

4

Hey, anybody home? John called out as he opened the door to his parents' house. In front of him in the short hallway lay a virtual army of sneakers and boots lined up on tattered newspapers. Through the doorway to his right he spied the large cabinet television which was tuned to a baseball game with the sound turned down. He heard the pattering of small feet and saw his five-year-old sister scamper through the dining room archway into the living room.

She took one look at him, stopped in her tracks, and fled back towards the kitchen without a peep. John closed the door and cautiously stepped into the living room. Mom?

A short woman with straight dark brown hair down past her shoulders came into his line of vision from the kitchen, wearing an oven mitt with a burn mark at its tip on one hand. John, is that you? She halted in the middle of the dining room; John's little sister had

APPROACHING TWI-NIGHT

attached herself to her mother's legs. John's mother pried the arms away and scolded the squirming mass of reddish curly hair. Jennifer! It's only your big brother John! Don't you remember the photos we showed you of the two of you at Christmas?

John remembered. The pictures had been taken three years ago, the last time he had been able to afford the trip to Gladden Fords for the holidays. The previous time he had visited for Christmas had been nearly four years before that. Twice in the last seven years. No wonder the poor kid was scared.

Jennifer was looking up at John now. She crossed her arms and pouted. Go on, her mother coaxed, say hello to John.

Hi, John, Jennifer said curtly. You're not sleeping in MY room. She turned and scurried out the back door of the kitchen. John couldn't help laughing.

His mother gave him a hug. It's so good to see you again! Your father's out back in the garden with Craig.

John sniffed. Are you making cookies? he asked.

His mother nodded and walked back into the kitchen, still talking as if he were standing right next to her. Yes, well, with so

many of the kids visiting for the game, they all go through them so quickly. Just yesterday I had two batches of cookies and now they're all gone!

Uh huh, John replied, wondering how much longer his mother would call her adult children "kids." Forever, he supposed. He followed his mother into the kitchen and paused in the doorway to look around. The clothes bookshelf was still standing against one wall, the clothes drying rack still perched over one of the floor vents near another wall, both full from his younger siblings home from college for the summer. The wrap-around countertop at the far two walls still remained cluttered with cookbooks and appliances and crooked wooden spice racks made in shop class. Go on out back and see your father, his mother said over her shoulder as she opened the oven door and pulled out a tray of slightly over-browned chocolate chip cookies. It won't be time to eat supper for another hour or two, but tell him he needs to get his rear in gear if we're going to have any bread to go along with the spaghetti.

Good old spagett, huh? John thought, heading for the back porch. He could hear his mother still talking out loud as if he were standing there. The back porch contained an old stand-up freezer and a small dresser, as well as Grandma Betty's old bed. It appeared

APPROACHING TWI-NIGHT

as if the room John's father had created on the porch for Craig's summertime college breaks years ago was still in use by someone.

Opening the outer door, John noticed that a plastic lawn bag had been placed over a fist-sized hole in the wall. I'll have to ask about that one, he thought, walking out into the backyard. The uneven dark green grass looked as if it had been mown in alternating strips, at different times of the week. The old swingset still stood to the right of the yard, just a few feet inside of an even older chain link fence held up with four by four wooden posts. John ran a hand along the top of the fence, rusted brown and bent at the tops, curled with age, past the spot where a crabapple tree once stood. He remembered afternoons in the fall, when, instead of doing his math, he and Craig would swat the little hard green apples with wiffle bats into neighbors' yards, over the backyard shed. The shed still stood at the opposite side of the yard from the swingset with chain link fences leading up to it from the house and continuing past it. The fence completely surrounded the yard, encompassing the third of an acre his family owned, the box of his past.

John found his father and brother near the very back of the yard, working in the patch of sand they called a garden. He skirted the stunted blueberry bushes which had replaced the failed boysenberry

bush before them as his father finally turned around and noticed him. Dressed in a red, roll-sleeved plaid shirt and motor oil-stained jeans, John's father looked more and more like the middle-aged father of seven he was. He appeared to have aged dramatically since John last saw him, his hair white at the fringes, especially his beard, which had thinned considerably. He now wore bifocals, wide lenses spread across the upper corners of his cheeks.

John, there you are! his father greeted him, resting his forearms on a wooden rake. Sorry I didn't meet you at the door, I wasn't sure when you'd be stopping by. Say, I read they gave you number forty-one. Tom Terrific.

Somebody's idea of a joke, I think, John said.

His father gestured to the small patch of barren earth in front of him, a strip of sand between two beds of green beans. The sweet potatoes died on me again, so I decided to plant more beans. Only thing that'll grow this late in the season. He paused and mopped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. Craig still hadn't said anything, standing with arms crossed, wearing, along with a pair of Nike shorts and expensive red and black sneakers, the old T-shirt he always wore whenever visiting his parents.

APPROACHING TWI-NIGHT

Uh, Dad, Mom says we need some bread for supper, John said, putting his hands in his pockets. I think she means French bread. He glanced around the yard. He was standing in the indentation in the soil that once he and Craig had used for homeplate for wiffle ball games, a permanent trench in the lawn where their heels had daily dug for summer upon summer. He turned and faced the shed, which marked center field. To his right he could still see the mound he had built out of boards and dirt, now covered over by grass, as if it had never been there. The mound had doubled as first base for wiffle ball games, but the shed bore plenty of reminders of the mound's true purpose. The scars John had inflicted upon the back of the shed lay hidden behind random patches of weather-beaten plywood.

Well, let's see, what time is it, his father said to himself, drawing out his watch. Quarter to six. I guess I'd better get down to Grand Union before they close. I'll have to see if I can work on the garden after dinner. It won't be as hot then anyway.

He began walking towards the house. Hey, Dad, John called. How many are here now?

His father paused. Well, I think it's basically just you and Craig...and Jan. John raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar name. His father glanced at Craig, then back to John. Lisa and her husband

stopped by after the game for a while, but they had to go back to Syracuse...Lisa has to work early tomorrow...so... He coughed. Luke's at work until nine, and Ben and Brian are at a friend's house. Just the six of us tonight.

Huh, said John. Mom gave me the impression that there were a lot of people over for supper.

Well, your mother's memory is starting to go, I think. She still goes through all your names whenever she calls Jennifer.

John's father walked towards the house at a slow even pace, the rake over his shoulder. John and Craig, both hands in pockets, slowly trudged after, their eyes intently focused on their footsteps. John debated whether he should ask his brother about the new woman in his life. Craig had already had one failed marriage and had moved to the West Coast back and forth twice since. He decided to clear his throat experimentally and try to talk without drawing his father's attention.

So...who's Jan?

Craig shrugged. We been seeing each other a couple of months.

What happened to...uh...Becca?

APPROACHING TWI-NIGHT

It's been a while since I talked to you, hasn't it? Craig shook his head. Been over a year since I saw her. Won't even talk to me now. He paused to spit, and shrugged. Probably better that way.

They were just outside the house now. John's father had shut the outside door behind him, like he always did, to keep the bugs out of the porch. John could see through the window in the door that the overhead fan had been turned on.

John stopped and thought for a moment. Craig stopped as well, turning to look over the yard behind them. So, John finally said, how long are you here for?

Just a couple of days, Craig said. Dad won't let me and Jan stay in the house together, so we had to get a room down at Motel 6. He paused to spit again. Bastard. He looked up at the sky and squinted. Sure would have liked to see you pitch today.

Yeah, well, that's the way it is for me. No guarantees for relievers.

Craig coughed. John said, Maybe if you stop by tomorrow night I might be out there. I'll see if I can get you some tickets cheap.

Craig shook his head. No, can't make it. We already got plans to

go out up to Lake George, you know, go to the Great Escape during the day and then walk around the village at night.

John nodded, thinking there was nothing quite like the packed sidewalks of Lake George on a summer's night. Village of a thousand night clubs. Well, maybe some other time then, he said.

Yeah, Craig replied. They opened the door and walked inside.

The smell of chocolate still lingered through the kitchen and dining room. John could hear sounds of baseball from the television, and, walking into the dining room, he saw his mother kneeling in front of the screen, clapping her hands and trying vainly to make Jennifer interested in the game. Mommy, I wanna go ride my bike, she whined.

Good, good, her mother clapped. The good guys are winning.

Mommy...

Well, all right, but stay in the back. If I see you go out front there'll be no bike for a week.

Jennifer immediately tore through the back of the house. John suspected he would find the back doors left wide open in her wake.

APPROACHING TWI-NIGHT

His mother was carefully rising from her knees. Has your father gone and gotten that bread?

I don't know. Didn't you see him go? He came in the house before us. John turned around. Craig was pacing around the kitchen table, occasionally pausing to leaf through papers on the kitchen table. Um...where's...uh...

What's her name is in the downstairs bathroom, his mother replied, somewhat testily, John thought. Just then he heard his father coming down the stairs with a heavy sigh.

Jesus Christ! John's mother exclaimed. You haven't even left the goddamn house yet?

John slipped over to the television set. He looked at the picture frames hung on the wall behind the set.

No, I had to go upstairs and get my wallet.

Well, if you don't hurry up the damn store'll be closed and we won't have any bread for supper!

There's still plenty of time to get down there. It's only down the block, you know.

John's gaze wandered over a piece of old newspaper in a small

M. Thomas Apple

three by five inch frame. He plucked it off the wall and realized it was a boxscore, carefully torn out from the *Dallas Morning News*, dated September 8, 1989. He quickly scanned the boxscore, down to the last few lines:

Texas	IP	H	W	K	R	ER
Guzman (L)	7.1	9	4	6	5	4
Klein	1.2	3	1	1	1	1

Frame in hand, he turned around to face his parents. Hey, Dad, look at this. He waved the frame in the air, and held it in front of him with both hands. I remember sending this to you.

His father smiled. I remember saving it, he said. And opening the screen door, he walked out to his faded yellow Ford truck. John's mother followed. John stepped out onto the front porch to see his father's truck rumbling out onto the street, a dirty white rag trailing from the ladder in the bed. His eyes followed the truck off to the left, where it disappeared behind a large oak tree. He lowered his gaze in time to see his mother stalking back from the sidewalk, a rusted red tricycle under one arm, Jennifer under the other.