathetic.”

And so he went.

Tonight, here at home, I was thinking about his words as I watched the videos of Pepper and Frankie together on the hide-a-bed, and of JoJo joyfully dropping his pants and bongo-ing his own butt. Boys having fun, innocent and good-hearted fun, feeling no harm, feeling no fear, happy. But all illegal! All abuse! Every one of those boys a victim of my sexual assault! Victims of molestation and the horrors of kiddie porn! The reality of their happiness, of their free and eager enjoyment, of their volition and dignity as sexual beings—all irrelevant, meaningless, lost in the sound and fury of moralistic bombast. In other words, Doc was right. The reality of male sexuality and all of its randy ambiguity has become an intolerable embarrassment in this feminized culture. Demonization and witch-hunts are the results. Nature has been outlawed. Boys, yes, are the saddest of all the victims—but the victims of their own culture, their own society, their own families and churches and schools. Not my victims. Not mine.

FEB. 6

The Huckfeldts dropped by very briefly yesterday after school (Thursday). Jimmy told me, before I shooed them out, that my house is getting boring, that I need “some good games.” He was right (rude, but

right), so I went out last evening and bought myself a Nintendo 64 and a bunch of games, including one called Jedi Knight that seems perfect for Frankie, and another called Top Gun: Hornet's Nest that should be ideal for Ryan, the wannabe Navy pilot. No more need for Pepper to bring his system when he visits. Really, I should have done this weeks ago. In fact, the games have already proven useful. Although JoJo was at some kind of Scout meeting this evening (I'll have to find out more about that later), Jimmy and Dally came over after supper because, according to Jimmy, "there ain't nothin good on TV." He was delighted, and so was Dally, when they discovered my new Nintendo. Dally was even more excited, I think, when he saw the pile of new comic books that I bought yesterday during my shopping trip. "But," I told both of the boys, "I'm tired, and I need a shower, and I have to get up very early tomorrow for work."

"Damn, man, you're unfriendly," Jimmy said. He was chewing Red Man tobacco again and had that dreadful Budweiser cup of brown drool in his hand. You'd almost think that he does it just to disgust me. Such a shame, because otherwise he's a splendidly sexy kid. Tonight he was wearing his usual camouflage Jack Daniel's cap, also green-and-brown camouflage pants and the black bowling shirt—untucked and only half buttoned—that he sports so often. He and Dally both, by the way, had run from their house with no coats or jackets of any description—just across the street, I know, but still, it's too cold for that. So Jimmy said, "Damn, man, you're unfriendly," and went right ahead and started playing with the Nintendo, his cup beside him on the floor where he could continue using it as a spittoon. Dally, standing in front of me while I rubbed his shoulders to warm him, looked back and up at my face and grinned. "I'm not joking," I said. "This is a work night for me. I have to take a shower and. . ."

"Be a good neighbor," Jimmy interrupted, which almost made me laugh, I have to admit, he's such a smartass punk. Dally then asked if we could read one of the new comics, not taking me any more seriously than his big brother. (Of course he's only eight years old and has a better



excuse.) No, not tonight, I told him as patiently and gently as possible—then, once more, declared that I needed to take a shower. I wasn't trying to be coy or provocative by announcing this over and over; I genuinely needed a shower, and I was tired, and I wanted the boys to leave. But Jimmy was just as determined to stay and keep playing, and he finally said, "Well damn, man, take your shower! I ain't stoppin you!"

OK, I thought, it was my idea to buy the Nintendo, so let the boys enjoy it. Anyway, he was right (rude again, but right); no reason to alter my routine because of him and Dally; leave them in the living room with their precious Nintendo. But Dally had another idea. When I tried to leave him behind with Jimmy, he grabbed my hands against his shoulders and held them and said, "I can come with you!"

"For what?"

"To take your bath."

"Don't you want to play with Jimmy?"

"I like your bathtub," Dally replied, which apparently meant "no." Jimmy, without looking around from a game called *Flesh Feast* that he was playing, said, "Yeah, go with Jake, go away!"

"We'll go away to the bathroom," Dally agree, happy-happy, yanking at my hands to get me moving. He was in front of me and facing forward and, as we walked down the hallway, I held his hands high and bounced him like a puppet, like a marionette, Geppetto dancing Pinocchio. The boy, as I've said, had arrived without any jacket, also without a cap, and he usually removes his shoes when he first comes inside. Now, in the bathroom, he was ready to shed everything else, and he kept his arms upraised in that universal little-kid gesture for "undress me, undress me!" I pulled off the sweatshirt he was wearing and asked, "Are we taking a shower together?"

"Yep!"

"You like showers?"

"This one here I like," Dally said, letting me take off his pants. He was wearing a pair of JoJo's Batman briefs that were too big for him and saggy and actually came down by themselves when his jeans came off.

He stepped out of them and, still wearing his white socks with two red stripes around the tops, watched me as I took off my own clothes and then as I turned on the water. “A bath or a shower?” I asked him at that point. The boy squinted and pondered and knuckle-chewed his forefinger and finally decided on a shower, because “it’s fun like the rain.” I reminded him to take off his socks, which he now did while leaning against me with his free hand to keep himself balanced. He has the milky and freckly skin of a redhead, although his hair is not truly red, more of a rusty blond, a strawberry blond perhaps, even his eyebrows like rusty caterpillars. I held his hand as we climbed together into the big tub and closed the frosted-glass door behind us and stepped beneath the hot spray. The shock of the water made the boy shiver and hop. He turned sideways and hunched his shoulders and, to steady himself, put one arm around my waist. He’s still a child about nudity, so comfortable and natural without clothes that he seems truly oblivious to his own nakedness, and to mine, no giggly self-consciousness or furtive curiosity whatsoever. The two of us, using the boy’s own analogy, might as well have been outside playing in the rain, no difference in his own mind between that and joining me naked in the shower. (The true definition of innocence: a gleeful and uninhibited enjoyment of nudity and all things sensual, not the ignorance of them, not the fear of them, not the stunted and unhappy deprivation of them. Keeping children “innocent” by “protecting” them? The concept is backward, senseless, sick.) We turned ourselves (or, rather, I turned myself and Dally with me) to get a good overall soaking beneath the spray. Then I grabbed the bar of Zest and said, “I’ll wash you.”

“You wash me,” Dally gleefully echoed, nodding. I made a leisurely job of it, working from the top down, using the Zest as both soap and shampoo on his head and hair and face, then rinsing him clean, then moving to his shoulders and back and chest and under his skinny arms. When I got down to the middle of him, I didn’t hesitate to lather vigorously between his legs, then to turn him and lather just as vigorously on his rear end, getting into the crack, teasing around the

soap-slippery hole with my fingertips. The boy didn't even smile. I mean, he's not the least bit fazed by being groped or fondled—not while reading comic books on the couch and certainly not while in the shower. Sex play, I'm assuming, has been a normal part of his life for as long as he can remember. I asked him, "Do you take showers with Jimmy?" "Mostly baths," he said.

"And with JoJo?"

"Yep."

"Who gets the most boners?"

That made him smile just a little. "Probably JoJo," he decided. "JoJo gets himself a lot of 'em."

"Who has the biggest one?" I asked him. Of course I knew the answer, but talking about boners seemed appropriate now because I had Dally facing me and was soaping his dick and making it hard. The tub, by the way, has an L-shaped tiled bench along the inside walls, and that's where I was sitting while I played with Dally's little peter. He was standing between my legs with his hands on my knees. The steamy spray was against his back, and the water was dribbling past his green-gray eyes as he glanced from my hand to my face and then back to my hand on his hard, soapy penis. "Maybe you got the biggest," he finally said to my question. I had a whopper of an erection, that's for sure; at least, it must have looked like a whopper to him. But I said, "No, no, just your brothers. Who has the biggest? You?"

Dally showed all of his many missing teeth when he laughed at my joke. "No, not me! Jimmy!"

"Oh yeah. Jimmy," I said. "He must get a really big one."

"Yep."

I pulled the boy forward against me, his penis right against mine. He put his arms around my neck and his chin on my shoulder. I held his bottom with one hand while using the other to masturbate, making sure to feel and rub Dally along with myself. The water was splashing against the back of him. I spoke into his right ear, still asking about Jimmy. "Does he do stuff like this? With you?"

“Sometimes.”

“In the bath?”

“Yep.”

“And in bed?”

“Sometimes.”

“And JoJo too? All of you together?”

Dally nodded “uh huh” against my shoulder. I was using both hands now, one to do myself and one to do him, rub rub rub while we talked. He tightened his grip around my neck, like someone on a wild carnival ride, clinging for safety. “What happens,” I asked him, “when Jimmy does this?”

“I dunno.”

“I mean, with his. . . with his pecker, when he rubs it. What happens?”

“He sperms,” Dally mumbled against my neck. I thought, just about then, that I could feel a tightening in the muscles of his legs, his hips, his arms. I kept stroking him, and I kept stroking myself, almost ready to do some sperming of my own. I repeated, to Dally, “He sperms? You watch him?”

“Yep.”

“Can JoJo sperm?”

“I dunno.”

“You’ve never seen him shoot stuff out?”

“Nope.”

As if I were a kid myself, showing off, I said, “Look, Dally, look at this,” and let him lean back and look down and watch as I came directly onto him and onto my own hand holding him, not as messy as it sounds, the shower quickly diluting and rinsing away the slime. Dally watched attentively until I’d finished, then grinned and nodded his approval, as if I’d just performed an especially clever party trick for his amusement. I turned him sideways and sat him on my left leg and continued stroking him. He kept one arm around my neck and gripped my knee with his other hand. I could tell, from the hot-red color of his boner and from the

tightening of his thighs and tummy, that something was about to happen. And it did. Right there on my lap, Dally had himself an impressive orgasm, no doubt about it, his penis going throbby for a full ten seconds before it finally relaxed between my fingers. “Good boy,” I said, rather stupidly, like praising a little doggy for rolling over or giving his paw. I kissed him as the shower washed over us. He kissed back as he always does, the water running into our eyes, into our mouths, warm water in our mouths as we kissed.

How did eight-year-old Dally Huckfeldt become my lover?

A few moments later, we were out of the shower and drying when (yipes!) Jimmy came barging into the bathroom. He looked at me and at his little brother—both of us naked, of course—and then he said, in a snarly voice, “Pardon me while I take a humungous piss!”

“Be my guest,” I told him. He assumed a wide-legged stance in front of the toilet and unzipped and started splashing. I could see, from where I was standing, the head of his dick with the pee streaming from it. He was right about a “humungous piss.” It went on and on noisily for half a minute and ended with three strong, squeezed-out spurts, plish plish plish, and then a final tinkly dribble. Jimmy went “ahhh!” in dramatic relief and turned toward us while still zipping. “Look at you fuckers smilin,” he said, still in that snarly voice. “Y’all was doin shit together.”

“That’s top secret,” I said, more than a little nervous.

Again Jimmy said, “You fuckers was doin shit together! Even your peckers is still red!”

Dally looked at me, and I looked back with a smile and an exaggerated shrug. The little boy made the same exaggerated shrug and laughed softly and then shrugged again for his brother’s benefit. His new alliance with me tickles him, giving him a power vis-à-vis his big brothers that he’s never known before. Jimmy chuckled and made a

“naughty, naughty” gesture with his fingers and said, “Jake, you dog, I’m gonna call the fuckin cops!” That’s how he left us, with that chilling jest. Dally assured me, as he got back into his piss-smelly underpants, that Jimmy “was just jokin with us.” I’m sure that’s true. But damn, he certainly does know how to push some seriously hot buttons, that punk.

I need to get to bed, and to sleep, but I simply can’t relax after so unexpectedly having sex with Dally this evening. Imagine, entrusting my fate to an eight-year-old Huckfeldt boy and his crazy brothers. I must be crazier than any of them.

FEB. 7

Well, now it’s my turn to be sick. I woke this morning feeling flush and seeing spots. Since the weather was reasonably mild, I went to work anyway and did my route, but now I’m paying the price for my diligence, feeling weaker and more feverish as the day goes on. Not good, not good.

I called Pepper and apologized and told him that we’ll get together next weekend, I hope, when I’m doing better. Also I spoke to Frankie just before he went out to his big party, more for a bit of sympathy than anything else. He said he can stop by here tomorrow if I need something from the store, something to eat or drink, whatever. We’ll see.

Dally ran over this evening when he saw me home from work. It was a relief to know that all is still stable and secure in the Huckfeldt camp. Jimmy and JoJo were busy with other things and didn’t come over, thank god. Even little Dally was more than I could comfortably handle. We made it through only a few pages of a Spider-Man comic when I had to stop, feeling slightly nauseated. Dally kept reading it on his own. I stretched out on the couch, on my side, and tried to rest. The boy sat against me like a snuggly little pet, using my hip as a book rest.

When he finished with his comic, he cozied himself alongside me and lay there playing with his red Power Ranger, which he still carries with him like some plastic fetish wherever he goes. He kept changing positions, sometimes with his back against me, sometimes on his back with one leg up across mine as he talked to himself and made his Power Ranger fight and fly and climb on my hip. I lazily caressed his head, and once, while he was on his back, I simply laid my hand between his legs and held his denimed crotch. Just as indolently, a few minutes later, Dally rolled toward me and peered at me and started counting the gray hairs at my temples, touching and gently pulling at each one between thumb and forefinger, like Baby Chimp grooming Papa Chimp on a drowsy late afternoon. He gets a funny expression, Dally does, when he's concentrating on something, or when he's listening intently, a cute way of squinting one eye (his left) while clenching his teeth on the same side. Picture Popeye (minus his pipe), or picture someone trying to bite off a piece of licorice. That's how Dally looks. In fact, he smiles the same way, with that one eye squinted and those side teeth clenched, like someone smiling into the sun. Anyway, that's how he was peering at me while he picked and pawed at my gray hairs.

Around five o'clock, he went home for supper.

FEB. 8

Very sick today. Short of a miracle, there's no way I can go to work tomorrow. Maybe I'll stay home through Wednesday, which is my regular day-off anyway, then go back Thursday. Or maybe I'll just blow off the whole week. Don't know. Today was a feverish, baffling mishmash of activity, which I'll try to relate as coherently (and concisely) as possible. Here's what happened:

Frankie came over early in the afternoon and made me a can of chicken soup for lunch, and then made me eat it, along with some

crackers and some chocolate-chip cookies and a glass of milk. Queasiness followed, but I held everything down. I remembered Doc's story about Rafael, the gypsy boy, like a feeling of *déjà vu*, like being a figment of someone else's memory, my life imitating another man's art. I was on the couch at this point. Frankie was in the La-Z-Boy, reading a novel by Stephen King. I didn't know until today that the boy is an avid reader, has his own library card, is especially fond of horror, science fiction, sword-and-sorcery. Sex, until now, has been our common bond. It took my illness today to make us stop and relate in quieter, simpler ways, allowing me to see a slower Frankie, a calmer Frankie than I've ever seen before. He just sat there and read his book and glanced at me every now and then with a gentle grin, wondering if I was all right. It was a comfort to have him nearby, so attentive.

Then the Huckfeldts showed up. All three of them. JoJo wanted me to see the Boy Scout uniform that he was wearing: tan shirt with red epaulets; a red-and-yellow neckerchief; olive pants and an olive web belt with brass buckle; an olive cap with a red front. He's a tenderfoot, and has a tenderfoot insignia (sort of like a fleur-de-lis) on his shirt, along with a red troop number 123 on his left sleeve. It's all very cute, and I told him so, but he and the other boys kept shouting and laughing and making such a frenzied racket that I became sweaty and sick to my stomach and finally had to retreat to my room, to the relative peace and security of my own bed.

The boys had the house to themselves. I listened. Half listened, really, and half slept. Feverish dreams fed by the voices of the boys and the noisiness of their game-playing. Nintendo noises, music, frenetic bursts of laughter. JoJo in his Boy Scout uniform kept running like a video loop through my fitful dream-doze. It seemed desperately important that I tell him, that I convince him how cute he looked in that spiffy new uniform of his. Why so important? Over and over: I have to tell him, I have to tell him, I have to tell. . .



They were all laughing nearby, all of the boys, very close, not in my room but very close, in the hallway and, I finally realized, in the bathroom. I rolled to the edge of my bed where I could see through the door of my bedroom to the door of the bathroom. What were they doing? They were taping one another using the toilet, peeing, goofing around. Jimmy, JoJo, Dally, Frankie—all of them, at the same time, taking turns with the camcorder. Noisy, so noisy, crazy. Frankie came in and apologized for the commotion and brought me a can of Seven-Up and asked what else, if anything, he could do for me. Nothing, nothing, my dear, I said to him—just keep the Huckfeldts from destroying my house. They're OK, Frankie assured me, don't worry. Jimmy looked in and held up the camcorder and said, "Here's your get-well present, man!" I haven't watched it yet, the video they made. It's in the living room, but I haven't seen it. Too sick. Too dizzy. JoJo also looked in and said, "Hey Jake, hey Jake, it's too bad you're sick!" His cap was off, his neckerchief was off, and his shirt was now untucked. I told him again, "I like your uniform, JoJo. It's cute. You're cute. A real cutie-pie."

My little Dally pushed his way into the room as the others left, back to their Nintendo, back to noisy, unseen mischief. He came to my bed. He was breathing raspily with his mouth open, not unusual for him, often asthmatic, and he said, "I'm sick too!"

"You? You're sick?"

"Yep," Dally said, "just like you." He crawled beside me onto the bed, on his knees. Poor baby, I said, humoring him. Lie down. Rest. You'll feel better. Dally smiled and flopped beside me. The jostling of the mattress made me seasick. I touched his head and said, "Please, honey, please, you have to be nice and still."

"So's we can rest," the boy agreed. Anything to be near me, to be with me. My little sweetheart. He smelled dirty, probably hasn't washed since our shower together. Take off your pants, I was about to say, started to say, but the boy didn't need any encouragement or instruction and was out of his pants already. Not wearing anything beneath. Oops, he said. Oops, I said, and tried to smile, queasy, letting the boy climb

beneath the sheet to cuddle against me. I was in my underwear. Dally kept his socks on and also his shirt, a worn and outgrown red sweatshirt. Beside me in his socks and his shirt and nothing else. Oops! Bare pecker. Oops! Bare fanny. But I was too sick even for an erection, and I closed my eyes and did my best to lie very quietly to stop the spinning in my head. Half-naked boy beside me. On his back. I found his penis, soft little thing, and gave it a tickle-tickle squeeze and jiggle, but just one quick time, then put my hand on his tummy and left it there and listened to his raspy breathing. We dozed. We dreamed. Honey, baby boy, be good, lie still, your daddy is sick. Not spoken, these words—or yes, spoken, but in a dream. I gave him a blowjob in this dream, this maze of dreams, telling him—Dally—to lie still, my baby boy, my sweetie, and be good, daddy is sick, but daddy will suck you, he'll suck you, and I did, and his dick was big—like JoJo's, like Jimmy's—and it spilled in my mouth and tasted like lemon. Crazy dreams. Sweaty. Exhausting. Dally, when I woke up and looked at him—three times, four times—was napping, and peaceful, and sucking his own thumb.

The phone rang twice (I think twice) while I was there in my room. I didn't answer it. I didn't move. Frankie, I knew, would handle it. Frankie was in charge. Good old Frankie. My best buddy. My amigo. Taking care of everything. Dally napping, sucking his thumb, sprawled against me in a silly position, on his back but with one arm and one leg thrown across me. Jimmy came into the room and said something that I didn't quite understand and then helped himself to a peek beneath the sheet at me and his little brother. JoJo came in later, just a few minutes later, and also lifted the sheet and peeked underneath, and Frankie was with him, and Jimmy from the doorway said, "It's their fuckin honeymoon!" I let out a laugh that sounded more like a groan and told them, "All very innocent. It's nappy time. Go away."

I dozed again and opened my eyes, confused at first, to find Dally sitting cross-legged next to me and once again counting my gray hairs

one by one between his fingers. Dally awake. Sitting cross-legged. No pants. “Baby boy,” I said. He was peering at me with one eye squinted and side teeth clenched. Now, when I spoke to him, his mouth opened a little wider in a crooked smile that showed front teeth missing. No pants. His penis limp but not droopy, a Huckfeldt wang, a firm nozzle hanging out not down. Easy for me to crane my neck without even lifting my shoulders and to kiss him right between the legs. And I did. A movement of my head forward. Just like that. And I kissed his penis. Dally smiled again and said, “My pecker,” humorously, like the punchline to a joke. I smiled back and said, “Very cute little pecker.” I closed my eyes, battling a fresh wave of dizziness. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that, is what I was thinking. Did anyone else see me? No. Anyone else in the room? No. Just me. Just Dally. No one else.

Dozing. Waking. Dally was gone. My clock was staring at me with an orange face and black smudges in the shape of a star—no, the spokes of a wheel—no, numbers—regular numbers, a regular clock-face, orangely luminescent, a little after four o’clock. I had to pee. My bladder was sore from the pressure. I dragged myself from bed and did a zombie-shuffle to the bathroom. Finished, I took a glance into the living room. The TV was on, but the sound was down, and an old Jefferson Airplane record was playing on the stereo. Frankie’s choice, no doubt. He was on the floor, sitting with his back against the couch. Pepper—somehow, Pepper—was sitting between Frankie’s outstretched legs, his back against Frankie’s chest, the way they sat together on the sled at Doc’s. They smiled at me as I stood in the doorway. I shook my head and said, “Pepper? You’re not supposed to be here.”

He had been there for about an hour, they explained. One of those earlier phone calls had been from him. Frankie had driven over, with Holly’s permission, and picked him up. The Huckfeldts were gone. Pepper asked, “Is it OK?” Sure, sure, I said, of course it’s OK. Then he asked, “Are you very sick?”

“Extremely.”

“Are you throwing up?” “No, thank goodness, none of that.”

“When I was sick,” he said, “I threw up twice.” He was sitting between Frankie’s outstretched legs and had his hands on Frankie’s knees. They had their clothes on, both of them, but they seemed a little sheepish, a little nervous, especially Pepper. Probably Frankie’s idea to be sitting together like that, so lovey-dovey, maybe just a bit too obvious for Pepper, too openly affectionate, not so bad with just the two of them alone but difficult with a spectator—as if I might start pointing and chanting, “Pepper has a boyfriend, Pepper has a boyfriend. . .” He had that kind of uneasy, caught-in-the-act look on his face. Frankie, meanwhile, had his thumbs tucked into the waistband of Pepper’s jeans, in front, so that his other fingers were splayed across Pepper’s thighs, where the front pockets are. Was he getting ready to do more? To unfasten those pants? To pull them down? Would Pepper allow it? Yeah, probably. Definitely. Pepper would allow Frankie to do almost anything, I think.

Again that feeling of “no fair, no fair” jealousy, like being left out of a game that I created, my reward going to a player who showed up late and stole the prize. But what could I do? I said, “Have fun, have fun,” and wandered back to my bedroom. As I lay there and drifted and tried to listen, real sounds became dreams and then dissolved again into reality, like glimpses of color and shape through a shifting fog. I heard laughter; I heard footsteps; I heard, from time to time, Frankie or Pepper saying things like “I’ll get some” and “That’s right, in there” and “Dude, yes, of course” and “That’s too funny” and “I don’t think so, not yet” and “Wow, anyway, pretty cool” and “What did Jake say?” and “No, dude, it’s just normal” and “Wait, you’ll see, I’ll do it.”

At six o’clock the boys came to my room and said goodbye. Frankie drove Pepper back home. I returned to my half-awake dreams.

FEB. 9

I feel terrible today, but not as terrible as yesterday. Did not go to work, of course.

An odd surprise: I found the Pepper-and-Frankie video in the VCR this morning. I didn't put it in. I'm saying, in other words, that one of the boys found it and put it in to watch. I don't think Frankie and Pepper were watching it, so Frankie and the Huckfeldts must have been the culprits. Imagine, the Huckfeldts watching the video of Pepper and Frankie in the shower, and of Pepper and Frankie on the hide-a-bed, naked, boners showing. I'll have to ask Frankie about it when I talk to him.

LATER—SAME DAY

Frankie gave Pepper a blowjob yesterday! I just found out about it on the phone. I can't believe it. Why do I find it so upsetting?

I talked to Frankie after he got home from school. He told me, by the way, that it was the Huckfeldts themselves who found and watched the video-in-question while he was out to get Pepper. As you might assume, Pepper was mortified by the whole situation. But Frankie turned it into a big joke and laughed about it and managed to ease Pepper's embarrassment. After all, Frankie and the Huckfeldt boys had already been busy making a video of their own in the bathroom. Remember? Yesterday, while I was napping, all four of them had a great time being as gross as possible for the camcorder. I watched it today after lunch, and I'll describe it now briefly before getting back to the blowjob topic:

Frankie, at first, is the one who's taping. We see Dally perched on the toilet with his pants around his ankles. He makes a scrunched-up face and pushes and, plop!, we can hear his turd hit the water. Jimmy

and JoJo, laughing, walk into the picture. It's not immediately apparent, but they both have their pants open and their dicks out. The game is to piss into the toilet between Dally's legs. Jimmy goes first and steps in front and flexes his knees to get a good angle and a good aim. The camera shakes as Frankie moves quickly to the side for a better view. Dally is staring down at the stream of Jimmy's urine. He opens his legs a little wider and leans back and looks up giggly because, he says, the water is splashing against him from below and "feels like it's rainin against my butt!" JoJo, in his Boy Scout uniform, goes next. He's not as skillful as his big brother. His aim is off and he spurts directly onto Dally's penis. Laughter from everyone, including Frankie, which makes the camera shake again. JoJo corrects his aim and stands there bouncing at the knees, no hands now, arms akimbo, his pee nicely golden in the bathroom light. Frankie goes last, Jimmy holding the camcorder, JoJo standing just to the side. JoJo, in fact, actually bends forward into the picture, very obviously curious to get a better look at Frankie, to appraise this new pecker he's never seen before. Frankie directs his stream, deliberately I think, so that it just wetly nips the underside of Dally's balls and makes the little boy laugh as if a finger is tickling him between the legs.

Frankie turns, when finished, and the camcorder is immediately passed back to him. Nothing but blurred and jumbled images for several seconds. We finally see Jimmy and JoJo clearly enough to realize that both of them still have their pants open. Olive Boy Scout pants on JoJo. Khaki pants on Jimmy. Both of them with flies gaping and underpants inched down and dicks exposed. Frankie is doing his best to get some good footage of all this, but the bathroom is cramped and overcrowded and the boys keep jostling one another. The camera settles momentarily on Jimmy's crotch and zooms in just a bit and allows us to see that he, Jimmy, is playing scratch-and-sniff with himself, enjoying the crudeness of it, reaching into his own pants and scratching at his balls and pubic hair and then sniffing at his smelly fingers. He smiles and says, "Ah!" like someone appreciating a finely aromatic rose. More scratching inside

those unzipped khaki pants, then he reaches past the lens of the camera and (we assume) shoves his fingers under Frankie's nose and says, in an insolent playground singsong, "Smell my dick, makes you sick, smell my dick, makes you sick. . ."

"Hey Jimmy, hey Jimmy," JoJo proposes, "say prick! Smell your prick, makes you sick!"

Jimmy says, "Dick prick, don't get sick," and gives Frankie another sniff. We hear Frankie, right into the camcorder's built-in microphone, says, "It's so sweet!" He's never sounded more comically gay. It's deliberate, of course, a jokey faggot voice. Jimmy repeats, in the same kind of jokey lisp, "It'th tho thweet!" We're not sure if he's simply sharing in the joke or flat-out making fun of Frankie. Maybe, with Jimmy Huckfeldt, there's no real difference. Now there's more agitated movement and jiggling of the camera as the action leaves the bathroom, all three brothers parading to the living room with their pants still undone. Frankie tries to keep up, even tries to get in front where we can better watch Jimmy followed by JoJo followed by Dally strutting and swinging their hips to get maximum waggle from their limp, exposed dicks. Hard to see because of the shaky camera and dim light and bad angle, you almost need to run the tape three or four times to appreciate the Huckfeldt organs—small, medium, and large—the fraternal resemblance right there on display, those firm and meaty wangs of theirs. How big, really, is Jimmy's? His shirt, a colorful Hawaiian number, is loose in front and keeps getting in the way. We want a clear, steady close-up to know the exact shape and size of his cock, a chance to stare right at it, to study it. But we don't get that chance. He's strutting around the room, chuckling, pleased with himself. He says, "Go to school like this, man, leave your fuckin pants like this, have your pecker out, oops, I forgot, sorry!"

JoJo and Dally imitate him, around and around the living room, Frankie turning with the camcorder to follow them. In mid-strut, Jimmy abruptly veers to his left and intercepts JoJo and grabs him in a rough and clumsy embrace. This is how he'll dance with Anita, he says, with

his girlfriend, using JoJo to demonstrate. He calls it “dancin pecker to pussy” and presses forward with his hips against JoJo, humping his brother standing up. He does this roughly as he does everything, more like bullying than playing. (Only with Dally, now and then, does he show a certain gentleness.) Then there’s a confusing transition as the camcorder is passed (to JoJo?) and as Frankie himself becomes the partner in Jimmy’s obscene bump-and-grind. We discover, at this point, that Frankie has his jeans undone like everyone else. Jimmy grabs him as he grabbed JoJo and shoves against him, crotch to crotch, humping so aggressively that Frankie has trouble keeping his balance and stumbles backward, with Jimmy, toward the La-Z-Boy. Such an expression on Frankie’s face, such a look of flustered and overheated bewilderment to find himself in a pantomime of sex with one of the Huckfeldt boys!

Jimmy’s not finished yet. His khaki pants and his underwear have worked farther down his hips by now, and so have Frankie’s jeans and underwear, making for truly bare penis-to-penis contact between them, although we’re still watching from behind and from several feet away and can only deduce the full and fleshy squash of genitals that must be taking place. Frankie backs into the La-Z-Boy and sits awkwardly with Jimmy sprawled atop him. The old chair rocks beneath them. The camcorder is still too far away and we want a close-up but don’t get it, so frustrating, impossible to see any of the salacious details. Jimmy, on top, ends the performance with a frenzy of double-fast, rabbity humping, his head thrown back, going “uh, uh, uh!” like somebody getting ready to cum. But then he pushes himself backward, up and onto his feet. He says, “No boners allowed! No boners allowed in this fuckin house!” What’s he talking about? Who has a boner? Himself, or Frankie, or both? We don’t know. His pants are up by the time he faces us, and then the camcorder is turned off.

So that’s my “get-well present” from the boys, as Jimmy called it yesterday. I used it already to jerk off, but then felt even sicker when I’d finished. Orgasms do not mix happily with the flu, believe me.



## LATER—SAME DAY

So, yes, I talked to Frankie on the phone. We chatted, at first, about the video. I asked him about Jimmy's "no boners allowed" statement. What did he mean? Who had a boner? "No doubt, we both did," Frankie told me. "Dude, you know, it was getting pretty wild."

"I'm glad you had fun," I said. Frankie laughed into the phone, and then we talked about Pepper's visit, and I remarked, "Well, you sure did have a busy day." Frankie laughed again, maybe a little more loudly than necessary, maybe something on his mind making him nervous. He said, "Oh yeah, for sure, I had a busy day." There was a pause that seemed odd, then he blurted, "Dude, Jake, with Pepper yesterday. You know, you were so sick and I couldn't tell you. But me and Pepper, it's so amazing, he let me suck his cock!"

I don't know what I stammered after that. It's not important. Basically, I just allowed Frankie to share his story, which went like this:

He and Pepper were watching TV, listening to records, looking at the new comic books I bought. Frankie offered to rub Pepper's shoulders, which is why Pepper was sitting between his legs there on the floor when I walked into the room yesterday. By that time, though, Frankie was rubbing a lot more than Pepper's shoulders. I was right to assume that something naughty was in progress when I intruded. And, obviously, it continued as soon as I left. Within a few minutes, Pepper's pants were down to his knees and Frankie was giving him a handjob. Frankie was out-of-his-mind horny by this time, especially after everything with the Huckfeldt boys, and he wanted to do more. He told Pepper that there's something even better than jerking off. Something that feels totally good. You'll love it, he said. Can we do it? Pepper said OK. Frankie crawled into position and took Pepper's pants and underwear all the way off and then started sucking him. Frankie said, to me on the phone, "I think he was like extremely surprised, made this

weird noise and sort of jerked, didn't know what to do." So Frankie asked him once more if it was OK, should they keep going, and Pepper said yes. But even after twenty or thirty minutes of energetic sucking, there was no payoff, no orgasm, nothing. Frankie told me, "He was so hard in my mouth, dude, it was ridiculous! His cock was totally, totally hard! But he couldn't cum!"

"It'll happen sooner or later."

"Maybe I did it wrong."

"Like how?"

"I don't know," Frankie said. "I've never done it before, so maybe..."

"That was your first blowjob?"

"Well, yeah."

I should have known that about Frankie, I guess. He's never given a blowjob to me, not yet, but I've always assumed he'd done it to someone, somewhere, sometime. "I'm sure you did a good job," I told him, trying not to let him hear the sick disappointment in my voice. To imagine him on the floor of my living room, right here in my house, with Pepper's boner in his mouth—it's maddening, to say the least. No payoff, though. No cum. There's a comforting bit of Schadenfreude in that. Yeah, I know, I'm being an asshole. A jealous, mean-spirited creep. I know, I know. Strange, anyway, that Pepper continues to have such a difficult time reaching a simple orgasm. Too bad, despite my selfish relief that he's still a "virgin" waiting for someone—me, I hope—to bust his twelve-year-old nut.

This shit is getting too crazy.

I'm so tired.

FEB. 15

Yesterday was Valentine's Day. I spent all of last week home sick, as I expected. I'm just now starting to feel healthy, strong, back to normal.

Frankie sent me a Valentine's Day card. Very sweet, with Snoopy offering hugs and kisses to his favorite human, signed, "From the BOY who LOVES you more than anybody ever, always and always, Frankie." Needless to say, it left me feeling dreadfully guilt-ridden. How could I have thought such petty, jealous things about Frankie last week? I told him, months ago, that I would have no problem, none at all, with him and Pepper being sexually intimate, fooling around, whatever. Was it a lie? I hope not. Really, truthfully, I think I'm all right with the two of them together. Last week just took me by surprise, that's all. Plus I was so sick, everything hit me in a way that felt ominous, threatening, hopeless. I'm better now.

I went to Pepper's house for dinner. Holly invited me because of the holiday. We had baked ham and sweet potatoes and two vegetables and a chocolate pie (bought by me at Baker's Square) for dessert. Holly is thinking very seriously about moving to Joliet as soon as Pepper is finished with school, as she's mentioned before. I still can't bear to think of Pepper being three hours away. He won't talk about it, Holly says. Anyway, I left early, declining an invitation to stick around for a game of Hero Quest. Harder and harder, by the way, to feel comfortable around Holly as more and more secrets accumulate between us. Her son was getting his dick sucked in my living room just last week, after all. How do I ignore something like that when the three of us are together at the dinner table? How do I pretend, to Holly, that her twelve-year-old son is not having sex at my house?

FEB. 23

Ryan Fox turned ten years old today. He's been getting lots of cards in the mail recently. He was in school when I showed up at his house this afternoon, but we saw each other yesterday at his tournament in Monmouth, a small town about fifteen miles west of here. His parents—surprise, surprise—were there, so my time alone with him was brief, restricted to a few minutes after his last race, which he won, when he came and sat next to me on the pool-side bleachers. (Note: His groin injury has healed.) I wished him a happy birthday and told him about the Top Gun Nintendo game that I bought for him. "It's your birthday present, I guess. Do you already have it?" Ryan shook his head no and stared at me with his chlorine-reddened eyes. I said, "You can play with it at my house, or you can take it home with you, whichever you want."

"I've got Nintendo and PlayStation both," Ryan informed me.

"It seemed like the perfect thing for you," I said. "Since you want to be a Navy pilot and all that. I'm surprised you don't already have it."

"I'm going to be a pilot, for real."

"I believe you."

"Did you bring it?" "The game? No, you'll have to come to my house for it."

"When?"

"Any time."

"Don't let that Joey kid play with it!"

"OK," I promised him, "no one else will touch it."

The boy was sucking on a grape lollipop; his tongue showed purple as he talked to me. Suddenly, he proposed that I bring the game to Chicago, which confused me at first, such a strange and incongruous thing to say. But he was talking, it turned out, about his most important tournament of the season, the Junior Olympics next week at the University of Illinois, Chicago campus—or just UIC for short. His parents are not going to be there, so he can travel either on the team's minivan or with a friend. He's been assuming, apparently, that he'll be

traveling with me! Even his parents knew about his plan! We talked about it, all of us, before leaving the pool. Mister Fox, as always, seemed strangely disengaged from the conversation, standing in a macho-silent way with his arms crossed and his eyes wandering from place to place as if searching for more interesting company. Honestly, I can't stand the guy. He's one of those Rotarian, Republican, Chamber-of-Commerce guardians of "family values" who can somehow sniff out heretics and infidels like myself. He knows or senses, on some subconscious level, what I am and how I feel about his son, which is why he treats me with such a quiet contempt, such a passive-aggressive disregard, while not even fully realizing the source of his own behavior. There's something about me that he doesn't like, but he's too harried and distracted to think about it or put a name to it. So he just looks away, and acts bored, and postures. Luckily, it's Mrs. Fox who does all the talking, and she seems to like me just fine. "Ryan insists that Jake can drive him to Chicago," she told me. "It's silly, really, I know, we don't expect you to do it."

I had to think fast, make some quick decisions. Could I afford the time off? Did I have any previous plans with Pepper or Frankie or Doc? Was I willing to drive three hours to Chicago, maybe even four, spend money on a hotel, find my way around the UIC campus? Yes, to be with Ryan, of course. So this weekend I'll be taking him to Chicago! I'm still trying to come to grips with this new development, a little shell-shocked, scrambling to make plans, call for reservations, figure out directions, busy with a dozen necessary details. Mrs. Fox assured me that she and her husband would make arrangements with Ryan's coach. (This whole thing involves some kind of swim club, by the way, not the school.) Permission slips will need to be signed. She was actually relieved, I think, that I'll be traveling with Ryan. It's his biggest tournament of the year, after all, but she and Mister Fox can't be with him (why, I don't know), certainly a cause for some guilt, at least for her. So maybe it helps that the boy will have a companion of his own choosing, someone

he apparently likes. Maybe it eases the guilt. Otherwise, really, why would Ryan's parents allow me—want me—to take their son to Chicago? They should be suspicious, but they're not, or don't allow themselves to be. It's a strange psychological bargain they've made, trading their frequent neglect and bad parenting for an eagerness to please, to pamper, to oblige.

Anyway, Ryan and I will be leaving Saturday morning, very early.

FEB. 24

A slight change in plans: Ryan has preliminary events beginning Friday evening, which means he'll be traveling to Chicago on the minivan after all, with the rest of his teammates. I'll show up Saturday. After that, armed with permission slips, I'll have in loco parentis rights with the boy. We can go wherever we want, do things together, make our own plans whenever he's not busy with his swimming. He can even stay with me at my hotel (I have reservations for Saturday night at a Holiday Inn) if that's what he wants, and if we keep his coach informed. But that might be pressing my luck. Do I want such conspicuous and intimate contact with Ryan? It might be a little reckless. Then again, I'm not so sure that the boy will even want to stay with me. I shouldn't jump to any conclusions.

Two notes, before I conclude this entry, about the Huckfeldts: Dally has been here a few times to read comic books and snuggle. He often undoes his own pants to let me play with his dick, and always makes sure to collect his hugs and kisses when he arrives and again when he leaves. He's like a miniature Frankie, very sweet-tempered and wonderfully affectionate, impossible not to love him.

The other thing is this: Jimmy was here today, by himself, after school. Hard to believe, but we've never been alone together, just the

two of us, before now. He was smoking Marlboros again, a dirty habit for such a young boy, but not as bad as that horrendous chewing tobacco of his. Anyway, he was in a bored and listless mood, not even interested in Nintendo. For ten or fifteen minutes he did nothing but lie on the floor with his head propped against the couch. I was in the La-Z-Boy to his right, keeping an eye on him as we watched TV. He glanced at me every few moments to make some vulgar, smart-aleck remark about the program, Home Improvement, that we were watching. He smoked two cigarettes while lying there, using a pop can for his ashes, then started toying with one of the little pillows from the couch to amuse himself, tossing it from hand to hand, an idle game of catch. The pillow is round, the one he was tossing—round, about twelve inches across, covered in dark green corduroy. He was tossing it, making it spin, catching it and twirling it like a pizza, nothing unusual. Then he laid it on his lap, taking a moment to concentrate on a sight gag from the TV show, a bit of nonsense about the Home Improvement guy driving an army tank. Jimmy laughed with a guttural, staccato chuckle that sounded low-down and wicked, as if he were snickering at a porno film.

I kept glancing at him, watching him. He was wearing hightop sneakers and camouflage pants and another of those bowling shirts, this one sort of an eggplant purple with “James Huckfeldt” stitched across the left pocket in white letters. (Where does he get those bowling shirts and Hawaiian shirts that he always wears? From his father, he said. When the family was packing to move here from Cassville, Jimmy found a box of old clothing and claimed it for himself, which is why he now has such a colorful and retro wardrobe. Somehow it suits his audacious, don’t-give-a-damn personality.) His shaggy chestnut hair was pushed up in back like a bird’s plumage where it was pressed against the couch. His Jack Daniel’s cap was on the cushion above him. He had that round green pillow on his lap and, as he laughed at the sitcom on TV, he started rubbing it against himself. Just an unconscious fidget, I thought at first, but then he continued doing it more and more vigorously, and even glanced at me to see if I was watching. That’s when it became a

real show, a real performance, more fun than watching the TV—for me, yes, but also for him. Jimmy started humping upward against that pillow in the silliest and wildest way, thrusting so roughly at times that he seemed about to sprain his back. He paused once—just long enough to reach into his pants and adjust himself, to drag his hidden dick upright against his belly—then did a little more humping and showing off.

Five minutes, at least, this went on. Maddening to watch him. The lump in his camouflage pants was like a smuggled cucumber. A big cucumber. He finally set the pillow aside, better to display himself, his hands behind his head as if to say: There you go, take a look! Neither of us had said a word during all of this. I was afraid to respond. Frankly, Jimmy scares me. There's something about him that feels dangerous and unreliable. He was lying there about five feet away with that big hard-on inside his pants—but why? I asked him finally, right out, “So, Jimmy, what exactly are you doing?”

He said, “Fuckin.”

I said, “The pillow?”

“It's Anita's cunt,” he told me. He raised and stiffened his hips and did some more rabbit thrusting, no pillow this time, just a quick pantomime of fucking to make his point. I nodded, staring at him, and said, “It looks like you've got a serious boner there.” Jimmy took a glance between his own legs, both hands still nonchalantly behind his head. “That's right, Jake,” he said, an especially sarcastic emphasis on my name, as if he'd called me “jerk” or “asshole” instead. I said, “Very impressive, really, seriously.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Can I see it?”

“What for?”

“Curiosity, I guess.”

“You're curious, Jake?”

“I'm curious, yeah, Jimmy,” I said, putting the same caustic emphasis on his name that he kept putting on mine. The boy laughed a little and then used both hands to push his pants down—not unzipping or



unbuttoning them, just shoving everything forcefully downward, including his underwear, until the head of his penis and about two inches of swollen shaft were exposed for me to see. “OK, you fucker, that’s all,” he said after a few seconds. I didn’t move from my chair, didn’t ask for more, didn’t try to touch him. There’s something in his eyes, in his grin, in his voice—not just today, but always—that feels dangerous, as I said before. When he shoved his pants down, he seemed to be taunting more than flirting, perhaps mocking me or trying to trick me into doing something careless, something to reveal my true colors. I don’t know, maybe I’m being foolishly paranoid. I might be wrong about him. But he makes me nervous.

I did say, right after he flashed his dick, “Hey, I’ve still never seen those nasty underpants of yours.” He looked at me cockeyed, no idea what I was talking about, so I said, “You know, your underpants with the men and women fucking, you told me about them.”

“Oh, you mean them things! Yeah, damn, you’re right, you’re right, I’ll wear ’em sometime, give y’all a fuckin treat.”

He left a few minutes later.

## MARCH 2

Today, Monday, I can finally report on my weekend in Chicago.

I got there Saturday, shortly past noon. By “there” I mean the Holiday Inn where I had my reservation. It was too early, though, for me to check in, so I drove around for a while, went to a Burger King for lunch, bought a pack of Camels and a pint of bourbon for later. I was feeling very jittery. After an hour or so, I was able to return to the hotel and check in and have a quick drink and a smoke. My room was at the back of the complex, ground floor, off a glassed-in hallway that felt as warm as a greenhouse with so much afternoon sunlight streaming through the rows and rows of windows. Down that hallway from my

room, then off to the left, was a concrete-floored area with vending machines, ice machines, washers and dryers; then restrooms and a sauna; then a huge and echoey enclosure called the Holidome with arcades, miniature golf, a swimming pool, Jacuzzi, shuffleboard courts. Farther on was a coffee shop, a restaurant, then the lobby and the front entrance. I remember thinking that the Huckfeldt boys would have an insanely enjoyable time in this vast, plasticized playland.

I didn't have long to dally. By three o'clock, I was back on the road and driving east on the Eisenhower expressway toward the UIC campus. I had thought, from the map, that my hotel in a suburb called Oak Park would be close to the campus, maybe a fifteen-minute trip. But I was wrong. The expressway crawl was tedious and time-consuming, then lots of stop-and-go traffic on the city streets around the university itself. Finally I parked in one of the multi-level garages near campus and walked the final few blocks to the pool, which is located in the Physical Education Building on Roosevelt Road.

I was expecting a crowd, but nothing like the bewildering swarm that I encountered when I got inside. This was big-time stuff compared to Monmouth or Sandburg. Not just swimmers and coaches and spectators, but also lots of reporters and photographers covering the action for newspapers across the state. Even a few camera crews from small-market TV stations, and one from WGN—channel nine—in Chicago. How was I going to locate Ryan in this confusing sea of bodies? The only way, of course, was to plant myself on the bleachers and watch the swimmers and wait for Ryan to appear. He did, eventually, in his star-spangled Speedos with the red and white stripes across the butt. It was the 100-yard breaststroke, and he lost—or, maybe I should say, came in third. His teammates and his coach gave him sympathetic pats on the back and then wandered, all of them, toward the locker rooms. I discovered later that Ryan's race was the last of the day for the Taft Swim Club girls and boys. Actually the last of the tournament. Their team had barely qualified in Friday's preliminaries

and performed dismally on Saturday, overmatched against the powerful squads from Evanston and St. Charles and Hinsdale, rich communities with a history of excellence in such preppy sports as swimming and tennis and volleyball.

I scrambled through the crowd and managed to catch Ryan's eye. He half waved and kept going and left me there feeling awkward, not sure whether to stay put or return to my seat in the bleachers. I wandered out to the little snack bar (like a temporary cart) set up near the entrance. I bought an orange soda and thought about going outside to smoke a cigarette, but then returned to the pool, to the area outside the locker rooms. That's when Ryan came out, dressed and carrying his gym bag, and when I realized that he was finished. We talked, and decided that he should come back to the Holiday Inn with me, stay the night, then attend a special tournament breakfast with his teammates on Sunday morning before we traveled together back to Sandburg. He wanted to know if I had his Top Gun video game. No, I told him, you can get it tomorrow, at my house, when we go home. He shrugged, like: That's a stupid idea, but OK.

In the car, Ryan tried to explain about this "Taft Swim Club" that he belongs to. It consists, from what I could understand, of student athletes from various schools in the Sandburg-Stonerville-Monmouth area, and they qualify by accumulating points during their various school (and/or YMCA) meets throughout the winter. There's also, by the way, a state finals tournament next week for the school teams themselves which is being held in Joliet, where Pepper's grandmother lives. I don't know if I'll be going to that tournament or not. It's possible. Ryan explained all of this, and much more, in his snotty and impatient way—but I'm so accustomed to it by now that I hardly even noticed. It's just Ryan being Ryan. There was a lush purple-pink sunset in front of us as we drove west on the Eisenhower, back to the Holiday Inn. I mentioned it to Ryan, and he said, "It's because the air is dirty, because of pollution."

"Really?"

"Don't you know that? It's because of pollution."

The sunset was flaring brighter as we talked, now red, now orange, a hot paintbox of colors. I asked Ryan all sorts of questions, including: What hotel is your team staying in? Have you been to Chicago before? Have you been to the museums? To the top of the Sears Tower? Are you hungry? Where should we eat? His answers were: the Sheraton, yes, no, no, yes, someplace good—though much wordier, of course, on and on about his hotel and about being in Chicago last year with his parents and going to the Brookfield Zoo and not having eaten since a snack at noon because you can't have a big meal in the middle of a swimming meet, don't you know that? A strangely paradoxical thing about Ryan: He's so fond of chatting and chattering, a very lively little conversationalist, yet he's so surly and touchy and always so confrontational with other boys. Does he have friends at school? Friends on his swimming team? Is there a more sociable side to him that I've never seen before? He's popular at school, I think, because he's extremely cute and a fantastic athlete, but he doesn't "play well with others," as they say. He has poor social skills and genuine emotional problems and doesn't, as far as I know, have any real friends. I might, in fact, be the best friend he has right now, which is a little sad.

Traffic was heavy on the expressway, and we didn't get to the hotel until after six o'clock, in full darkness. Ryan brought his gym bag inside with him. Like his stocking cap, the bag is orange and has a snarling tiger mascot on it. When we were getting out of the car, I said, "Come on, tiger boy, let's go." He doesn't seem to mind this new nickname I have for him. It's a bit corny, I realize, very nineteen-fifties, very Father Knows Best, like, "Hey sport, hey champ, hey tiger." But it truly does seem to fit him. When you look at him face-on, he has a wide and slightly downturned mouth with a highly curved, feline top lip; his upturned nose appears almost round; his blue eyes are wide-set and moist and have those same long-long lashes as Pepper's (only blond, of course). His eyes also have an unusual natural bruising beneath them,

like a bluish-green eyeshadow, or like the bruised pouchiness that comes with fatigue and lack of sleep. Only on Ryan it's there all the time. Anyway, my point is that there's something feline about his face, and not just his face, but all of him, head to toe, something nimble and graceful and cat-like that makes "tiger" or "tiger boy" seem perfectly appropriate as a nickname.

My room was ideally situated for the two of us—in back, private, no way for management to see me coming and going with my non-paying and very young guest. Ryan waited at my right elbow as I opened the door, then pushed past me into the room and looked around and said, "The Sheraton is nicer than this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I replied, adding a mock snarl for good measure. "Quit complaining, kid!" This was exciting stuff, being with Ryan Fox in a room at the Holiday Inn. Just the hotel smell, by itself, was enough to make the evening feel like a wonderfully sneaky adventure. You know that smell, that hotel smell of cigarette-smoky carpets and curtains and perfumy disinfectant. It's the smell of road trips and illicit rendezvous, of childhood vacations and adult trysts, all those memories and associations mingling in that first whiff of stale, recirculated air as you step into the room.

Ryan used the bathroom while still wearing his parka, standing at the toilet with the coat unzipped and held open with one hand. I could see him from where I was waiting near the bed, around the corner from the bathroom, through a big mirror beside the television. Ryan didn't realize this until he was finished peeing and turned away from the toilet. I waved at his startled reflection. That's when I discovered, seeing the front of him with his pants open, that he was still wearing his American flag Speedos beneath his other clothing. He'd been too upset, he confessed, to shower and change at the pool, so just dried himself and dressed and got permission from his coach to meet me and leave. As he told me this, I noticed for the first time that his pants, gray cotton twill

with blue side stripes, were blotchy with moisture around the thighs. I assumed a stern attitude and insisted, for his own comfort and welfare, that he remove the pants and the Speedos and take a shower. The boy was watching me with that strange expression of his as I talked, his nostrils flared and his mouth turned down. OK, he said, OK—but first, before taking a shower or doing anything else, he wanted to inspect the Holidome. So off we went for a quick tour and ended up, spontaneously, at the restaurant across the way, near the lobby. It's called the Chandelier Room, decorated in greens and yellows and browns, each table flickering in the light of its own little candle. Ryan had friend chicken; I had a gristly sirloin steak. Both of us had chocolate cream pie, much too sweet, for dessert. I wish we had gone to a better place for dinner, but Ryan impulsively demanded that we stop and eat as soon as he saw the Chandelier Room and smelled the food. Hungry boy. Impatient boy. He demanded, so I agreed. He seemed to enjoy his chicken, in any event.

Afterwards, back in our room, he undressed down to his Speedos and said that he wanted to test the pool. Well, stupid me, I forgot to bring my swimming trunks, never gave it a thought when I was packing, so I was forced to sit at poolside while Ryan had his fun. There were only a few other people around us: two young couples, a middle-aged fat guy, and a woman with two small children. Ryan was conspicuous in his Speedos. What red-blooded American male wears anything so skimpy and revealing these days? Even Ryan himself would have worn something longer and baggier if he'd had the choice. But, my oh my, what a pleasure to watch him, and to know that he's mine (sort of). He was intensely aware, every moment, of my eyes upon him, I could tell. He kept showing off his dives, and showing off his different strokes, turning somersaults and doing dolphin-like spins and flips, always glancing in my direction, making sure that his one-man audience was watching his performance. He emerged three or four times to parade himself along the concrete deck, adjusting the elastic of his Speedos as he strutted, water streaming from his hair and arms and legs, his bare

feet plish-ploshing with each soggy step. I don't think, to be fair, that he was strutting in an arrogant "everybody look at me" way, or in any kind of teasing or coquettish way. Only in my own mind, in my own head, was there something provocative or titillating about Ryan's poolside strolls. Everyone else saw an ordinary boy—cute, but just a boy—having fun at the pool, emerging from the water, walking around, catching his breath. Only I saw a succulent ten-year-old, nearly naked, striding like some sea-drenched boynymph. Only I had an erection as he passed by, and as he glanced at me, and as he licked the beads of chlorinated water from his top lip.

Before we could return to the room, Ryan also had to sample the Jacuzzi, which was just a few steps from the pool. Again I sat by enviously as the boy enjoyed himself, sprawled in the bubbling, foamy water. I asked him, from my white metal deck chair, "Is it warm? Is it comfortable?"

"Duh, yes, it's warm and it's comfortable! You should try it."

"I wish I could."

"How could you forget your trunks? It's so stupid!"

"Gosh, thanks, you're making me feel much better."

"Well god, it's true," Ryan said, his voice raised above the noise of the churning Jacuzzi, his arms outspread on the ledge behind him. He was grinning at me, pretty little brat, with his gappy teeth and reddened eyes. I said, just kidding, "Too bad you can't take off your trunks and soak nude. Wouldn't that feel good?"

"Why?"

"Because," I said, glancing around to make certain that no one was standing or sitting nearby, listening, "no trunks, bare skin, bubbling water, you know, it would be excellent."

"Not in public," the boy replied. A very practical response. I laughed and said, "True, true, you can't go nude in public, you're right."

When he'd finally had enough, I handed him a big green-and-white Holiday Inn towel and headed with him back to our room, stopping at the vending machines for some bags of chips and cans of pop. Nervous,

so nervous, as I walked down that hallway to that room of ours, always afraid that someone might see us or stop us or. . . what? Impossible to predict. Who knows? So many ways that disaster can spring lethally from the shadows. But the hallway stayed empty and nothing happened, no one stopped me as I unlocked the door and led Ryan into the room, just like father and son, easy as a dream. I dead-bolted the door and made extra sure that the curtains were securely shut—just in case. Ryan was standing at the TV, using the remote to flip through the channels. He had the Holiday Inn towel draped over his head like an Arab's burnoose. I moved behind him and put my hands on his hips, on the cool spandex of his Speedo briefs. He looked at me quickly over his shoulder, just an "oh, it's you" glance, then went back to perusing the TV. "They only have one movie channel here," he said. "The Sheraton has two."

"Aw, that's a shame."

"I'm serious."

"Look," I said, "Independence Day is on. That's good, right?"

"I've seen it already."

"Anyway, you should take that shower now," I told the boy. "Get all of that chlorine washed off." Ryan nodded vaguely beneath his green-and-white burnoose, staring at an explosion on the TV screen. I patted his hips and even gave the Speedos a little tug. Ryan took the tug as a hint to get undressed for his shower and mumbled, "OK, OK," like a kid responding to a naggy parent. He pulled down at the waistband with his thumb, not very effectively, so I lent a helpful hand and quickly had the red-white-and-blue Speedos down to his feet and then off as he stepped out of them. He stayed where he was, not willing to leave just yet, more interested in the cities getting blown up on TV than standing there naked in front of me. It's no big deal to him, being naked, as I've said before. He's a locker-room veteran, not at all bashful about his own body.

I replaced my hands on his hips and then cautiously slipped them up and forward, across his belly and onto his chest, then down again, then up slowly, very slowly, then down to his hips and up again to his



nipples. Ryan was leaning back against me. The tight elastic of his Speedos had left a band of red around his entire waist, an angry circle of scarlet imprinted on the delicate white of his skin. I took two steps backward with my arms still around him until I could feel the bed behind me, then sat myself and Ryan onto the end of the mattress. The boy said “hey” and then “what?” in slightly irritated surprise as the two of us dropped to the bed with him seated suddenly between my legs, almost on my lap. I laughed as if the clumsy back-flop had been an accident, a stumble, funny, really funny.

Ryan, despite my interference, was still trying to watch the explosions and fireballs on TV. I pulled the towel from his head and kissed the damp blond mop of his hair and the red tips of his ears, first the left one, then the right. I continued feeling him from behind, both hands on his chest, then ventured lower, onto his hard stomach, then lower still, onto the lean muscle of his thighs. My chin was on his left shoulder. I was staring down at his penis, my thumbs on either side of it, nearly touching it.

You know, in almost twenty-five years of fondling and caressing naked boys, I’ve never known one—not one—to stop me and say something like, “Whoa, hold it, knock it off, get away!” Never. No matter where we are, no matter what the scene or the setting or the situation when their clothes come off and my hands start exploring them—whether at my house or their house, whether inside or outside, whether in a car or at the park or, like now, at a hotel—the boys are always willing to be touched and petted, often more than willing, as if being touched by a man who likes them is something to be expected, something—could it be?—natural.

Ryan’s shoulders were hunched slightly forward and he had his hands fisted against the mattress on either side of my legs. My chin, as I said, was on his shoulder, and I was staring down at his penis, which

was reddened like his ears and eyelids and the bridge of his nose, but still limp, still soft. I happened, just then, to glance up and realize that the two of us were seated not only in front of the TV but also in front of the big mirror beside it, and that Ryan was watching not only Independence Day but also the reflection of himself sitting there naked with my hands squeezing at his thighs. “Oh, hello” I said. Ryan actually waved at the mirror and said “hi” to my reflection smiling behind him. I laughed and gave the top of his head another kiss.

The movie had finally shifted to a quieter scene, no more explosions, and I could feel Ryan leaning forward to get up and take his shower, if I would let him. So we stood up together—but I kept holding him, my hands on his shoulders now, making him pose in front of the mirror just a moment longer. “Look at that boy,” I told him. “So handsome!”

“Oh wow, sure, handsome,” Ryan mumbled, rolling his eyes. I ran my hands down his arms and then back up his ribs and said, “You must have about zero percent body fat, Ryan. You’re amazing. Such great muscle tone. Really amazing.”

“I could get better.”

“No way,” I said, letting my hands travel down his body one more time, wanting his eyes to follow, to see the beauty of himself, to see the beauty and the sexiness of that naked figure in the mirror, letting my hands meet between his legs where I cupped his penis and testicles in my fingers and held them like jewels on a cushion, showing Ryan his own genitals. “The perfect boy,” I said. “Just look at yourself, how perfect.”

Ryan made a “psss” noise and finally stepped away and informed me, in a very Ryanish way, that “guys are ugly, don’t you know that?” I watched the lively flex of his bare butt as he walked to the bathroom, around the corner. I fixed myself a drink of Seven-Up and bourbon. Not too strong. I wanted to relax and loosen up, but I didn’t want to get drunk. After only a few minutes, Ryan yelled to me from the shower, asking for shampoo. I found a little bottle of Head & Shoulders in my

dop kit and took it to the bathroom and handed it to him behind the frosted-glass door. I asked if he wanted or needed anything else, “maybe somebody to wash your back?” Ryan shook his head and closed the door.

While waiting, I stripped down to my boxers and T-shirt, smoked a Camel, smoked another, finished my drink and fixed a second. Ryan came out, finally, with a fresh Holiday Inn towel draped over his head. He walked tiptoed across the carpet with his pink wiener jiggling. Too bad I didn’t bring the camcorder, I suddenly thought. Ryan went to his gym bag and rummaged for a comb, a long-handled black comb that he took to the mirror by the television. He removed the towel and started combing his hair, carefully smoothing it and straightening it, primping, preening, fussing with his perfect bangs. He stood there with his back slightly arched, a swaybacked posture that gave him—from the side where I was seated, watching him—a firm little potbelly.

I finished my Seven-Up and bourbon, then got up to fix one more—only three altogether, plus one earlier in the day, so no risk of ending up drunk. I gave Ryan a pat on the ass when I passed behind him. He moved forward a step, thinking I needed more room. He was still fussing with his hair, checking his left profile, then his right, then giving his yellow bangs another swipe or two with the long-handled comb. I splashed a shot of bourbon into my plastic cup, filled the rest with Seven-Up and chips of ice, took a sip, then spent a moment gathering Ryan’s clothing (his gray trousers, his shirt, his undershirt and socks) and putting everything in one of the chairs near the window. I also took his wet Speedos from the floor and hung them on the nozzle of the shower to dry overnight. His underpants were still in his gym bag because, remember, he’d worn his Speedos from the tournament under his trousers.

It occurred to me, at that point, that the rest of Ryan’s stuff—extra clothing, toothbrush, whatever—must still be at the Sheraton, in the room he’d been sharing with teammates. I asked him about it, but he

said it was OK, he would get his other things tomorrow when we returned to the Sheraton for the tournament breakfast, which was being held in the hotel's banquet room. "Too bad about tonight, though," I told him. "You don't have any shorts, nothing to wear."

Ryan didn't say anything. He finished with his hair and crossed the room to his orange gym bag—on the chair with his clothing—to put away the comb. I was standing near the bed with my drink, still watching him, always watching him. He glanced at me with his flared-nostril expression (agitated? expectant? what?), then plucked his underpants—ta da!—from his bag. "I'll wear these," he said, as if announcing an ingenious solution.

"Sure, sure, that's fine," I said. "But first, hey, how about a nice massage?"

"My mom gives me massages," Ryan said. "Her massages are better than yours."

"That's not fair. You've never had one of mine. How about it?"

Ryan, still clutching his white Jockey briefs, said OK and climbed onto the bed on his hands and knees and then flopped and sprawled with his head on the pillow, his eyes shut. I put aside my drink and rubbed my hands to warm them. "A nice, slow massage," I said to the boy as I knelt next to him on the mattress. "You'll enjoy this for sure."

And so I began, the same massage I've given to innumerable boys over the years, that thrill of your hands on his naked body for the first time, on your special boy's naked body, free to explore every bit of him while he quietly revels in your touch. I'd already had a chance to pet and feel Ryan, of course, earlier that night—but a massage is different, more than just a few moments of touchy-feely. It's the main course, the real meat and potatoes; it's *carte blanche* to put your hands everywhere, to touch everything, to fondle, to linger. I started on his shoulders, his back, then worked slowly down onto his white butt cheeks and down his legs, then up again to those fleshy-firm white cheeks. Up and down, up and down the naked length of him, always returning to the luscious

centerpiece of his ass until I was rubbing and squeezing only his ass and nothing else. Every bit of pressure left red fingerprints on the delicate white of his skin, red fingerprints that quickly faded and were then replaced by new ones as I moved my hands from place to place on those cheeks. I had already managed to spread his legs when I was working on them and massaging them, a subtle nudge here and a subtle nudge there, getting him to spread-eagle so that now I could slip my hand easily between his thighs and feel under and around his balls, all under and around and over his tight balls. His hips lifted and I again brought both hands onto his ass and used my thumbs to spread the cheeks and look at the rosy-pink hole of his anus, then used my thumbs to open the hole wider, stretching it, looking into it, actually massaging around and onto and into the hole of his butt with the tips of my two thumbs. Ryan twisted and tensed his hips and told me, in a mumbly voice, to “quit tickling.”

Fine, I said, no problem, no problem—so how about turning over now anyway, and we’ll do your front. Ryan rolled and flipped so quickly that he actually bounced when he hit his back. He crossed his arms over his face, over his eyes, with the white undies still clutched like a security blankie in his left hand. Wow, was he hard! I said, “Hey, that’s an excellent boner you’ve got there, Mister Fox,” and he took a hasty glance at it for himself from beneath his crossed arms, then made that same embarrassed “psss” sound and covered his eyes once more. That erection of his, I’d say, is three inches or maybe a fraction longer, a skinny thing that not only curves to the left (common enough, so does Pepper’s) but also twists to the left. It’s difficult to describe, very unusual, a boner twisted sideways so that its leftward curve actually becomes a stiff downward curve. But that’s Ryan’s erection, and it gets as red as sunburn when it’s hard like that, and so do his balls—almost shockingly red against the stark whiteness of his tummy and thighs.

I was lazily stroking and kneading all up and down the front of his body as I stared at him and tried to memorize the shape and size and color of those boygoodies between his legs. I used my knuckles at first

to touch him there, to skim across his testicles and along the underside of his penis. Then my fingertips, making him dick-twitchy and trembly and eager for jerking off, which I started to do, now, in the ring of my forefinger and thumb, giving the little mushroom knob plenty of friction, fast and light friction across the velveteen meat.

Ryan, little tiger, kept sneaking peeks at himself from beneath his crossed arms to see what was being done to him, as if puzzled by it—something so strange and new happening to him, he needed to witness it, but only timidly, with quick peeks, like someone spying on forbidden ritual. His balls were getting tighter and tighter. His legs (reminding me of Frankie) were shaking and shivering. Even his stomach was shaky, shivery. Another minute, maybe two, and I could see his balls clench, and I could feel his boner stretch and strain and go spasmy and then squeeze out a little drop of kiddie-jizz—just one, just one drop—glistening at the very tip of his dick like a clear bead of aloe. I used my thumb to smear it, then kept stroking until Ryan, ultra-sensitive, could stand it no longer and hunched himself and grabbed between his own legs with the underpants as if to cover and compress a wound or an injury. He started babbling in a mumbly way, saying, “Uh oh, uh oh, OK, OK, that’s all, OK,” as he sat up on the edge of the bed and kept the underpants clutched to his dick, flustered and disoriented, confused by the intensity of his orgasm into believing that he’d somehow been hurt or injured or that some kind of pee or blood was leaking from him.

Poor sweetheart. I told him over and over as he sat there that everything was fine, everything was normal, everything was OK—my hand on his back, petting him, reassuring him—nothing to worry about, that’s what happens when you rub your dick, even when you’re only ten years old, sometimes that’ll happen and stuff will come out and it’s all perfectly good and normal and OK, nothing to worry about, nothing at all.

One thing for sure: That was Ryan's first orgasm (and his first little ejaculation, if you can call it that), and I'm the person who made it happen. I'm the lucky guy.

The boy quickly put on his underpants after that and played the "nothing unusual happened" game for the rest of the night. I did ask him how he liked his "super-duper deluxe" massage, and he flared his nostrils and looked at me sort of defiantly and said it was good—or, to be perfectly accurate, he said, "I think you did a pretty good job but I needed to pee, that's all." I'm still not sure exactly what he meant; maybe a reference to the pee-like release and moisture of the prepubescent seminal fluid; maybe not. Whatever was on his mind, he said nothing more about it as he sat on the bed and ate chips and drank pop and watched TV, nothing odd about his attitude or behavior, bratty as usual, same old Ryan. We slept side by side that night, both of us in our underwear, my tension slightly relieved from having masturbated in the bathroom around ten o'clock. Slightly, but not much.

Next morning, we drove to the Sheraton in Chicago for Ryan's big breakfast. I had expected to hang around in the lobby or maybe at a nearby Denny's or IHOP, but Ryan had a plan of his own. He took me by the sleeve of my leather jacket when we arrived at the hotel and dragged me inside with him, informing me that "you're my guest, don't you know that!"

No, I didn't know that—but Ryan was right, I was his guest, all totally proper, and I ended up eating breakfast beside him at one of the large round tables in the banquet room—Ryan on one side of me, some boy named Robert and Robert's parents on the other. We all ate scrambled eggs and bacon and pancakes, toast and jelly, English muffins, juice. Ryan, I discovered, eats bacon the same way he eats french fries, munching daintily at each strip with his side teeth, Bugs Bunny-style. It's also worth mentioning that he behaved quite cheerfully and amicably with the other youngsters at the table, allowing me a

glimpse of him as a regular-guy teammate and, well, just an ordinary ten-year-old kid. I wondered, as I watched him, why he's so much grouchier with the boys he encounters at my house, and I came to this conclusion: Those boys are rivals for my affection; they incite his competitive spirit; he's jealous of them.

Not much else to report. Our trip back to Sandburg was long and monotonous. We stopped twice at rest areas on Interstate 80 to use the bathroom and to buy snacks, and then Ryan napped for a while, his chin bouncing and bumping against his chest in sync with the bounces and bumps of the road. At home I finally gave him his Top Gun video game.

We agreed to talk soon about next week's state finals (I should hear from him tomorrow), and then we had to say goodbye. I kissed him, and he actually kissed me back—not the kind of big smooch I always get from Dally, or the sloppy tongue-kisses I get from Frankie, but still a nice kiss right on the lips from Ryan Fox, the super-jock of Butler Middle School, the Golden Boy himself.

### MARCH 3

I keep thinking and thinking about last Saturday night. I can't believe I actually jerked off Ryan Fox at the Holiday Inn! No way was I expecting that to happen. Such a deep hole I'm digging for myself—with Pepper, with Frankie (well, he's safe), with the Huckfeldts, with Ryan. Is it worth the stress? The fear? I keep asking myself.

Anyway, I called Ryan's house this evening (he himself answered, thank goodness) and I discovered that I won't be going with him to Joliet this weekend for his tournament. His brother Chad is coming home for Spring Break and that's who has the honor of being Ryan's traveling companion. Oh well. Maybe it's for the best. I can use the time to visit Doc.

I asked Ryan about his Top Gun video game. He likes it a lot.



I wonder when I'll be seeing him again.

## MARCH 8

Last night, Saturday, I was host to Frankie and Pepper and the Huckfeldt brothers, all five of them together. They played Nintendo and watched a horror movie on Showtime and made an ungodly uproar and left the house littered with Twinkie wrappers and crushed potato chips and empty pop cans—but nothing raunchy or sexual happened. JoJo pretended to fuck the TV at one point (as he's done before), and Frankie had his hands on Pepper the whole night, but that was all, nothing else. The entire group was gone by ten o'clock.

Today I drove to Doc's house. He was in his bedroom trying to take a nap when I got there, which is very unusual for him. He never takes naps. It's those damn headaches, he says, that keep bothering him. I made him promise to make an appointment with a doctor—to check his blood pressure, his blood sugar, his eyes, et cetera. He grudgingly agreed. The house, by the way, was a mess. I mean, it's always sort of a mess, but today it was downright filthy, not even a clean glass in the kitchen for a drink of water. I mentioned this to Doc, but he only looked at me and narrowed his eyes as he lit a cigarette, as if he hadn't quite heard or understood what I'd said.

I sat there with him last night as I've done a thousand times, and we talked briefly about Frankie and Pepper, but I kept thinking: I'm not telling Doc about my weekend with Ryan (in fact, Doc doesn't even know about Ryan's place in my life); and I'm not telling him about Jimmy's little performance from two weeks ago; and I'm not telling him about all the X-rated video footage I've accumulated recently—footage that I would have shown him by now in the old days. I'm not telling him about anything important in my life because, somehow, he doesn't seem interested, or doesn't seem fully attuned to what I'm saying, or doesn't seem capable of responding except in excessive and unstable ways. Hard

to explain, that's for sure, but something has definitely changed between us.

I brought him a fish sandwich from Burger King (a favorite treat of his) and he enjoyed it. Nothing wrong with his appetite, at least. While we were eating, I asked him once more about his Morocco story, wondering if maybe he'd just been in a disagreeable mood the last time I mentioned it. But no, his response was exactly the same, right down to the dismissive wave of his hand and the way he said, "Ancient history, Jacob, ancient history. Can't be bothered with such nonsense."

As I was leaving, I made him promise (for a second time) that he'd see a doctor as soon as possible for a check-up. I also left him with a bottle of Tylenol for his headaches; he seemed to appreciate it. I wish I could call him in a day or two or three to see how he's doing and whether or not he's made his appointment, but of course he has no phone, so I'll have to wait and wonder until next weekend.

There was a beautiful crescent moon, low above the trees, as I drove home.

## MARCH 14

Guess what I just found out: Pepper slept at Frankie's house last night! It was Friday, and they couldn't stay here, so they arranged a sleep-over at Frankie's house in Stonerville. Frankie reported this earlier when he came by for a visit. According to him, Holly was quick to give her permission, telling Pepper only to "get back early" today for some kind of shopping trip. "To buy shoes or something," Frankie told me, not clear about the details. Holly didn't even call me about it. Does she trust Frankie now? Apparently so.

And what did the two boys do last night? Frankie never provided a full report, no graphic tidbits, and I didn't ask. Whatever they did, they

did, and I shouldn't expect to know every tiny detail. In other words, this situation I've created has assumed a life beyond me and apart from me, the boys themselves forming friendships, having their own little adventures, creating their own secret histories. What can I do? These boys don't belong to me. I don't own them. Frankie did say, "Dude, nothing special happened, you know, nothing remarkable." I'm guessing that he sucked Pepper's dick and then, probably with Pepper's help, ended up jerking off. But did Pepper himself finally manage an orgasm? Did he ejaculate? I have no clue. Shit. I guess I should've come right out and asked.

Here, this evening, Frankie settled into the La-Z-Boy and sat reading an Anne Rice novel while I had myself a supper of fried cod and Stouffer's macaroni and cheese. He also wanted to watch the video of himself and the Huckfeldt brothers from several weeks ago, especially the part where he and Jimmy get queer together. Pepper, by the way, was at his friend's house tonight, playing computer games or whatever. His friend's name is Marcus. I met him once, months ago, when Pepper and I went to see Rocket Man at the multiplex on Henderson Street. He's a black boy, same age as Pepper, and that's everything I know about him.

Anyway, after I finished eating and Frankie finished watching the video, we decided to take a steam bath together. It was the first time I've "taken a steam" with one of the boys. We sat on towels on the tiled bench-seats of the tub, getting hot and drippy with sweat as the steam outlet hissed and fumed like a tea kettle. Frankie sat to my left with his knees widespread and his balls resting smooshed against the towel beneath him. Such a slight and pale boy, so gracile, fine-boned, fine-muscled, no swell at all to his biceps or calves. Squinty and smiley in the steam. Pushing his almost-brown blondish hair behind his ears, over and over, to keep it away from his sweaty, reddened cheeks. A glisten of dampness on his frizzy pubic hair. His penis, which seems almost too

large between his very slender young-boy legs, grew quickly alive and stiff as I touched his knee, and as I lightly pinched his nipples, and as I nudged against him and licked across his lips and into his mouth.

Frankie asked me, “What should we do?” Whatever you want, I told him, anything you want. The boy said, “Dude, I need to be fucked, I’m not kidding!” Good, I agreed, come on, we’re so sweaty it should be easy—and I maneuvered him with my hands on his waist so that he was straddling my lap, facing me, looking into my eyes as he sat himself carefully and gradually onto my erection. He grimaced and made little grunting sounds and gripped my hips to pull me up into him, to impale himself as deeply as possible—and then I was in, all the way in, and I could feel his rectum like a tight, slippery fist around my dick, squeezing relaxing squeezing relaxing—and when I covered his mouth to kiss him, I could hear and feel him still grunting, uh uh uh, like the sound that Jimmy was making in the video, uh uh uh, like someone being jabbed or punched in the belly. The sound of a boy being fucked. He suddenly said, surprising me, “It can be your turn now, Jake, bro, your turn if you want.”

My turn? I confess, I’ve never had a gay boyfriend before (or, at least, a boyfriend who admits to being gay); I’ve seldom had my dick up any boy’s ass, just a few times; and I’ve only had a boy’s dick up mine once or twice, many years ago. Is that hard to believe? I mean, most boys just want to be jerked off or sucked, and sometimes enjoy having a finger or a cock slipped cautiously up their butts, game for almost anything in the heat of sexual abandon. But nothing beyond that, no full-fledged fucking (at least not with the boys around here, not in Sandburg). Frankie, however, ain’t your ordinary boy. We changed places and I straddled him, feeling sort of awkward and self-conscious in that goofy-looking position as I held his dick in one hand to steady it and guide it into myself, his sweat-slippery dick into my sweat-slippery ass. Jesus Christ, I’d forgotten how that feels, having a penis slide so hard yet so pliable right up into your very bowels, so rubbery hard and blood-

warm and impossibly big inside you, totally filling you, making your guts tighten and your chest tighten and your throat tighten, and all you can do is grunt and grimace and groan from the agonizing fullness of it.

I rode him slowly, very uncomfortable in that position with my knees resting bent against the hard edge of the tiled bench-seat, no effective way to balance or support my weight, easier for me—we soon discovered—to hold myself stationary while Frankie thrust upward, uh uh uh, into my ass. I held his shoulders and stared at the top of his head and at his hair parted neatly down the middle, then at the little scar on his forehead, then at his dark eyebrows—my gaze wandering from place to place as he kept frantically thrusting—from those dark eyebrows to his sweaty top lip and the plastic braces on his teeth and then to the small hoops of gold in his earlobes, one hoop in the left and two hoops in the right—watching him, studying him, his own eyes fixed somewhere on my chest, unfocused, a blind man's stare. He wasn't going to stop, I could tell, until he was spent, no way to interrupt him now, so I braced myself and leaned more heavily against his shoulders to relieve the weight on my knees. But then I groaned for real and felt an almost painful pressure in my bowels, like the cramping from an enema, afraid for one dim-witted moment that I might be about to shit. In fact, I was getting an enema all right, but I was getting it from Frankie as he orgasmed and came inside me, obvious to me now from the shakiness of him and from his hands vise-gripped on my hips and from the groan even louder than my own that came out of him as he spasmed and thrust and spasmed some more.

When Frankie was done, and took his dick out, I stayed where I was to masturbate, half standing and half kneeling as I did it, assuming from my position that I'd end up ejaculating onto the boy's chest directly in front of me. But Frankie was watching me closely, and as soon as he saw my initial release of semen, which did hit his chest, he lunged forward and grabbed my dick to put it into his mouth, so hastily that he fumbled and got a second spurt of slime on his chin before doing

it right and getting the damned thing between his lips. Another surprise! Not only did I take a boy's cum up my ass (wasn't expecting that to happen), but I then managed to return the favor by cumming into his mouth. When I said this to Frankie, he laughed and happily nodded and told me, "Yeah, yeah, this was kinky!"

"You wore me out," I said. We were showering to clean away the sweat and the semen. Frankie had spit out most of my cum after catching it, and I told him, as he rinsed his mouth, that I didn't blame him. "It's foul stuff, I know, like a mouthful of bleach."

"I didn't want to offend you," Frankie grinned.

"No problem. You can spit it out any time."

"Duuude!"

"Would you be willing to do the whole job next time?"

"The whole blowjob?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Sure, Jake, I want to, I want to practice."

"You can practice till your jaw aches."

"Does everybody's stuff taste like that?"

"You mean bad?"

"Well, yeah."

"Only when you get older," I said. "A young boy's cum is another story altogether."

"Does it taste good?"

"It tastes sort of nutty, or sometimes sort of sweet and sour."

"Really?" "It's hard to describe," I kept saying. "It doesn't taste quite like anything else, you know, very organic, a living taste, that living spermy taste of a boy's own body, fresh-squeezed from his own balls."

"Jake, damn, you can drive me crazy sometimes, the way you talk!"

"Just trying to be helpful."

Frankie laughed and then told me that he also enjoyed "that other shit we did." I touched his penis and said, "You mean the fucking?"

"Yeah, exactly."

“I enjoyed it, too.” “Both ways?”

“Yes, both ways.”

“Me too,” Frankie nodded, squinting against the water on his face and in his eyes, then squinting even harder as he smiled. “Now I know why you like it so much!” “It feels good to get your cock in there and fuck, doesn’t it?”

The boy made a face like “come on, be serious, of course!” and then laughed again and finished rinsing.

I should have asked him earlier, when we were talking about blowjobs, if he’s been “practicing” on Pepper, but I forgot. And, come to think of it, he apparently still has never tasted another boy’s jizz. Right? Otherwise he wouldn’t have been wondering about it. So I guess he’s never had Pepper’s semen in his mouth. Not yet.

Something else about Pepper: When Frankie and I were dressing, I noticed him putting what looked like a tea bag on a string around his neck. I asked him about it and he said that he just started wearing it, that it is a tea bag, and that it contains a lock of Pepper’s hair. “From last night,” he explained.

“Pepper’s hair?” “Remember the spell from his magic book?”

“Vaguely.”

“If you cut a piece of someone’s hair while he’s sleeping,” the boy reminded me, “and do it without getting caught, and then wear it in a bag around your neck. . .”

“Or twisted around your finger as a ring. . .”

“That’s right,” Frankie said. “Remember? Then you’ll be the master of his affections, or the master of his heart, something like that.”

“You did it last night?”

“Yeah, when he was asleep, it was easy.”

“And you wear his hair in a tea bag? Very clever.”

Frankie held the little bag away from his chest to show it off, as if displaying a fancy new locket. “Yeah, dude, pretty cool. It was a stroke of genius.”

“Magic and voodoo and sorcery,” I said, intoning the words ominously, smiling. “So now what? Have you become the master of Pepper’s heart?”

“I hope so.” “Don’t worry,” I said, “he loves you already.”

“Seriously?”

“Sure, it’s obvious, he’s crazy about you.”

“He’s my first real boyfriend, I guess.”

“You have impeccable taste.”

“Dude, you found him first.”

“OK,” I said, kissing the boy, “we both have impeccable taste.”

Note: This is the weekend of Ryan’s final tournament. In Joliet. I hope he’s doing well.

Note: The Huckfeldts were here last night, mostly for Nintendo. Dally, however, is never interested in anything but reading our comic books together, always with my hand in his pants. A couple of times he’s had an orgasm while I’ve been fondling him, just as he did in the shower last month. JoJo also sits with us sometimes, and sometimes I get my hand on his crotch—on the outside of his pants—for a quick rub and squeeze, but he’s flighty and ticklish and never sits in one place for long, so I’ve never had a chance to jerk him off as I’ve done with his little brother, with Dally. Someday, though, I’m sure it’ll happen. It’ll definitely happen.

## MARCH 15

Drove out to see Doc. He finally made an appointment at some medical clinic here in Sandburg. For next Tuesday. He wondered what he should wear. “Anything clean,” I said, not sure if he was serious or joking. “You’re not going to a party.” Then he wondered where exactly, in Sandburg, this clinic might be located. I told him, you know, right next to Silver Cross Hospital, not far from the tobacco shop. You can



buy yourself some cigarettes while you're there. Doc said, "Oh yes, very funny." Why did he respond like that? There was nothing about my remark or my tone of voice that should have been interpreted as facetious, which begs the question: Why did Doc, always so sharp, misinterpret so badly? I'm beginning to fear the worst for him. Maybe Alzheimer's or something equally dreadful is what I'm saying, what I'm afraid to think. Then again, it might be nothing at all, nothing serious.

The strangest and most disturbing thing happened right before I left. Doc went into one of his tirades about boys and their baggy clothing, same old stuff, then produced a batch of typing paper and showed it to me, only to snatch it back and start ripping the pages into little pieces. It was his Morocco story, or at least the rough draft of it, that he was destroying while he muttered, "Here, Jacob, here is what I think of boys today in their idiot costumes, goddamn morons, like clowns, goddamn clowns, nothing but worthless imbeciles!" I tried to say something in defense of today's boys, that they remain as frisky as ever despite their unfortunate clothing, but Doc wasn't interested, even told me that I have a wild imagination, as if I've simply been fabricating the recent events of my life. "You're fooling yourself," he kept telling me, very red in the face. "Nothing out there but traitors and cowards. The stupidity of them. That's the worst. The stupidity of them year after year after year in their ridiculous get-ups, such happy idiots!"

There was more, but I finally stopped arguing with him and decided to leave.

It made me cry, just a few minutes ago, to recall Doc ripping up his manuscript. If he wanted to hurt me, to make me feel bad, then he did a swell job of it. But I don't think his anger was directed at me. I just happened to step into its path. Anyway, what can I do about it? He'll be seeing a doctor next week, so I just have to wait and hope for the best.

## LATER—SAME DAY

I talked to Frankie and told him about Doc, and he says that he'll go to the clinic on Tuesday to find out what's happening. Doc's appointment is at one o'clock, but Frankie says don't worry, he'll meet Doc at the clinic, his last period is a study hall, easy to cut, no problem. Don't get yourself into trouble, I warned him. But he insisted; he feels terrible that something might be wrong with Doc; he wants to help.

I've said it before, but it's worth repeating: Frankie is a wonderful boy, such a sweetie, he's the best.

## MARCH 17

This is St. Patrick's Day. I picked up a dinner of corned beef and cabbage at the White Star restaurant on my way home, then had some beer to finish the celebration.

Frankie's car was here when I got home, and Frankie himself was across the street at the Huckfeldt's, tossing a Frisbee around the front yard with Jimmy and JoJo. Every bit of snow has melted by now, so the boys had clear and dry ground for their game. With any luck, we've seen the last of this winter's snow. Spring is only a few days away, after all.

Anyway, I should get to the point: Frankie went to the clinic and met Doc, who was surprised to see the boy. Everything went well during the examination; no obvious problems. Doc's blood pressure is a little high, but otherwise he's in good shape. So the doctor wants the usual battery of tests to determine what might be causing his headaches and fatigue. That'll be next week, Wednesday, to be exact, which is my day off, which means I can be with him myself when he goes to the hospital, where the tests will be done. Why the hospital? Because Doc needs a brain scan, among other things, and only Silver Cross Hospital has the necessary machines—MRI, CAT-scan, whatever. In the meantime, I'll run over to Doc's house tomorrow to hear his version of events and to

arrange our rendezvous at the hospital next week. He probably hates all of this attention and fuss, but I don't care, I won't let him do this alone.

About Ryan: I saw in yesterday's newspaper that he managed one victory at the state finals over the weekend. His team did poorly once again, obviously overmatched whenever they venture beyond the local competition. I haven't heard from Ryan since our trip to Chicago, a silence that always worries me. You can't help starting to wonder: Did I scare the boy? Is he avoiding me? Has he told anyone about our escapade at the Holiday Inn? In Ryan's case, I'd say no to all of the above. But the anxiety, even so, is always there.

An interesting flip side to my own anxiety: Holly told me, just this morning at work, that Pepper is worried that I might be mad at him. I responded with proper disbelief, genuine disbelief. Why would he think such a thing? Holly shrugged and told me, "You don't call as much as before, I guess. Don't worry about it. He's just being a little pain."

"No, no, he's right," I said, well aware that Pepper and I have seen less and less of each other as I spend more and more time with Ryan and with the Huckfeldt boys. Plus I was sick for a couple of weeks. Plus Pepper himself has been busy with one thing or another, mostly with Marcus, his video-game pal. But we have seen each other! I'm surprised that he's been feeling anxious or insecure about the situation. Surprised, but also flattered and sort of pleased. I'm glad that he misses me.

## MARCH 18

Doc, as I predicted, tried to dissuade me from coming to the hospital next Wednesday. He says it's "foolish" for me to waste my time. Too bad, I told him, I'm coming anyway. He seemed OK today, better than he has been lately, not as worked up.

When I got back from Doc's, I decided to surprise Pepper by picking him up after school and taking him home, where he and his

mother and I played a game of Hero Quest and then shared a large supreme pizza from Luigi's, my treat. Pepper has a new tropical fish, a big Oscar, that he was eager to show me. He likes the big mean critters: Oscars, Angel fish, especially Siamese fighting fish, always nice to look at until they start eating one another. Between our game of Hero Quest and our pizza, while I was seated at the kitchen table, Pepper suddenly decided to sit on my lap. I have no idea why. One moment he was helping to put away the game board and the cards and the little game pieces, the next moment he was perched on my lap and asking me which of the Hero Quest characters is my favorite. I said probably the barbarian. He asked me, "Why the barbarian? Is he really your favorite?"

"I like him because he's big and strong and rough," I said. "What about you? Who's your favorite?"

"Can you guess?"

"Well, I'm not sure," I teased him. He felt surprisingly heavy on my lap, his bony butt pressed sharply against my thighs. He was positioned slightly sideways, and I was talking to his left profile. His hair has had over two months to grow back and get thick and fleecy, curled softly against the pointy tip-tops of his ears. That rat tail in back is gone, finally snipped when it got too long. His big glasses were resting low on his nose—always low like that, I've come to realize, because the bridge of his nose is wide and flat and provides no support. He kept playing along as I teased him, again asking me, "Can't you guess who my favorite is?"

"Hmm, well, maybe the wizard," I smiled. Pepper sort of bounced and grinned while trying, at the same time, to put on a face of comical disappointment, his "boo-hoo" face, saying, "How did you guess? It's not fair! How did you know?"

"It had to be the wizard," I said. "Just like the poster in your bedroom. And the picture you gave to me for Christmas. And your magic books! It had to be the wizard." I put my arms around him and hugged him to my chest and kissed the cocoa satin of his left cheek.

Holly, near the sink, looked at us and said, “Aw, how cute,” in her affectionately sardonic way. I invited Pepper, as we sat there, for a Saturday night sleepover. He glanced at his mother, who shrugged an indifferent OK, then he said, “I think I might be free.”

I bounced his bony behind on my knees. “Oh really? You think so? When will we know for sure?”

“We probably know right now,” he smiled, trying not to. “What’re we going to do?”

“Saturday night? Well, we can go see a movie,” I said, wishing I could add: “And then we can get naked and go to bed and I’ll suck on your dick for a while!”

Do you suppose he was thinking the same thing?

MARCH 20

This is Friday. Pepper comes tomorrow night.

I got my hair cut after work today. The shop is called A Cut Above, I’m sorry to say. I have a stylist, not a barber, even though I never ask for anything but an ordinary barbershop haircut. The stylist just does a better job of it, I guess. Her name is Margaret. When we started chatting today, the usual small talk, I realized how much my life has changed in the past few months. Only two haircuts ago, say last September, I could honestly and frankly tell Margaret everything I’d been up to, no need to be coy or evasive, nothing to hide. But today I had to monitor every word, every bit of information. My life has become a furtive undercover operation. She asked me, “So what’ve you been doing lately?”

“Not much,” I said, staring at our reflections in the mirror as we talked and as she snip-snipped my hair. “Same old boring routine.”

“Nothing exciting?”

“No, not really.”

“Taken any trips? Gone anywhere?”

“Yeah, I went to Chicago with a ten-year-old boy named Ryan Fox and jerked him off. It was his first orgasm. Really amazing.”

“Wow, that sounds like fun!”

“It was. I mean, you should see this kid! He’s a blond beauty, golden blond, perfect.”

“Yummy!”

“Just think if we remain friends, when he’s twelve, thirteen, fourteen, an adolescent Ryan, sucking him, having real sex.”

“Some guys have all the luck,” Margaret did not say, could never say, silly to imagine otherwise. All of my actual responses were a litany of “nothing new” and “same old stuff” and other prevarications, ironic that my made-up life becomes more and more boring as my private life—my real life—becomes increasingly hectic and crammed with illicit adventure.

## LATER—SAME DAY

I was washing my hair after getting back from A Cut Above, something I always do to clean away the loose hair and the perfumy conditioner that Margaret uses when I get shampooed, just finishing with my hair when a loud knocking started at the front door. It gets me every time, that knocking, that sound of storm troopers pounding with heavy fists, demanding entrance. But it was nothing so wildly dramatic, of course (or I wouldn’t be sitting here writing this). The door-pounder was JoJo Huckfeldt. Dally was with him. Jimmy, they told me, was at Anita’s house. JoJo was dressed in his Boy Scout uniform, fresh from an afterschool troop meeting and eager to rehearse the magic act that he’s going to be performing at some Scouting event next month. He had a cardboard box under his arm, and when he put it down I could see Hocus Pocus Magic Kit on the lid in big red letters. He insisted that Dally and I sit on the couch and be his audience.

JoJo’s entire act took about twenty minutes, most of it spent fumbling and fiddling and trying the same tricks over and over. He went

through the whole familiar parlor-magic repertoire: cutting a rope in half and putting it back together; making coins and balls disappear, and then reappear, inside a plastic cup; various “pick a card, any card” sleights of hand; pulling multi-colored scarves from inside his tan shirt (after planting them right in front of us). He also has a magic wand (which, of course, can become a bouquet of flowers) and even, I swear, a black plastic mustache that he wears clipped to his nose while performing—to make him look like a “professional magician,” he says.

After that first run-through of his act, JoJo decided to do it once more, but this time while being videotaped. I used a fresh cassette for the job, something he could take home with him when we were finished. This second performance of his was just as halting and clumsy as the first, although his rope trick had become more convincing with practice. Ryan, I have to admit, was right about JoJo, about him being awkward and uncoordinated (to put it kindly). There’s no grace or finesse to the kid at all. He stood there laboring at those tricks of his, no expression on his face, comical with that plastic mustache clipped to his nose. It’s understandable that other boys might not like him, might consider him a “spaz” or a “geek.” To me, on the other hand, he comes across as charmingly gauche and ungainly, loveably awkward.

Those “pick a card, any card” tricks are his favorites. He told me, “These ain’t tricks, they’s mentalism.”

“Mentalism?”

“I can read your mind!”

“Really?”

“Yeah! And you know what, Jake? You know what else? I can do hypmotism.”

“Hypnotism, you mean.”

“Yeah, hypmotism,” he repeated incorrectly. “It’s part of mentalism.”

“What can you do exactly?” “I can hypmotize Dally,” JoJo said. He used his finger like a slow-moving pendulum to cast his mesmeric spell, back and forth in front of Dally’s eyes, doing the whole “you’re getting

sleepy, very sleepy” routine. I forced myself not to laugh. Dally had apparently played this game before. He became “very sleepy” and let his eyes droop shut and then opened them again when his brother commanded him to “do a dance.” The little boy jumped to his feet and hopped around the room, waving his arms. Then JoJo told him to “be a dog, be like Mongo.” (Mongo is one of their noisy hounds.) Dally quickly dropped to his hands and knees and started barking in the deepest voice he could muster, which wasn’t very deep, sort of a terrier with asthma. It was that very asthma of his, in fact, that made him start coughing and brought him out of his so-called trance. JoJo snapped his fingers and said “wake up, wake up” as if still controlling the situation, playing his part right to the end.

Dally had his inhaler with him, luckily. He was OK after a few minutes. I gave him a swallow of pop when he settled down, then a hug and a kiss to comfort him and make him smile. We were on the couch together. He leaned against my side and took my hand, my right hand, and started sucking on my thumb, same way he sucks on his own thumb to relax himself and ease his breathing. JoJo felt left out, common with him, so leaned against my other side and started sucking on my other thumb. I must have looked ridiculous there on the couch with my hands up and my thumbs out like a confused hitchhiker, a boy attached to each one, suckling. Dally does it gently, his suckling, really just holding the thumb in his mouth, contented and babyish, sometimes even dozing off. JoJo, on the other hand, always manic, treated my thumb like a piece of candy, or like a chew toy, gnawing at it and tonguing it—like someone sucking on a dick, to be honest. I keep remembering the snowman that he and his brothers made in December, the snowman with the snowcock that JoJo merrily sucked and ate. It makes you wonder: Has he ever sucked the real thing? And if so, whose? Jimmy’s? Does he give blowjobs to Jimmy?

He had a great time with my hand, that’s for sure—and not just the thumb, but with all the fingers, putting them in his mouth and gnawing at them, sometimes hard enough to force an “ow” or a “hey, be careful”



from me as I sat there with an erection. Actually, I think the erection came when JoJo suddenly gave me his finger to suck. His middle finger. He turned himself so that he was looking at me and practically jammed it into my mouth. Not the cleanest thing, that finger of his, with its scuffed knuckle and its dirty, chewed-down nail, but the dirtiness of it made it that much more nasty and appealing. I held him by the wrist to keep him from pulling away. Such a phallic sensation, sucking on his finger like that, teething it and tonguing it and doing everything you'd do with an actual dick. JoJo must have felt the same way. He became wriggly with laughter and started jabbing me with his elbow. I kept my hold on his wrist and mumbled, still finger-sucking, "Are you having an orgasm?" I don't think JoJo was familiar with that word. He said, "I might be," then punched me (gently, thank goodness) between the legs, right on my erection—definitely had an erection by then—making me flinch so hard I almost levitated. Of course JoJo was delighted by this and gave me another jab to the crotch, and then Dally jabbed me from the other side, and then JoJo again. He could feel the hardness inside my pants, apparently, because he suddenly asked, "Jake, Jake, why do guys get boners?"

"They get excited," I said, finally taking JoJo's finger from my mouth. "You know. Excited, turned on, like for sex. Or sometimes there's no reason. It just happens."

"In the shower?"

"Sometimes."

"When you wake up?"

"Yeah, then too."

"And in the bathtub," Dally volunteered. I said, "And at school, and at McDonald's, and when you're watching TV."

"And then y'all get an orgasm?" JoJo asked.

"Yeah, well, possibly."

"Is an orgasm like a really big boner?"

"No, no," I said. I put one arm around Dally, who snuggled and went back to sucking his own thumb, and my other arm around JoJo,

who always becomes punchy and squirmy whenever you try to hug him or hold him. He kept jabbing at me with his elbow and wriggling and poking at my crotch—or, maybe you could say, feeling at my erection with his fist, which is what he was doing, really. I said, “No, no, an orgasm is what happens to your boner if you rub it, you know, jerk off.”

“Oh yeah,” Dally mumbled from behind his thumb. JoJo said, “Jack off not jerk off!” I looked puzzled, so he repeated, “It’s jack off not jerk off!”

“Either way,” I said. “Jack off, jerk off, beat off, whack off, all the same.”

“Whack off,” both boys echoed, laughing. The phone rang at that point. It was Pepper. He wanted to know about tomorrow, to make sure he’s still coming here. JoJo heard me discussing this and, when I hung up, started badgering me about spending the night at my house. I didn’t know how to answer. It’s so complicated. I mean, I’d like the Huckfeldt boys to stay overnight, but I’m afraid that their parents might find it strange—their sons sleeping here, with me, for no apparent reason. They live just across the street, after all. Why would they stay here? For what? To have sex, yes, I know—but how do you explain that to Mom and Dad? Also, having the Huckfeldts here—tomorrow night, for example, with Pepper—would produce such messy confusion, such stress. Forget about being alone with Pepper, about enjoying a peaceful night together, about (maybe, I hope) some serious kissing and cuddling and lovemaking with him. Forget about all that. The lovemaking part might still happen, I suppose, some combination of masturbating and/or sucking carried out surreptitiously after midnight, after the lights go out and the Huckfeldts have fallen asleep, maybe even after some kind of sexy shenanigans with the Huckfeldts themselves. Sure, it might be fun, it might be wild and exciting, all of them here together, Pepper and JoJo and Dally and Jimmy, god only knows what might happen. Fantasies galore. Orgy time. But I don’t want the noise and the commotion and the risk that the Huckfeldts always bring with them, not tomorrow, not for Pepper’s first overnight visit in almost two months. (Hard to believe!

Almost two months! It was my illness in February that really screwed us up. So many wasted weeks! Well, not wasted. I've had plenty of fun with Frankie and Dally and Ryan, but still. . .)

Anyway, I gave JoJo my usual answer, something like, "One of these days, if your parents say it's OK, I guess so, sure." The momentum of our earlier discussion had been derailed by Pepper's phone call. My erection was gone. JoJo wanted to watch the video of himself performing his magic tricks. While that was happening, Jimmy showed up to fetch his brothers for supper. He'd been at Anita's house, of course, and spent a few minutes bragging about the blowjob he'd just gotten from her. (Oral sex seemed to be the theme of the day.) I said, "That's nice," in an overly blasé and casual way, trying to disguise my agitation. Dally, my little ally, said, "That's nice," in the same indifferent way. Jimmy was annoyed by this and said, "You fuckers don't believe me," and then unfastened and pushed down his khaki pants and his underwear to show us the evidence. "See there," he boasted, "my pecker is still red. That there is red from sex, you fuckers!" And it was. Extremely red. Hanging thick. More pubic hair than even Frankie, I think. Jimmy was holding up his shirt to show himself to us, to me. "See," he said again, "that's from sex, man, no shit."

"It's red," I nodded. Jimmy stepped closer just to make extra sure I could see him in detailed close-up. His penis, soft, is an average three-to-four inches, but it's thick and hangs out instead of down, just like Dally's and JoJo's. I nodded again, happy to give my approval if that's what the boy wanted, wondering if he also wanted me to touch it. I reached out and pinched the air with my fingers, just an inch or two from him, testing his response. Flirty rascal, he backed away one step and grinned with his evil-demon chuckle and called me a "pervert." Dally laughed. JoJo glanced around from watching his video to see what was happening. I said, "Hey, you're the one with your dick hanging out, not me!"

Jimmy chuckled again and took off his camouflage Jack Daniel's cap and, like a modest little virgin, held it over his genitals. "You're

makin me embarrassed,” he said, not very convincingly. JoJo told him, “Jimmy, Jimmy, if your pecker was hard y’all could hang your hat on it!”

“If it was hard,” Dally agreed.

“Stupid,” Jimmy said. He took his cap away and put it back on and pulled up his underpants. They were his special underpants, I realized, the ones with the cartoon pictures of guys and girls fucking. I pointed them out, and Jimmy said, “Yeah, man, these here. Ain’t they cool?”

“Nice.”

“Sexy thang,” the boy said with a shimmy of his hips, khaki trousers still down. He grabbed the underpants with thumbs in the waistband and fingers in the crotchbands and hiked them up, way up and so tight that the underpants became nothing but a pouch over his big bulge. “You like this here?” he asked, teasing and teasing. I said, “Yeah, you sexy thang,” mimicking his drawl.

He and his brothers went home for supper a few minutes later.

## MARCH 21

Pepper brought his saxophone with him this evening. He’s getting pretty good at it after all these months. He grinned, nodding, when I complimented him.

He’s grown two or three inches since October, I bet. It’s most noticeable when I stand next to him, or when I hug him—when I can no longer rest my chin on the curly top of his head. I probably could if I stood on my toes and stretched, but he’s taller, definitely taller, sprouting into puberty.

He asked, early on, if Frankie was coming over. No, I said, he was here last Saturday, and I think he’s busy tonight, and hey, you guys were together last Friday, right? You stayed overnight at his house, didn’t

you? Pepper shook his head no, then fought against a smile and made a little pitiful whimper and said, "It's a secret!"

"A secret?"

"Aren't you mad?"

"About you staying with Frankie? No. No way. You guys are friends. Did you have fun?"

Pepper was fiddling with the camcorder, peering through it as we talked. A defensive tactic? Keeping a secure space between us? He nodded, still peering through the eyepiece. I asked, "Did you both sleep in Frankie's bed?" He nodded again. I asked, "Did you sleep naked?" He nodded yet again. He was aiming the empty camcorder at the front door. I smiled, even though he wasn't looking at me, and said, "My oh my, you naughty boys!" Pepper swung the camcorder from side to side and whined, "No, no, no, no, no. . ." I kept prodding him, saying, "I'm sure Frankie had a good time! He really, really likes you."

"He does?"

"Pepper, Pepper, he loves you," I said, remembering the lock of hair that Frankie stole to work his spell. I took the camcorder from the boy's hands and kissed his forehead. Suddenly he asked, "Is Frankie gay?" What a strange question! "Of course," I said. "You know he is. We've talked about it before."

"Why is he gay?"

"I don't know. Some guys are attracted to girls, some are attracted to boys. Like Frankie. And like me."

"And like Doc?"

"Yeah, also Doc. Some guys love girls and boys both. It can be sort of confusing, I know. Not everybody grows up and gets married and has kids. People are all different. Right? Does that make sense?"

Pepper nodded and shrugged in one ambivalent gesture, then pushed up his glasses and let me kiss him on the forehead one more time. I said, "This sex stuff can get complicated. But remember, it's all about enjoying yourself. Having fun. Not hurting anybody else, but having fun. With girls, with other guys, whatever."

“I’ve seen it on TV,” Pepper told me. What “it” is that he’s seen on TV, I don’t know, but he seemed satisfied with our facts-of-life discussion and I didn’t want to push any further and spoil the moment. I just said, “Yeah, good, so that’s all settled,” and then started talking about our plans for dinner (tacos from Casa Sierra) and a movie (The Man In The Iron Mask, with Leonardo DiCaprio, very cute, he always reminds me of Frankie). But before Pepper and I could manage our escape, we were swarmed by the Huckfeldts. Jimmy came swaggering inside and spotted Pepper and started calling him “Peppy”—again chewing that horrid tobacco of his, spitting the juice into a Budweiser cup, looking for trouble. They (the Huckfeldts) wanted to play Nintendo, but I said no, there wasn’t time. Both JoJo and Dally started badgering me again about staying overnight. Not this time, I told them. Sorry. Dally took my hand and said, “But next time, Jake! Ain’t that right?”

“Our mom and dad don’t care none,” JoJo added.

“You asked them?”

“Fuck yes!”

“About staying here? For the whole night?”

“Fuck yes,” JoJo said again. “They said we oughta stay here tonight!”

I said, “Hard to believe. You must’ve hypnotized them.”

“Maybe I did,” JoJo nodded with his familiar starey-serious expression. That began a noisy conversation among all the boys about hypnosis and mentalism and mind control. Pepper, who had been inspecting the little blue dagger tattooed on Jimmy’s right hand, suddenly dared JoJo to hypnotize him. JoJo accepted the challenge and took Pepper by the shoulders and sat him on the couch and quickly began his “you’re getting sleepy, very sleepy” routine. Pepper lasted only a few seconds before he was overcome by a fit of giggly laughter. JoJo poked him in the shoulder to make him stop. Dally, sitting beside him, did the same. But the poking only made Pepper more and more giggly. He managed to compose himself just once, for just a moment or

two, before Jimmy got all of them laughing again when he said, “Come on, man, hypnotize Peppy there and make him jack off!”

Laughter, actually, was just one of the varied responses to Jimmy’s comment: JoJo nodded and continued as if he considered the idea a good one; Dally laughed the hardest and then stuck the head of his Power Ranger (yes, he still carries it) into his own mouth, like stopping a bottle with a cork; Pepper made a startled laughing noise with a panicky look on his face, half convinced, I think, that the other boys and I might be serious about Jimmy’s proposal. Hell, I think the Huckfeldts were serious about it! I even waited myself to see what would happen, not interfering, watching as Pepper became giggly once more and finally frustrated JoJo’s best efforts to mesmerize him. (I realize now that JoJo is dead serious about his hypnosis. He thinks it’s real.)

So, no, Pepper didn’t “jack off” for our amusement. The Huckfeldts left after I practically shoved them out the door. Dally, by the way, had responded to Jimmy’s proposal by not only laughing but also by volunteering to take Pepper’s place, to “get hypmotized and jack off.” In the clamor, though, no one except me seemed to hear him or take notice, and nothing came of it. I mentioned this whole episode to Pepper when we were in the car, on our way to the multiplex, saying, “Those Huckfeldts are really crazy,” and, “Jimmy can be so weird,” and other comments like that. Pepper agreed, and laughed, and said yeah, they’re funny. I said, “You know, I bet one of them really would jerk off and let everybody else watch!”

Pepper asked, “Which one?”

I said, “Heck, any one of them!”

“Probably JoJo would for sure,” Pepper said, putting more thought into the notion that I’d expected.

“Any one of them would,” I repeated.

“Would Dally?”

“He’d try.”

“Would Jimmy do it?”

“Oh, I think Jimmy would do it for anyone, anywhere, anytime.”

“Would he have to be hypnotized?”

“No,” I laughed. It’s always fun to talk dirty with Pepper—with any young boy—so I decided to keep the conversation going. “Jimmy would be happy to jerk off and let anybody watch, I’m sure.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s a show-off.”

“Would he be embarrassed?”

“Nothing embarrasses the Huckfeldt brothers. They want to stay overnight, by the way. They keep asking me. Did you hear them?”

“You should let them,” Pepper advised.

“You think so?”

“They’d be funny.”

“And,” I said, comical excitement in my voice, “we could all have a jerk-off contest together!”

Pepper looked at me to see if I was joking or serious, then put one hand over his eyes and made that embarrassed laughing noise like soft gurgling. I asked him, “Who would win, do you think?” Pepper shrugged. I gave him a tweak between the legs and said, “Maybe Jimmy?”

“I don’t know the rules,” Pepper said.

“Well, I don’t either. We’ll have to figure them out,” I said. We were at the theater by then. On our way inside, Pepper said, “Will the Huckfeldts be staying tonight? At your house?”

“Not tonight,” I told him. “You and I deserve some time alone. For a change. Too many other people lately. No privacy.” I put my hand on his shoulder as we waited in line for our tickets. After that we talked about tamer, safer topics: his new fish, his favorite Nintendo games, his possible move to Joliet this summer. He says that his mom “definitely wants to go.” But not him. He hates the idea, I can tell, even though he doesn’t come right out and say it. I can understand his anxiety and displeasure. Losing his friends, going to a new school, leaving behind



the house where he's spent his entire life—not easy for a twelve-year-old boy.

The movie was good. Pepper liked it. Leonardo DiCaprio was adorable, as always. He and Frankie could be brothers, I swear, with their blond hair and dark eyebrows and dimply cheeks. Even Pepper noticed the resemblance. When I mentioned it, he said, “Maybe they’re twins, like in the movie, and got separated at birth.”

“Except,” I said, “Frankie is only sixteen years old.”

“That might be a problem,” Pepper said, which made both of us laugh.

I thought, speaking of Frankie, that he might call tonight, but he didn’t—at least not while I was here at the house. He keeps himself very busy with friends (his “buds”), with parties, with family activities. You might imagine, his being a gay teenager, that he’d be unhappy, maladjusted, moody—but, in fact, he’s as friendly and happy-go-lucky as any boy I’ve ever known. He shatters all the stereotypes, that kid.

At home, I needed to tend to an air lock in the pipes. In other words, air had somehow gotten into the cold-water pipes and, when the water was turned on, was causing the plumbing to clank and rattle like a Jamaican steel-drum band. To fix the problem, I needed to go into the basement, shut off the cold water and run the pipes empty to eliminate the air pocket. Simple enough—until the handle on the valve stuck, goddamn thing, finally it came loose with some WD-40 but then wouldn’t re-shut tight, kept dripping from around the stem. It needed to be wrapped with new bushing, which looks and feels like sticky black string. Pepper was in the basement with me, watching my little comedy of errors. The leaky valve is up near the ceiling. I asked Pepper if he’d like to give me a hand and wrap the bushing around the stem. He likes to fool around with mechanical things, with tools, with little electric motors, and he was happy to play plumber and be my helper. So I

dragged over a chair for him to stand on and gave him instructions, step by step, talking him through the simple procedure: Just loosen the nut and wrap the bushing and then tighten the nut back onto the wrapped stem, which is sticky and makes the nut hard to turn and takes a strong arm on the wrench.

I was standing beside him while he reached and stretched and strained, my hand on his hip to steady him, actually on his butt more than his hip. He was wearing jungle-striped athletic pants, orange and black ones, tiger-striped. A gray sweatshirt came down over the seat of his pants. My hand was underneath it, on the blousy fabric, where I could feel the flex of his ass cheek as he rocked from heel to toe in his struggle with the big, heavy wrench. Finally I took over for the last few turns of the wrench to snug the nut, while giving Pepper enthusiastic credit for his hard work. He asked, "Is there something else we can fix?" No, I said, but Pepper wanted to stay in the basement anyway to explore all of the old tools and bicycle parts and broken radios and other dirty, mysterious treasures hidden in every cobwebby corner. Lawn chairs, toys, empty paint cans, storm windows—all busted up, all discarded and forgotten, all fascinating to Pepper. I hung around and watched as the boy rummaged.

He finally retrieved an old Zenith radio from the mess and toted it upstairs with him and spent a contented hour taking it apart bit by bit, screw by screw, wire by wire. "Could make a robot from this," I heard him say while he tinkered, more to himself than to me. It was after ten o'clock by then. The news was on TV. (Nothing lately about Kurt Randall, whose trial begins this month. Just as well. Too depressing.) I was getting a little antsy and impatient, I admit. Feeling horny. Wondering what might happen in the next few hours. I stripped to my underwear and rested on the hide-a-bed and tried to concentrate on the news. Pepper was on the floor with his pile of radio parts. He took a break to use the bathroom, went to the kitchen, came back with a can of root beer and a handful of Oreo cookies. He looked at me when he

returned and we smiled at each other, then he gave me two of his cookies and went back to his tinkering on the floor. I could see the left side of his head, his left profile, from where I was resting. I'd swear that his Adam's apple, always prominent, has gotten larger in the last several weeks, another sign of advancing puberty, Pepper gradually becoming a gangly adolescent before my eyes. Not yet. Not a gangly adolescent yet. Still in the earliest, prettiest bloom of his body's change. But the transformation has begun.

I asked him, "Do you need a shower?" He said, "No, I don't think so." A few minutes later I asked, "Are we sleeping naked tonight?" Pepper, now lying belly-down on the floor so that I could see only the top of his head, said, "Oh yeah, that's right," in that same phony surprised voice he used last time we slept together, just the two of us. I said, "In that case, I'll get comfortable," and took off my underwear. The weather has warmed nicely in the last week or so; it's officially springtime, starting today; the house is comfortable and being naked felt good, no covers necessary, no chills, no goosebumps. Pepper raised himself above the edge of the mattress to peek at me, to see what I was doing to "get comfortable." His glasses were resting on the tip of his nose. He smiled just slightly and pushed up the glasses and asked me, "Is it time for bed already? Is it late?"

"It's getting late," I said. "Whenever you're ready, you can come to bed."

"Pretty soon."

"It's up to you," I said. The boy was watching me with that mysterious little grin I know so well. He pointed to the Sony camcorder on the table next to me. It was positioned and aimed to record whatever might occur on the bed, needing only to be activated. Pepper asked, "Does JoJo still make movies?"

"He likes the camcorder," I nodded, then briefly described his latest performance, from yesterday—his magic act. I also described the "movie" that he and his brothers made with Frankie when I was sick. Pepper had never seen it. He asked, "Is it funny?" I said, "Yeah, it's

funny, very dirty, raunchy. Should we watch it?” “OK, you can put it on,” Pepper agreed. I got up to do just that. I felt sort of awkward, being naked, walking around, but I kept my mouth shut, said nothing, tried to make the situation appear as natural and run-of-the-mill as possible. Then we watched the tape, starting with a segment from the very beginning of February: JoJo mooning the camera, then JoJo and Dally posing side by side and flashing their wieners with the voices of Jimmy and Ryan—off camera—trading vulgarities and insults behind the action. Pepper found that amusing, and glanced back at me as he laughed. I was lying on my stomach on the mattress, watching both the video and the back of Pepper’s head. He was still on the floor, still fiddling with screws and wires and other radio guts. He focused more intently on the TV screen when the next segment started, the one beginning with everybody peeing between Dally’s legs into the toilet and ending with Frankie and Jimmy humping on the La-Z-Boy. I was watching all of this with an erection pressed stiffly between my stomach and the mattress. I could reach Pepper easily from where I was. He was on the floor just below me at the foot of the sofa bed, on his side with his head propped up on one hand. I could reach him easily, as I said, just by letting my arm hang off the end of the mattress. So I rested my hand on his hip. The boys on the tape were dirty-dancing, first Jimmy and JoJo, then Jimmy and Frankie. Right at the end, Jimmy goes “uh, uh, uh!” and then jumps up and yells, “No boners allowed! No boners allowed in this fuckin house!” Pepper glanced back at me again and laughed an uncertain laugh and asked, “Why did he say that?”

“Good question. I’m not sure,” I said. Stop being such a pussy, I thought to myself. You and Pepper have gone a lot farther than this in the past. You’ve ejaculated onto him, for Chrissake! You’ve tried jerking him off a couple of times! Don’t be such a coward. Go ahead and feel him, I told myself. So I did. I used one hand to rewind and replay the segment we’d just seen, then put my other hand on the front of Pepper’s tiger-striped pants and found his soft penis through the lightweight cotton and proceeded to squeeze and massage it until I was

squeezing and massaging a fully aroused hard-on. Pepper pretended not to notice, only became more nervously chatty as we watched the video for a second time, saying things like, “That part is funny,” and, “Who’s holding the camera?” and, “Jimmy’s doing his weird dance,” and again, “Why did he say that?”

“About the boners? No boners allowed? Probably because he had one and didn’t know what else to say or do.”

“He had one?” “I asked Frankie about it after.”

“And he said so?”

“Yeah, he did, Frankie said they both had boners by then. Just like you, buddy boy!”

“Not like me!”

“Just like you,” I teased him again. “What’s this hard thing in your pants?” “It might not belong to me,” the boy said, then broke down laughing, one of those helpless laughs that sounds almost like a sob when he tries to stifle it but finally surrenders. I used my thumb to tug down the front of his beltless pants and his underpants. “I’d say this thing definitely belongs to you,” I said, showing Exhibit A, giving it air, making Pepper sob-laugh once more and roll onto his belly to dislodge my hand and hide his erect meat.

When the video finished, I decided to issue another invitation to Pepper for a late-night shower. Again he declined, saying he was too tired, maybe later. “When later?” I asked him. He said, “Maybe tomorrow.” I stood up with my dick sticking out hard and asked, “Tomorrow? But you’ll be leaving tomorrow.” Pepper said, “I’ll be here in the morning.” He glanced at me standing there, then glanced away. I didn’t try to cover myself. I had an erection; Pepper had an erection. Good. No big deal. Boys with boners. One old boy and one young boy. Perfectly ordinary. Natural.

I ended up taking a shower on my own. Not a long one. Quick. I was horny, nervous, eager to get back to Pepper. It never occurred to me, I swear, that he would be asleep when I returned. But there he was, still in the same spot on the floor, fetally curled, hugging his own knees. In

fact, I didn't know he was asleep (or pretending to be asleep) until I started talking to him and got no response. Stepping closer, softly calling his name, I still couldn't rouse him. What else could I do? I had given him hint after hint about getting naked and getting cozy, all with no success. Really, truly, what more could I do?

I could try one final time, that's what. I crouched beside Pepper and took off his glasses and gave him a gentle tickle in the ribs. His lips curled in a smile, and he moaned a little noise of protest, but he didn't open his eyes. He was awake, though. Obviously awake. I pulled off his white socks and said, "Come on, buddy, time to get undressed." He made another grumpy mewling noise, still with a grin playing at the corners of his mouth, betraying him. I tugged at the waistband of his pants, telling him again that it was time for bed, time to get undressed, let's go. He hugged his knees tighter and said, "A little later," in a dreamy-drowsy voice. So I gave up, and I got into bed by myself, and I waited for Pepper to make an eventual move, to do or say something, maybe to join me. But I was asleep before any of those things could happen. When I woke around three o'clock, Pepper was still on the floor and, by that time, genuinely asleep, totally out. I turned off the TV, rechecked the front door (couldn't remember if I'd locked it), then hoisted the boy in both arms and put him onto the bed. He never opened his eyes. I didn't try to undress him or touch him.

No, I didn't try. Pepper wasn't interested in playing. It was like starting over—being with him tonight—as if we'd time-traveled back to last year, to the first timid months of our friendship. Back and forth with him, always back and forth, impossible to anticipate his mood, his attitude, his willingness to experiment, to play. Did something happen with Frankie that I don't know about? Has Pepper decided that he doesn't like "gay" stuff anymore? Or was he just tired? I don't have an answer.

## MARCH 22

Those were my thoughts last night. Now let me tell you what happened next:

The room was still dark, just the dimmest glow of streetlights through the windows, when I opened my eyes and rolled over and checked on Pepper. He wasn't there, a confusing disappearance until I realized that he was using the bathroom, which is why I'd woken up, most likely. Then the toilet flushed and he came shuffling back to bed, still wearing his pants and sweatshirt. He stretched out on his side, facing me, and seemed surprised to find me staring back at him across the gap between our pillows. Don't think about sex, I told myself. Don't think about it. Don't torture yourself. I reached across to him and put my hand on his cheek and stroked his lips with my thumb, whispering, "Go to sleep, go to sleep. . ." I stroked his lips, then his chin with its fingerprint dimple, then again slowly across his big and moist and pouty bottom lip, thumb-stroking it as he relaxed and dozed, his mouth also relaxing, opening slightly, my thumb grazing his front teeth, feeling the warmth of his mouth, his breath. I leaned closer and kissed those lips, something I never get to do when he's awake. I kissed him again. I touched his teeth with my tongue. I pressed my lips against his in a third kiss, holding my hand behind his head, my fingers buried in the thick fleece of his hair. Then I let him sleep.

He was gone again when I awoke, ready for coffee and breakfast, at nine o'clock. Busy boy. Where was he this time? I stayed where I was, letting my empty stomach rumble, finally noticing the noise of softly whooshing and drumming water. So Pepper was in the bathroom again. In the shower. Strange. Maybe last night was a sort of test—seeing how I'd behave, if I could be trusted, Pepper testing his own control over our little arrangement. And maybe I passed his test. By letting him sleep and keeping my hands off, maybe I passed, and convinced him anew that he's in charge.

I got up finally and started the coffee, then knocked on the bathroom door and went in, saying, "Sorry, Pepper, but I'm going to explode if I don't pee."

"I can understand," he said, very politely. He was already in his Fruit of the Loom briefs, having dried himself except for his hair, which he was still rubbing with the towel, creating a wild fluff of curls. I stood and peed. Pepper was to my right, slightly behind me. I was in my boxers. Peeing was difficult, my dick half erect and uncooperative. I said, "Remember that time when JoJo couldn't pee because his pecker was too hard?"

"When we made the snowman?"

"I think it was the same day," I nodded. "Now I've got the same problem."

"You do?"

"Nasty thang," I said, doing a Huckfeldt drawl, getting even harder, finally managing to finish anyway at a messy angle, getting most of the urine out. I decided to brush my teeth while I was in the bathroom. Pepper was directly behind me. We watched each other's reflections in the toothpaste-speckled mirror above the sink. Drying and drying his hair, suddenly he said, "I made a mistake and my underwear is too wet."

"What kind of mistake?"

"I didn't dry good enough," Pepper said. "Now they're too wet."

"You're right," I said, glancing over my shoulder with a mouthful of foam, ready to rinse and spit, "they're all blotchy."

"I have other ones. In my bag. I'll change," the boy said. Then, as if rewarding me for last night, he peeled off the soggy underpants and stood naked behind me and waited while I finished brushing. The brush must have been trembling in my hand. I rinsed hastily and wiped my mouth and turned to Pepper and took the towel and the underpants from his hands, set them aside, smiled at him. His skinny penis was just slightly stiffened, not much, like a little brown snake stretching, lifting its head. I ran one finger down between his nipples, down his tummy,



down to his groin whiskered with pubic hair, much more of it now than two months ago, too many hairs to count, quite a lot for a twelve-year-old. I told him so, and kept petting him there with my one finger, also touching his penis now with my other hand, fingering it, flicking it, watching it lift its snaky one-eyed head and stretch up hard, totally hard, a baby viper ready to strike. I took him by the shoulders and turned him and walked him to the living room—one hand still on his shoulder, the other on the right cheek of his bare butt, holding it and squeezing it as he walked. “Clean underpants,” I said when we entered the living room. “In your bag?” The boy nodded and hurried forward, but not to the bag, instead to the pile of comic books next to the bed, quickly grabbing one, any one, then flopping onto the mattress with it, on his back, saying, “We need to read this first!”

“Good idea,” I said, getting into position beside him. Something odd about this, I was thinking, then realized what it was: We were naked (I had taken my boxers back off) and we were about to mess around, this boy and I, but the room was bright with daylight, with morning sunshine, not dark, not dim with the TV’s flicker, not the traditional midnight lair of shadows and secrets. Bright daylight instead, suddenly no secrets, no hiding, Pepper ready after a night of anxiety and hesitation, his dick impatiently hard, jumpy, curved to the left and pointed away from me and swollen with blood, blushing along the shaft, blushing even redder at the knob.

He held the comic book up toward me, urging me to read, to begin. I reached beneath it and took him in my hand and commenced a slow and steady stroking while looking at the comic and doing an improvised narration of the story, simply describing the pictures (“ . . . there’s Spider-Man on the roof, and he doesn’t even know the Cyborg guy is behind him, could be dangerous, but OK, his spider sense is working, he knows something is wrong. . .”). I couldn’t concentrate well enough to do an actual reading of it word by word, with character voices and sound effects. Pepper didn’t care about the damn story and neither did I, just something to do while jerking off, something to fill the silence as my

hand pumped him and then, after a minute or two or three, as my other hand took his and put it on my own erection and used it to masturbate, his fingers under mine, his fingers wrapped directly around my dick. I let go of his hand eventually and he kept moving it up and down anyway, good boy, same rhythm, automatic, still clutching the comic book with his other hand, trying to hold it steady. As you'd expect, his hand on my dick brought quick results, only a couple of minutes and I was helplessly orgasmic, ridiculously out of control, such a mess, splat splat splat, no way to catch it. I laughed at myself, at the mess I'd made with Pepper's assistance. He met my eyes and also made a tense laughing noise. I was still masturbating him, of course, finally pausing just long enough to wipe myself with the sheet, saying, "This needs to be washed anyway, right?"

"Right," Pepper said. The comic book was still in his hand, but apparently forgotten, held off to his left side where I couldn't even see it, even if I'd tried or cared. But I didn't, no way, only one thing important now, the thing between Pepper's legs, the thing that Pepper was holding now in his own hand, not even waiting for me to continue, doing it himself, holy shit, beating off right in front of me. His romance with Frankie has made him bolder. He knows what he wants, knows what feels good, knows how to do it—still bashful about it at times, about getting started, initiating the action—but he knows, he understands now, he loves it. I didn't interrupt him, not for a while, happy to watch him masturbate, his Adam's apple bobbing every time he swallowed, must have had a dry mouth, swallowing every few seconds, his eyes fixed blearily (without their glasses) on the comic book still clutched pointlessly in his left hand, as if staring at porno instead of only Spider-Man, just somewhere to aim his gaze and take the edge off his embarrassment as he pounded and pounded at his own meat. I murmured a few words of encouragement, letting my hand slip between his legs, under his balls where he was still damp from his shower, coaxing his thighs apart, feeling into his crack, even damper there, nice and slippery.

I kept waiting. I watched as he slumped, as he finally allowed the comic to drop from his hand, as he kept swallowing like someone fighting back nausea. OK, I told myself, this is it, this is when it's all going to happen, and to Pepper I said, "We'll do it Frankie's way," a bit cowardly, as if to say, "This is Frankie's idea, not mine, so blame him if you don't like it." Then, before the moment could escape, I bent over Pepper and nudged away his hand and took his penis into my mouth. I don't know if he looked surprised or alarmed or delighted. I couldn't see his face, only his belly and balls and thighs. But the fierce stiffness of his throbby goatboy hard-on told me everything I needed to know as I sucked him and sucked him and sucked. It turned into a full, lingering, very complete blowjob, minute after minute of every trick I could summon to make the boy thrill and tremble—sucking him, licking him, licking at his nuts and then under them and around them in wet and teasing circles, tonguing upward along the dick itself and then down again and up again to get at the knob and lick it, suck it, then using the tip of my tongue to tease the pee-slit and to rim the whole knob, tracing the collar of skin around and around where knob meets shaft, then back to the very tip of the knob and the little slit, kissing right there, kissing and sucking at the little pee-slit as if I could force Pepper to cum by inhaling the juice from his testicles, using his boner like a straw.

Fifteen or twenty minutes of this, on and on until I needed just a momentary pause, a chance to flex my neck and catch my breath. But the last thing Pepper wanted was a pause. No stopping him this time. No giving up. He grabbed himself again and resumed a frantic pumping with his own fist. I leaned on my elbow and watched him, a fleshy thwap thwap thwap of fisted dick, sunlight from the window behind us turning his skin glossy, brightest and glossiest on the roundness of his thighs, the shadow of his own head across his chest, his eyes half shut, his mouth opening and closing as he breathed and swallowed, breathed and swallowed. And then, as I watched him, Pepper tightened in every muscle—and he ejaculated. The head of his dick was suddenly shiny

with its own leakage. No spurting or gushing. Nothing spectacular. He's only twelve. But he was definitely and visibly having an orgasm and seeping from the cock. I leaned forward and quickly got the thing into my mouth and sucked it and tasted the mildly cummy flavor still warm from the boy's nuts. The sucking made Pepper quiver and go rigid at the hips and push at my head to stop the sweetly unbearable torture—like all young boys, flustered by the agony of pleasure, confusing it with some new type of pain. Ryan was the same way a few weeks ago. Amazing! First Ryan. Now Pepper. Both in the same month. I can hardly believe it.

Pepper's orgasm left him absolutely knocked out. I think the hormonal comedown also was making him feel a little weird, a little vulnerable, a normal reaction. I cuddled him and hugged him and tried to make him feel safe. I decided, after a couple minutes of silence, to talk about what had just happened, afraid that Pepper might interpret our silence as a confirmation of something sneaky, shameful, hush-hush. He was still on his back with his sex-reddened wiener flopped sideways on his left thigh. (How different from the Pepper I first met in October, lying there like that, so utterly exposed.) I held him, joking with him, telling him, "Now you're ready for that jerk-off contest with the Huckfeldts."

"I am?"

"I'd say so. Good form, good stroke. You're a top performer," I told him. Pepper grinned and said, "Maybe JoJo hypnotized me. Maybe I'm still hypnotized right now."

"That could be," I laughed. "You're Jimmy and JoJo's jerk-off slave from now on."

"Forever?"

"Until they release you. It's fun, though, right? Seriously. It feels good, doesn't it?"

Pepper nodded. I waited, kissed him on the cheek, asked, "Do you know what it means to cum? To sperm?" The boy nodded again. I said, "That's what you did just now. So you know that already? You know

about having an orgasm and ejaculating and how that all works? Cum, sperm, semen?”

The boy exhaled a little laugh and said, “Yes, I know,” in a patient, polite way.

“I guess you’ve seen it happen with me,” I said. “And with Frankie. You’ve probably even talked about it with Frankie.”

“Yeah.”

“Has it happened to you before?”

“A few times.”

“Really? How many?” “I guess maybe, like, maybe four or five times. I’m not sure.”

“Wow,” I said, trying to hide my selfish and stupid disappointment, wishing it had been his first. “Four or five? What about with Frankie? Any times with him?”

“I think maybe two times,” Pepper said. “Or three.”

“Wow,” I said again. When did it all happen? Here? At Frankie’s house? In Frankie’s car? Where? When? Three times Pepper has cum with Frankie, three times, and I didn’t even know about it! Why didn’t Frankie say something? Did he think I’d be upset? Possibly. Then again, maybe Pepper was just fibbing, just boasting. That’s also possible, I guess. Anyway, even if it is true, why should I expect to know every detail of Pepper’s sex life? Or Frankie’s? Some things, I suppose, should just remain personal, special—and private.

While Pepper and I were talking, I suddenly remembered the camcorder. I hadn’t even turned it on! I’d completely forgotten about the goddamn thing. Imagine—Pepper’s first cum (with me, at least) and I didn’t even get it on tape! Terrible. Makes me sick. I could be watching it right now, watching Pepper masturbate and get sucked and leak cum, watching all of it—but I fucked up, and the moment is gone, only a memory now and some words on a page, nothing more.

Still, I do have something on tape. Something unexpected. I was cuddling with Pepper, talking to him about Frankie, when a visitor came

tapping at the front door. Actually not surprising and not so unexpected; I had been half waiting and half listening for one or more of the Huckfeldts to show up (not even thinking about the cops for a change). The light rap-rap-rap told me, most likely, that it was Dally. The older boys have a much heavier fist when they come pounding. Pepper was startled by the noise, ready to run and hide, but I told him not to worry, it's OK, I'll just check and see who it is. He pulled the sheet across his midsection and watched as I hurried to the door. Still naked, I peeked out the window to the porch, just to make sure I was dealing with friend, not foe. It was Dally, just as I'd figured. No need to put on clothes for that frisky little guy, so I unlocked and opened the door and let him in. He saw me and giggled as if I was wearing a funny costume on Halloween. "Just got up," I said to explain. "We sleep naked here." I pointed to Pepper on the hide-a-bed. Dally had his Power Ranger with him and used it to poke my boner, which had never completely deflated and was now back at full, randy attention. I stepped closer and put an arm around his shoulders as he kept playing with me. I asked him about JoJo and Jimmy, and he said, "They's in bed, they's sleepin, it's Sunday."

"Lazy bums."

"We was at wrestlin last night," he said, pronouncing it as "rasslin."

"Again?"

"March Mayhem," Dally said, his hillbilly twang making the two words sound like a question. He laid his Power Ranger face-down on my erection with its plastic arms out on either side. The boy said, "He's ridin on a rocket," then looked up at me with that funny one-eyed squint and side-of-the-mouth grin of his. Pepper let out a soft laugh that made Dally turn to him and really notice him for the first time. Once more I said, "We always sleep naked here. Right, Pepper?"

"Unless I forget," Pepper said. Dally nodded and told us, "Me and my brothers, we all sleep in our bare skin most times." He moved, with me, to the edge of the bed, where he very matter-of-factly took the sheet and pulled it away from Pepper's middle and said, "Your pecker,"

nodding, like yep, there it is. Pepper made a panicky oh-no face and grabbed for the sheet, but missed, then grabbed the Spider-Man comic instead and put it over his crotch, a modest gesture that struck everyone, including Pepper himself, as silly and pointless, definitely something to laugh about. (Stretched out like that with no clothes, nothing covering him, Pepper's pubescent lankiness becomes very evident, especially those oversized feet and hands of his, like the big clumsy paws on a puppy. His arms and legs being so thin only adds to the effect, those big feet resting on the mattress somehow improbably attached to such skinny ankles.) Anyway, we all laughed at Pepper's silly attempt to hide himself beneath the comic book. I reached behind me and pushed the red "record" button on the camcorder, just to be sure I didn't miss anything that might develop. To the boys, smiling, I said, "Dally is the only one here wearing clothes."

"I don't need 'em," the little boy said, shaking his head. Next moment he was shedding his shoes and John Deere cap and raggedy jeans in one frenetic wriggle, then his shirt, no underwear today, stark naked in less than ten seconds. He jumped on the bed and landed on his knees and started bouncing, the Power Ranger still in his hand, held above his head, flying, Dally also providing the sound effects, whoosh whoosh, making the figure swoop and dive. I've never seen him more excited. Pepper glanced from him to me and back again, not sure how to behave with this naked eight-year-old bouncing next to him. I was wondering how to direct the situation when Dally himself solved the problem, saying, "We all could rattle, like WCW, this here's the ring!"

"The bed?" "This here bed is the ring," Dally nodded.

"You guys start," I said. Dally handed me his Power Ranger so hastily that I fumbled and dropped it, then he sort of pounced on Pepper and started grappling. The Spider-Man comic went flying onto the floor, and a not-quite-prepared Pepper suddenly found himself entangled with Dally Huckfeldt and forced to defend himself. Dally is a strong little guy, tough, a good wrestler. Pepper, as I've mentioned, is all gangly arms and legs, not a bad athlete but not built for wrestling, funny to

watch him struggling to seize and control his smaller and feistier opponent. While this match was in progress, I decided to set up my tripod for the first time, the one for my camcorder, no need to be furtive or subtle about it. I put it near the TV (which coincidentally was showing WWF Superstars on the USA channel), positioning the camcorder at just the right distance and angle to record everything happening on the bed. “See, you’re on TV,” I told the boys. “Here’s the camera and here,” pointing to the television screen, “you can see yourselves wrestling.”

The boys paused for breath, mouths open, faces getting sweaty. Pepper jokingly asked, “Is that us on TV?” Dally said, “Yep, sure is,” then sprang a fresh attack on the other boy. Rolling, flipping, grunting, on and on they struggled, back and forth across the squeaky, clanky mattress. I watched, staying near the camcorder for occasional zoom-ins and close-ups whenever the boys tumbled themselves into some especially eye-popping position. Best of all were those rear-end shots with a boy on his knees and bent forward, usually in a headlock, mooning the camera. I’ve got three wide-open asshole shots of Pepper, brown balls dangling, and five of Dally, those surprisingly plump balls of his also a-dangle, but smaller than Pepper’s, tighter, pink as candy from behind. Also cute were those moments when something on TV caught the boys’ attention and made them freeze in mid-grapple, like players in some homoerotic game of Statues. Pepper, one of those times, came to a stop on his belly while Dally knelt beside him, panting, staring at the ruckus on TV, his left hand on Pepper’s ass. Another time Pepper was on his back, his head rolled to the right to see the televised action, with Dally straddling him, sitting on his stomach. Cute enough, but even cuter when Dally decided to steal a moment’s rest by laying his sweaty head on Pepper’s sweaty chest, which meant scooting himself backward a few inches, which put his bare butt directly on Pepper’s dick. Dally himself remained oblivious to what I was seeing, to the lewdness of it, nothing unusual to him about being nude with another youngster, about



resting his hand on that other boy's butt, about catching his breath while sitting on that other boy's penis. Pepper, though, is a little older and a lot more self-conscious and clearly knew exactly what was happening. He kept glancing at me to see if I was watching, a look on his face that appeared to say, "I'm not sure what I'm doing, but I'm trying, I'm trying!"

Several times both boys called for me to join them. I did, finally, for a few minutes of rolling and groping on the mattress, then positioned myself alongside the bed to catch the boys as they leaped one after another into my arms, wild kamikaze leaps, their imitation of wrestlers flying from the ring. It was my job to catch them, as I just said, and then to fling them back onto the bed, easy with Dally, not so easy with Pepper. The most enjoyable part, of course, was having those two boys naked in my arms—first Dally, then Pepper, then Dally, then Pepper again, over and over—always taking advantage to grab a cock, to tickle a scrotum, to squeeze and pinch a cheeky little bottom. I had a throbbing erection the whole time. The boys, too busy playing to think about sex, stayed limp and happily ignored Old Jake's hard-on.

They were exhausted, both of them, but it was Dally who finally had to quit. Besides being sweaty and red-faced, he was also winded and wheezy from his asthma, which I should have noticed earlier. I fetched a towel from the bathroom and used it to dry the perspiration from the boys' faces and bodies. Neither of them was in any hurry to get back into their clothes. With Dally, well, that's to be expected, he's a Huckfeldt. But Pepper, wow, such a remarkable day for him, a real breakthrough about showing himself, being naked for the entire morning. They rested side by side, flat on their bellies, eyes on the TV. I got between them and started giving each of them a butt massage—Pepper's cheeks in my left hand, Dally's cheeks in my right—calling them "my boys" and "my baby boys" and enjoying myself while they cooled off and settled down. Pepper was happy to stay on his belly, not interested in any kind of hotter action, understandable, he'd been sucked and jerked off just about an hour earlier. Dally, on the other hand, let me

play with his behind for five or six minutes but then rolled over to show me his boner. He put his foot on my chest and wiggled his toes in the hair. He had his thumb in his mouth, his gentle green-gray eyes watching me, his gingery crewcut still damp around the forehead. I took his foot and kissed the toes, which made him squirm with giggles and start pushing at me with his other foot, kicking lightly and playfully at my crotch. “Naughty boy,” I said, grabbing him now by both ankles, using two hands for the job. I was forced, temporarily, to neglect Pepper, who laid his head on his folded arms to peer stealthily sideways at me and Dally. I was glad to have him watch.

Dally was pretending to struggle, his thumb still in his mouth as he grinned and churned his strong little legs. I shushed him and reminded him not to rile his asthma, then wishboned his legs and ran my hands up his thighs, really spreading them. He had a nice rosy-red boner begging for attention. I took it in my fingers and held it as I’ve done many times, Dally probably expecting me to start rubbing it, to masturbate him, no doubt surprised when I positioned myself closer and leaned over him and began licking his balls. He responded with a breathy gigglish noise and a slight squirm, raising one leg in something like a slow spasm until his foot found my shoulder and rested there. Pepper, I know from seeing the tape, was still watching us. No problem. He’d had his turn earlier and now it was Dally’s. He was welcome to observe and learn and enjoy the show. (He watched me once before. With Frankie. Remember?) I didn’t mind, and Dally certainly didn’t either. In fact, as if to include Pepper in our activity, Dally stretched out an arm and laid it on Pepper’s back, very sweet to watch on tape, Dally’s hand absently pawing and pressing at Pepper’s back, at Pepper’s shoulders, even at Pepper’s hair, his fingers playing and playing with the cottony curls as his own balls and boner are being licked, being kissed, being sucked. You can’t see Pepper’s expression on the tape, but I’m guessing he had a patient, bemused smile and that “I’m not sure what’s happening” look on his face. Always something new at Jake’s house, especially today.

There's no juicy climax to this part of the story. I spent several happy minutes slurping and sucking at the goodies between Dally's legs, then shifted to my left and licked the back of Pepper's thighs right up to the crack of his ass, then went back to Dally, then to Pepper again, this time getting my tongue fully into his crack, both boys smiley, giggly, loving every moment. No orgasms, no cum, just good sexy fun with my two young friends, finally ending when I glanced at the clock and decided that we needed to stop, the morning was nearly gone, Jimmy or JoJo or both might suddenly show up and, hey, that might be even more fun—or it might be reckless, hard to say, and there was no reason to take that risk, not today, not after such a great time with Pepper and Dally. I asked Dally, his penis still shiny with my spit, if he liked what we'd been doing. He squinted one eye and nodded and said, "Y'all was suckin my pecker."

"That's right," I said, stretching myself out between the boys so we could talk, so I could put an arm over each of them, so I could kiss first one and then the other as we chatted. Dally raised himself to look over my head, saying directly to Pepper, "I can pretty near sperm."

Pepper said, "Oh yeah?"

"Ain't that right, Jake? Can't I pretty near sperm?"

"It's called seminal fluid. Like baby sperm, little-boy sperm. You won't have real stuff for another few years," I said. "But Pepper here has real stuff. Not a lot. But he can cum a little."

"He's older," Dally conceded.

"That's right, he's older," I said. "He came before, didn't you, Pepper?" The boy nodded. Dally asked him, "Was you gettin your pecker sucked?" Pepper just laughed. I answered for him, saying, "Yeah, he was, just like you." Dally asked, "And that's why he spermed?" Pepper laughed again, his face buried in his arms. I said, "Plus he was jerking off. I mean, jackin off."

"It's 'cause JoJo hypmotized him," Dally said.

“Yes, exactly, we thought the same thing,” I said, also laughing now, although I don’t believe Dally was joking. Pepper finally lifted his head and looked at us and mock-whimpered, “I was hypnotized for sure, that’s why! Evil hypnosis!”

Dally was watching and nodding seriously, an avid believer in JoJo’s mesmeric powers, but then abruptly he lost interest in our sex chat and challenged Pepper to a game of WCW Revenge on Nintendo (more wrestling!). Even then they were too lazy and content to get dressed or move from their belly-down positions on the bed, so I fetched the Nintendo joypads for them and got everything set up and running, then put on my own clothes (enough Edenic indolence for one day) and went to the kitchen for my long-delayed coffee, as well as some cereal and fruit.

Then, just as I’d thought might happen, Jimmy and JoJo showed up. I heard them before I saw them, because Dally let them in. Bad security! What if a parent (or a salesman, or a deliveryman) had been on the other side of that door? But never mind. It was Jimmy and JoJo, here to find their little brother, who was standing bare-assed near the open door to greet them. I rushed forward and herded everyone inside and closed the door. Pepper, wearing his glasses now but nothing else, was still on the bed, holding his Nintendo joypad and staring nervously at me and the Huckfeldts. Their arrival must have caught him off guard, must have been too sudden for him to escape and grab his clothing. At least that’s my assumption. He hasn’t become an exhibitionist yet, I don’t think.

Jimmy announced, with his nastiest scowl, that Dally had to come home because “we’re all goin to the Sunday bingo.” Whatever that is. He told Dally to put his “fuckin clothes on.” Dally nodded, but then, instead of dressing, started telling his brothers that “we was rasslin before, all of us!”

“You oughta called me, you fuckers,” JoJo said. He shoved Dally’s shoulder and then sat on the bed and took over the controls just abandoned by his little brother. He didn’t seem to notice that Pepper was

naked beside him. But Jimmy noticed, saying, “You guys bein queer or what?”

“Wrestling,” I said, echoing Dally’s story.

“Fuckers are naked,” Jimmy mumbled. Dally, who was slowly getting into his clothes, showed his missing teeth in a grin and told his big brother, “It’s top secret,” repeating something he’d heard me say several weeks ago. Jimmy ignored him and moved to the bed, his eyes on Pepper. He was wearing a clean pair of khaki trousers with his eggplant-purple bowling shirt, sneaker laces flopping, camouflage cap pulled low, its peak bent in a semi-circular curve above his eyes. He was chomping rudely on a big pink wad of bubblegum as he climbed onto the bed and slapped Pepper’s bare ass (not too hard) and said, “You guys was bein queer, man, I can tell.”

“We were wrestling,” Pepper said, repeating the party line, doing his best to concentrate on Nintendo. But Jimmy wouldn’t let him. “You fuckers don’t know shit how to rassle,” he said, that grin of his like the snarl of a hungry wolf. Then, to prove his point, he was on Pepper’s back and holding him in a half-nelson that looked painful, a little too tight, too rough. I came closer to the bed and warned him to be careful. Pepper muttered “jerk” and dropped his joypad and grabbed at the wrist against his throat. Jimmy chuckled, “I can pin y’all so easy, it ain’t even funny,” then proceeded to do it, flipping Pepper onto his back to flatten his shoulders against the mattress. Again, though, he was being much too rough, so I said, “All right, fine, that’s enough. The match is over, Jimmy, you win.”

“Damn right I win,” he said, easing himself back to his knees. “Anyway, man, I’m just playin with Peppy here.” He backed off till he was kneeling between Pepper’s legs, chomping his big wad of gum, readjusting his cap. He looked down at Pepper’s dick and grinned another wolfish grin and said, “Peppy’s pecker, man, check it out, it ain’t bad.” JoJo, sitting and playing Nintendo all this time, obeyed his brother’s “check it out” and glanced at Pepper, even nodded briefly, then went back to playing, his tongue stuck in the corner of his opened

mouth. Jimmy was gently poking and slapping at Pepper beneath him, a cat toying with a mouse, aiming fake punches at the other boy's vulnerable crotch to make him flinch and twist. Then he said, "I can even pin y'all like this here," and grabbed Pepper's legs and pushed them up and forward until they were pressed knees-to-nipples against Pepper's chest—until, in other words, Pepper was positioned ass-up like someone about to be fucked. He punched at Jimmy's shoulder and, for the second time, called him a jerk. Jimmy fell onto him in perfect intercourse position, his khaki-ed crotch directly against Pepper's upturned butt. "Peppy, Peppy, Peppy," he smiled, his hands pinning the other boy's knees. "I'm your king, man. You're totally helpless. It's pitiful."

"You're pitiful, you stink!" Pepper snapped back, angrier than I've ever seen him. I was right beside the bed, giving Jimmy another few seconds to end his obnoxious performance before ending it for him. He told Pepper, "If you was my girlfriend, man, I'd be fuckin y'all so hard," then began his inevitable humping, his favorite dirty joke, thrusting and banging his crotch against Pepper's upturned bottom, going "uh, uh, uh!" as he splayed Pepper's legs with both hands, a very convincing pantomime of anal intercourse that looks totally genuine on the tape, which was still running in the camcorder, forgotten. (Watching it, you can see Jimmy glancing now and then at the lens, clearly aware of it, showing off.)

Dally, finally dressed, volunteered the information that "Pepper can sperm a little!" Jimmy said, "Yeah, man, in your mouth!" Dally said, "Nope, stupid, you's wrong!" Jimmy stopped humping and sneered down at Pepper, "Y'all like to sperm in my brother's mouth? Y'all like bein queer?" Pepper muttered, "Such an idiot, shut up!" Jimmy once more taunted, "Y'all be my girlfriend and we'll fuck," then resumed his rough humping of the boy beneath him. If he'd been naked his dick would have been ramming right into Pepper's perfectly positioned and perfectly receptive asshole. That's when I nudged his arm and ordered him off. He grumbled, as he stood up, "Fuck, who cares, damn nigger

kid.” I lost my temper right then and there, sorry, completely lost it and grabbed Jimmy by the throat and shoved him against the wall. I scared myself as much as I did him, probably. The expression on his face was so strange, real shock and fear in his eyes but still, even then, you could see his defiant attempt at a smirky grin—the expression of a cornered bully. I tightened my grip on his throat, saying, “Don’t ever use that word in my house! You hear me? You hear me? Don’t ever use that kind of bullshit talk around here!”

“OK, OK, OK,” Jimmy answered, the strangled urgency of his voice making me suddenly aware of how hard I was choking him, nearly cutting off his windpipe.

“You behave yourself around here or don’t come back,” I told him, not yelling, not quite, my voice just barely in control, shaky with anger.

“OK, OK, I’ll be good,” the boy managed to croak. His pledge to “be good” was somehow touching and made him sound, for a change, like the young boy he is. I loosened my grip and mumbled something like “didn’t mean to hurt you” and gradually became aware of the other boys in the room. Pepper was putting on his clothes. JoJo was staring with his mouth open and the Nintendo controls clutched in both hands. Dally was standing nearby, sucking his thumb, frightened. “It’s all right,” I said to all of them, especially to little Dally, putting my hand on his shoulder. “Anyway, you guys need to get going, you’ll be late.”

“Yeah, you fuckers come on,” Jimmy said, his gum-chomping grin back to normal but his eyes moving nervously. I ushered all three of the brothers to the door. As Jimmy passed, I swatted him on the butt and told him, “Next time, you behave yourself.” I was afraid he might say something like, “Fuck you, faggot, there ain’t gonna be no next time!” But he just responded with the same conciliatory “OK, OK, OK” as before—which is good. I mean, after all, I can’t afford to have Jimmy Huckfeldt as an enemy.

Pepper, meanwhile, surprised me with his nonchalant response to the whole unpleasant affair. I thought he would be upset almost to tears. Hardly. He finished dressing, fixed himself a bowl of cereal, nodded

calmly when I asked if he was OK. I said, “Jimmy was really terrible today. I should’ve stopped him sooner.” Pepper wiped a dribble of milk from his chin and asked me, “Why didn’t you kill him?” “Whoa, that’s a little harsh.”

“I hate his guts.”

“Well, I guess I don’t blame you.”

“We should put a curse on him,” Pepper suggested, which gave me a strange little chill. I said, “Oh, I don’t know about that. He’s a jerk, I know, but. . .”

“Can he be nice sometimes?”

“I’m not sure if ‘nice’ is the word, but, well, today he was out of control. Showing off. Jealous of you being here. I don’t know. Maybe,” I said, “we should give him another chance.”

Pepper agreed with a very half-hearted shrug. It’s a “god news, bad news” situation with him: The bad news is, Jimmy created such an upset with his smartass bullshit. The good news is, Jimmy’s bullshit didn’t seem to ruin Pepper’s weekend. The best news is, Pepper got his dick sucked, and he seriously jerked off, and he even had a nice little spermy orgasm—and, as Frankie would say, he totally dug it.

## MARCH 25

Not a good day. Bad news. It occurs to me, in fact, that I started this journal for the purpose of recording and preserving the fun and the adventure and the delightful craziness of my life with these new boys. With Pepper and Frankie and Ryan and the Huckfeldt brothers. I started it on New Year’s Day, I now recall, checking back. Not quite three months ago, yet I’m already exhausted by the effort. I don’t have time for this. Especially not now, not after finding out the bad news about Doc.

I suppose I should get to that, say something about it, at least finish this entry before putting an end to the entire journal. Therefore, in brief: I met Doc at the hospital and waited for him while he had his tests done,



including the scans on his brain, both the CAT and the MRI. Usually, after the tests and the scans, patients are sent home to await a follow-up call, some days later, from their physician. But Doc was told to wait. So we knew something was wrong. When the doctor was ready to see him (only nurses and technicians until then), I was asked if I was “the son.” Ominous. The son. No, just a friend, I said. But I was invited into the office anyway, a good idea for someone else to hear what needed to be discussed. Doc, during all of this, looked so old, so confused.

To put it simply, he has a “mass” on his brain. That’s why, no doubt, he’s been having so many headaches, so many odd mood swings and memory gaps, so much fatigue. It’s a large mass, the doctor explained, showing us the pictures. Surgery, at this point, is the only option. He recommends having it performed at one of the big joints in Chicago—you know, like Rush-Presbyterian or Loyola or Northwestern. It would be sophisticated surgery, calling for a major neurosurgical unit beyond anything here in Sandburg. Doc said, “Don’t be foolish, traveling all the way to Chicago,” as if we were talking about a trip to some museum or amusement park. Nothing the doctor said could make him commit to a decision. I finally stepped in and promised to get Doc safely home, discuss the situation with him, let the doctor know tomorrow about arranging the surgery. Doc was staring at me with a strange scowl, then repeated, “Traveling all the way to Chicago, such nonsense, this time of year.”

So I followed Doc home, to his house, in my own car. Twice I tried to have a discussion with him about his dire condition and the need for immediate surgery, no fucking around, let’s get to Chicago and beat this thing, no time to lose. But he wouldn’t listen. He kept saying, “There’s no point to this, really, so much foolishness,” and other dismissive things like that, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, rubbing and rubbing at his head—which is so disturbing now to watch, knowing what’s inside his head, growing there, malignant. Actually, we don’t know yet whether the “mass” is malignant or benign. But, hell, I’m sure it’s bad.

Finally, after demanding his cooperation, I got Doc to agree that, yes, he needs to allow his physician to make the necessary referral to a hospital in Chicago, to schedule the surgery, to do whatever is necessary. He says he'll drive himself back to town tomorrow and take care of it. I know I should pick him up and do the driving, but I can't take another day off, not tomorrow, not if I'm going to be responsible for getting him to Chicago and back, probably next week. How am I going to do this? How am I going to manage the traveling, the organizing of so many details? Who's going to take care of Doc after the surgery? What if he needs chemotherapy or radiation? Of course I should be worrying about Doc, not myself. I'm being selfish, as usual. He could be dying. My old friend. My only real friend. Who else knows so much about me? What am I going to do without him? What happens when all the witnesses to your life—all the trusted witnesses—are dead and gone? Do you keep living as a partial person? Do the dead take pieces of you with them, secret bit by secret bit, until they've taken everything?

But he's not dead. Doc's not dead. He's sick, and that's what I have to deal with for the next several weeks, maybe months. A thousand problems, big and little, will have to be met and dealt with and solved. Time, money, emotional resilience, you name it—my life, in every way, will need to be devoted to this crisis, to Doc's welfare, for the foreseeable future.

I almost cried when I left him, but no, I had to be strong, had to be a man. I did hug him, and he hugged me back with a strength and heartiness that surprised me. I made him promise again that he'll go back tomorrow and make the necessary arrangements for his surgery. He said, "Yes, Jacob, yes. But now it's time to go. Time to go."

Who will call me "Jacob" after he dies? My mother often used that name, and Doc, but no one else. After he dies I'll be Jake, always just Jake. The "Jacob" part of me will be one of those bits, one of those secret bits, that Doc takes with him.

I phoned Holly when I got home, just to give her the news. She knows Doc only slightly, met him a couple of times—but I had to share my overflow of sadness with someone, plus I wanted to explain to Pepper why I might be busy this weekend and unable to see him. I also called Frankie. The news made him cry. Remember, Doc was his hero. Doc's stories mean everything to him, even now. We cried together, the two of us.

So now what happens? I'll go back to Doc's tomorrow, after work, to check on him and make sure he's arranged everything properly. Then, I don't know. If I allow myself to gaze too far into the future—well, I just can't do it, the frightful prospect is too much, too overwhelming. One day at a time. One hour. One moment. Otherwise I'll drown.

I also can't allow myself to gaze obsessively backward, to paralyze myself with nostalgia, all the old memories, my entire adult life spent with Doc, just a kid when we met. It's a type of masochism, I guess, that nagging desire to wallow in lost happiness, lost youth, picking through yesterday's joy to intensify today's sorrow. I can't afford to do that now.

And what about the boys? How will I handle the Huckfeldts, for example, while entangled in this mess with Doc? I can't imagine dealing with Jimmy's bullshit in my current state—touchy, impatient, exhausted. And Ryan. It's been, what, three or four weeks since our trip to Chicago, terrible to neglect him for so long. I've been planning ways to get us back together, difficult to do now that Ryan's swim meets have ended, although he will be running track before too much longer. Anyway, Doc's condition changes everything. Ryan will have to wait.

What else? What else? I must be forgetting something. But no matter. This journal is finished. I'll store it away with my books and magazines; with my drawings from Pepper; with my photos and Polaroids and videos. It's been a record of good fortune that finally, today, has ended. But maybe Doc will be OK. That's what I have to keep thinking, keep hoping. Right? Don't be a melodramatic ninny and

make this situation worse than it is. Wait. See what develops. Deal with each day, and with that day only. Each hour. Each moment.

And so now I'll stop.

MARCH 28

One final entry, which I didn't plan, just to record the date, to remember the date.

Yesterday, Doc killed himself. Friday. Today is Saturday. He killed himself on Friday. He used his shotgun. I found him. I saw him and talked to him Thursday night about his surgery. It was scheduled for next week. I was going to take him. Maybe he would have been OK. But he killed himself. Doc killed himself on Friday.

END







































