On Leave

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David didn't say anything. That was typical of him. At least that hadn't changed. He stood in front of the fireplace in the den and smiled as everyone took turns posing with him. I watched Aunt Louise wrap her fat arms around his uniformed chest, sidle up as close as her large frame would allow.

"Kiss me you big handsome military man!" She laughed and everyone laughed. The camera flashed as David bent to kiss her cheek.

I saw all of it from where I was sitting in the living room. I didn't see what there was to be happy about, why everyone was laughing and eating and drinking like it was a celebration.

"Okay, Janet," my mother said, "It's your turn."

When Janet stood up the room quieted. David waited by the mantle, looking at her and smiling, his hands in his pockets. She smoothed her dress, tucked a strand of short brown hair behind one ear, and leaned against him. He didn't kiss her but put his arm around her waist as the camera flashed.

I didn't like Janet. David, I guessed, was in love. He spent practically every minute of his leave with her. Every school day of those two weeks I rushed home, got out the bat and gloves, hoping he would come home before dark. As the sun was setting the day before the party, I lay on my bed with his mitt over my face. I closed my eyes and breathed in the dark richness of the sweat-stained leather. I remembered how it used to be before he met Janet. He had never broken a promise to me before.

I hardly recognized him. Everyone kept saying how handsome he looked in his uniform; I thought he looked odd. It was so meticulously pressed that it looked flat, two-dimensional — as if he were walking around holding it in front of him instead of actually wearing it. And, with his hair gone, he didn't look like my brother. His head, practically shaved, looked like a peach, a cap of fuzz, not unlike the dead clump, the unfledged sparrow we found under the eaves two years before.

I was seven. It was the same year our father asked him to move to Colorado. David decided to stay with us, I think mostly because I begged him to. We shared the same upstairs room. The sparrows hatched almost directly above my head. I had positioned my bed, in spite of mother's protests, under the window where I could watch the progress of the nest. Each day I kept tabs on them,

waiting for the eggs to hatch, excited with the prospect of watching the babies learn to fly.

I woke one morning, just after they had hatched, to silence. I looked up but could see no sign of them. David was already out so I rushed to get dressed. Before I finished he came in. He didn't say anything but waited for me to put my jacket on, then led me outside. Strewn among the tall grass and irises were the remains of one of the babies.

After school we buried it in a band-aid tin beside the white pales that once enclosed our rose garden. The backyard had become wild and overgrown, but we cleared away a plot. David made a cross out of popsicle sticks and a rubber band; I adorned the mound with honeysuckle and clover.

The next morning I remembered waking in the night and seeing his bed empty. I looked out the window and saw him by the grave, his white terrycloth robe the same shadowy blue in the moonlight as the overgrown calla lilies next to the fence. I planned to ask him about it at breakfast but forgot. Later I wondered if I hadn't just dreamt it.

I watched him now as he sat on the couch between Aunt Ruth and Janet. He didn't seem to mind that everyone was fussing over him. Mrs. Piper, our next door neighbor, sliced him a piece of the cake she had brought over, then sat on the piano bench to watch him eat it. She was the only parent in our neighborhood that had children my age. It was an old neighborhood of white clapboard houses, and mostly retired people lived in them. I didn't like Wanda and Alice Piper too much. I never played with Alice at all, but sometimes I'd go roller skating with Wanda if things got desperate enough. They had come to the party with their mother. Through the sliding glass doors I could see them on the patio, feeding cake to Alice's doll.

David, who was being extremely careful not to drop any cake on his uniform, had managed to smudge chocolate frosting on his chin. I noticed it even from where I was sitting. He had very fair skin, almost the same color as the calla lilies in our backyard. He was also overly modest. Though he had wide shoulders and a strong build, he rarely took his shirt off. Practically the only time I saw him without it was when he shaved. Before he joined the service he let me sit on the edge of the tub in the morning and watch. Outdoors he had to be careful. If he was in the sun longer than a few minutes he would burn, like he did the day he taught me to swim at Black Rock Lake.

We had planned to go fishing at Purdy's Trout Farm in the foothills north of town. It was a good hour's drive. When we got there that morning the farm was closed. I tried not to let my disappointment show. He suggested we drive up to Black Rock Lake where he camped when he was in Indian Rangers.

It was called Black Rock Lake because of the slate and black silt that surrounded the area. The lake, bottomed with this silt, was also black. The surface was like a mirror. David rolled his levis up and waded along the shore. I went in in my underwear. We were the only ones around.

"Don't go out too far," he said.

I was fascinated by the sky and the green pines on the surface and the rippling effect caused by the movement of my body. I felt the black mud between my toes though I couldn't see my feet. As the disturbed silt rose from the bottom, brilliant gold particles flickered underneath the surface in the shafts of sun against my stomach. When I stopped moving and the water became still, I looked at my reflection.

That was the last thing I remember before it happened. I was staring at my face and thinking I looked strange, like someone I had never seen before. There were birds circling on air currents above the lake. I watched them swoop down. I must have moved forward. My feet slipped out from under me, and I found myself thrashing in over my head. My mouth filled with water as I tried to call out. The sky swirled blue and green and black. Then I felt his arms roughly under mine, chafing against my ribs and chest as he hoisted and pulled me through the water.

I lay on the shore; he sat next to me, his knees drawn up supporting his elbows, the butts of his palms on his forehead. I could hear the hard release of his breath, see the water drip from his hair and nose.

After a few minutes, he took his wet clothes off and spread them over a rock. Then he dove in, swam the width of the lake and back. I watched his white shoulders move cleanly and powerfully through the water.

As he neared the shore I heard him calling me. "Come on back in," he shouted.

"No," I said, "I don't feel like it."

He moved closer, stopped in water up to his waist and looked at me. "It's important, Jeff. I won't let anything happen to you."

Later, driving home, we sang songs he had learned in Indian Rangers. He didn't like to talk but had a strong singing voice. I listened and watched the skin on his face and neck deepen redder and redder.

"Jeffrey . . .," someone was calling me. "Jeffrey, your father wants to talk to you." It was Janet. I looked up. David was in the den holding the phone toward me.

"I don't want to," I said. David stood, looking surprised, still offering me the phone. My mother put her cake down and came over to my chair.

"Jeff, your father is calling from Colorado and he's asked for you."

I noticed how quiet it had become, how everyone was looking at me, waiting for me to get up from the chair and walk over and take the phone from my brother. I don't know why that simple act seemed impossible. My father rarely called, usually on birthdays and holidays; I always enjoyed talking to him. So it was as surprising to me as it was to everyone else when I simply repeated: "I don't want to."

I stared at my arm on the arm of the chair. David, who I'd never heard lie before — said something into the phone about me not feeling well. I'm not sure he lied then.

When the phone was hung up, my mother tapped me on the knee.

"Go and stand by Davy," she whispered, "I want to take your picture."

"I don't want to," I said.

"You don't want a picture of yourself with your brother? He's going away tomorrow; you may not see him for a long time."

I stared at my arm. For some reason it was impossible for me to move. Then David grabbed me by the elbows and dragged me across the room. I felt the same rough chafing against my ribs and chest. But I struggled to get free this time. I kicked as hard as I could and yelled: "I don't want any picture. I don't care."

He held on tight. "Sure you do," he said. "Anyway, I want one with you. You can send me a copy when you write to me."

"I'm not going to write to you," I screamed. "Let go of me." I wriggled one arm free and hit him on the chest and shoulders. I didn't understand why I was hitting him or why I was yelling. I struggled as hard as I could to get free and when I couldn't, my eyes blurred and I screamed: "I hate you!" He let go, and I ran down the hall still yelling, "I'm glad you're going away. I hope you never come back."

In the dark attic, I stood before the crosshatched wires of the vent. The sun was low in the sky. Yellow leaves from Sweet Gums and Walnut trees blew along the sidewalk. I looked out across the rooftops to the yellow fields, the row of eucalyptus trees that ran along the alley behind the dairy. There were already a few chimneys started. I thought soon the streetlamps would blink on.

When he found me he had the gloves and the bat. I saw my glove come flying at me in the dim light and reached out to catch it just as it hit me in the stomach.

Walking to the field, I wanted to say something, to tell him how sorry I was. I wanted him to know how I really felt about his leaving, how I felt about him. But I was afraid if I tried to talk, nothing would come out.

I think he must have known how I felt. Perhaps he knew then even better than I did. As we walked, he ruffled my hair and began talking idly about baseball, about the wind. I remember wishing

we would never reach the field, that we would just go on walking like that forever.

It was late when we got started. He pitched underhand to me. The red sun threw shadows like spears from eucalyptus leaves across his broad teeth and cocked arm. I hit one, a long fly, and watched from the center of the field as he moved away toward the mountains outlining the twilight sky.