

Rebuilding Men

SETH HARWOOD

My father and I do exercises together at night to get in shape. I'm in the sixth grade and my father and I live together in a Boston suburb called Newton. We are single men who could use some work around our midsections. We build our muscles; my father says we are rebuilding men. On the thick orange rug in the second-floor hallway, we hook our feet behind each other's ankles and do sit-ups. We do sets of twenty, taking turns—him, then me.

A book dictates our regimen with pictures: seven exercises each night, cardiovascular and stretching, that take us through our whole bodies two and a half times each week. We do push-ups, sets of eight, and then move to calf-raises, on the stairs, each of us holding the banister. Because of my father's bad back, we do extra work on our stomachs: lying flat on our bellies in the hall, face to face, we hold our heads and feet off the ground for an eight-count. My father tells me I'm good at this, but it's no trouble, to me it's flying. On our second rep we hold our arms out in front, stretched straight, our hands almost touching. I imagine the air blowing past, my feet out straight and my hands up high. I hold my breath and imagine I'm Superman. We balance on our stomachs until my father counts to eight, then rest, one cheek on the rug, before going up for another, our arms stretched behind us this time, as far as the hallway will let them. I'm a plane now, an F-14 Tomcat flying with my wings tucked in.

For dinner we eat fish sticks and frozen vegetable medley. My father refuses to use the microwave until we have it tested for radiation—we're only renting the house—so I'm in charge of steaming the vegetables. My other job is to mix mayonnaise and relish to make tartar sauce.

"We're getting a new tenant," my Dad says, "A girl who's going to move into the third floor apartment and live with us."

"I don't need a baby-sitter," I say.

"I just feel better if someone's around when you get home. She'll have a car."

"You're the only one who can help me with my homework," I say.

"Tammy will be able to help you," he says. "She's very smart."

"Tammy?"

"Watch out you don't burn that." He takes the vegetables off the stove.

"But she's not as smart as *you* are," I say. "You can't promise that."

My dad opens the lid and looks in at our vegetables. "She'll just be here," he says.

The day Tammy moves in, I have to help her carry her boxes up the stairs. She is manly with a wide face and blond straight hair with bangs like a helmet. She wears blue jeans and her hips are wider than my dad's. There is a guy with her, who says his name is Mike. He carries the heaviest boxes, and jokes with Tammy about their cars, but he does not shake hands with my father. We offer them iced tea made from powder, but they don't drink it. I gulp down two glasses. Tammy laughs and says she thinks I'm cute. She stands with her hands on her hips and laughs. She says we're going to have some fun together, her and her cutie.

"I'm in sixth grade," I tell her. She's still laughing. "I'm no cutie," I say. She tells my father that she'll be sure and watch what she calls me.

Tammy's bedroom is just above mine. That night in the dark I can hear her rusty bed-springs. I think her and Mike are up there screwing, that this is what I hear. At first it starts out just a creaking sound that comes slow, but it gets quicker. I wonder if my father can hear it, if there's anything he will do, but his room is all the way down the hall. The sound gets faster, metal springs stretching then releasing, as if someone's jumping on the bed up there—like I used to do at our old house when my Mom still lived with us—and then all at once it stops. There are a few more noises, but mostly it's quiet. I guess that's how screwing stops.

At school I tell Allen Sherman about the sounds. He thinks it's funny, that the noises a bed can make are worth imitating all morning in class. "Eek-er, eek-er," it sounds like he's saying. Catherine Gill hears him and she asks what we think we're doing. I tell her nothing important is going on.

To the other kids in my class I'm still just a new kid, some guy who moved out to the suburbs when his parents split up, and mostly they don't notice me. The ones that do think I'm weird. But Allen Sherman's my friend and Catherine Gill at least knows my name. She's from England or someplace like that, and she talks funny, but the others seem to like her. She lives behind our house, up the hill, and sometimes she walks by while I'm in the yard. The most she ever says is hi, but at least she knows my name.

We're having sex education classes twice a week now, and Mr. Strether lets the girls go out of our classroom to meet with the nurse. When they're gone, he explains to us how the male reproductive aspects of copulation occur and shows us a diagram of the penis to explain what an erection is. He says things like *vas deferens* and *seminal vesicle*. Allen Sherman's holding his hands in his lap and has his lips sewn together like he's biting them closed, not breathing, trying to keep from laughing, and I'm not doing much better.

"Boner," he whispers.

We both get thrown out of class.

Afternoons I play with Allen Sherman in the yard. We play badminton or hit rocks over the neighbor's houses with the rackets. He's not very good at badminton, but the fact that he can serve makes him better than Tammy, and she won't usually play anyway. He shows off sometimes, like he'll dive for ones he doesn't have to, just so he can jump on the ground, and then I'm laughing so hard I usually don't hit it back. He looks funny all stretched out in the air, going after one he could've just hit by stepping sideways, and then he slams to the ground so loud it's even funnier.

Catherine Gill walks by while we're playing. She can see us through the hedge and we see her, but no one's talking. She's just there for a while and I'm hoping Allen won't do anything stupid. I realize I'm wearing the brown sweatpants I wear every weekend—only on the weekends!—and I wish Catherine doesn't see me in them, that I'm wearing my new parachute pants instead.

"Hi, Noah," she says.

"Hi."

"We're *playing* badminton," Allen Sherman tells her.

"I was just walking home—"

Just at that moment, Tammy yells to ask what we're doing. She can't see us behind the garage. "I'm going to the mall," she yells. "Do you two want to go?"

"No!" I call back, though Allen Sherman's already on his way toward the house. He gives me a look that lets me know he wanted to go. He's been all talk about what new Dungeons & Dragons modules are in at the Kay Bee.

"What are you up to?" I say to Catherine.

“Let’s play badminton,” Allen Sherman says, and he hits the birdie up real high and with enough arc on it that it lands on the top of the garage. It bounces once on the roof, then stays up there.

“Oh,” I say.

“How’re you going to get that down?” Catherine asks.

“We’ll climb up there,” I say, trying to shrug it off. “Do you want to play?”

“No thanks. I should get home.”

“Oh.”

“There’s only two rackets anyway,” Allen Sherman says.

“And you’ll have to fetch your shuttlecock.”

Allen Sherman starts laughing. “Shuttlecock,” I hear him say.

“There are others,” I say, but Catherine shakes her head. “That’s fine,” she says, raising her hand. “I should get home.” She looks up the hill toward her house, finger-brushes hair around the back of her ear, and looks down at her foot, then up to the birdie on top of my garage. “I’m having a party,” she says. “It’s not for a while, but I’ll start inviting people soon.”

“Oh.”

“Excellent then.” She waves, and starts walking home. I watch her go until I can’t see her any more behind the hedges.

Allen Sherman claps me on the back. “That’s one of *the* parties, my man. You’re going to a dancing party.”

All year long the cool kids have been having weekend dancing parties that I haven’t been invited to. “Okay,” I say. “But I can’t dance.”

“It’s like this,” he says, holding his hands out straight from his hips, elbows locked into his sides, rocking from one foot to the other. “All you have to do is sway with them. Nothing like what you see people doing on TV. None of that fancy crap.” It seems hard to imagine Allen Sherman with a girl actually letting him put his hands on her, but he’s still rocking like he knows.

“Where are your hands?”

“On the girls,” he says. “Right on their hips.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says, rocking. Then he stops. “Well, whatever,” he says. “Give me ten fingers and I’ll climb up to get that birdie.”

“I’ll go up,” I say, so Allen gives me ten fingers and from there I can get a good grip on the gutter, then, stepping on a window, I get one knee up and from there I’m on the roof. I throw the birdie down to Allen and take a good look around the world: up the hill to see if I can still see Catherine, but she’s gone; there’s a big blue sky all around, just a few white clouds over in the direction of downtown. For a minute, just a few seconds really, I catch myself thinking it’s not so bad living in the suburbs now without my mom and so far away from the city. Allen Sherman’s down on the lawn, looking up at me, my friend. “It’s not so bad here,” I say. “I’m going to a party!”

“Come down, you knob!”

It’s too high to jump from standing, so I sit on the side of the roof and slide my butt over the edge of the gutter, like I’ve done other times, but this time something breaks and I crash down onto the grass with a big piece of the garage.

“Shit!” Allen says. “Are you okay?”

I stand up and look at the garage. The whole gutter on the back side is off, it’s on the ground where I fell, and it doesn’t look like something Allen Sherman and I can fix before Tammy gets back, or ever. “Damn,” I say.

When my dad comes home I tell him the gutter got knocked off the garage and when he asks me how *that* happened, I have to explain to him about climbing up to get the birdie. It’s late, so we have to take a flashlight outside with us to look, and he shines it along the edge of the roof where the gutter used to be and then he touches the used-to-be-attached part, running his finger along it.

“Well. You broke that one right off.” he says. He looks up to where it used to be and lets out a long, rising whistle. “How did you get *up* there?”

“Allen Sherman gave me a boost up and then I climbed on the shutter.”

“You know we’re renting this house, Noah. This garage isn’t even ours?”

“I’m sorry Dad, I didn’t mean it.”

“I know,” he says. He turns the flashlight off and pats me on the back. “I know, Noah. I’m just looking for some help is all.”

“I know, Dad. I’ll try.”

My dad and I have a new book we’re taking exercises out of from yoga. There’s one where we stand facing each other and press our hands together leaning forward until our top halves are parallel to the ground. It’s supposed to help our flexibility, which is good for my dad’s back.

“How old were you when you went to your first boy-girl party?” I ask between sets.

“I guess I was about your age.”

“Were there girls you liked there?”

“I guess,” he says. “I guess there must’ve been one or two I thought were nice-looking.”

“When did you kiss one?” I ask. “A girl.”

“Older than you.”

“What did you like about them?”

My dad gives me a look that lets me know we’re supposed to be relaxing between exercises. “I’m not sure I knew then, Noah. I think at your age it’s just something you go through.” He counts to five and we bend forward. All our other fingers touch at the tips, except for the pinky on my father’s right hand. That one won’t bend because he cut the tendon when he slammed a knife into our dining room table at the old house, after my mom left.

I know the kind of knife that did it because we still have some of them left in the drawer. Its blade was not sharp or serrated. It wouldn't cut meat; it was made for buttering toast and cutting green beans on your plate. It is all metal, from the handle to the blade and if you hit the table with it like my dad did, it could slip up through your hand and your finger.

We stand up again, my father across from me, older and gray, taller than I am, his hands against mine—strong hands, playing the piano strong. “One more set,” he says. We are in the upstairs hall and I know that downstairs in our dining room our table has three holes in it. I know that these holes are from when my father stabbed it with the knife. I've put my fingers in them; I know them: the first hole is a deep well, half as wide as a dime, that goes through the veneer and into the wood as deep as the tip of my finger to the nail. The second hole is a shallow gash where the knife slipped as it hit the table and went in at an angle, splintering the wood.

“Down,” my father says, and we bend forward. We push against each other's hands for balance. I can feel the little machine on my father's pinky touching the side of my left hand. It has a spring in it and it covers his finger, trying to make it straighten. It feels foamy, like Styrofoam, and it just brushes my finger. I look straight down at our feet and the dark orange rug.

The third hole in the table is only as wide as the knife's blade because that was where the knife met the hard wood that stopped it and pushed the blade up into my father's hand. I can only fit the end of my fingernail into that one.

“Up,” he says, and we push against each other until we are standing. Then we drop our hands and take a few good breaths.

The first weekend the town pool's open, Tammy takes us swimming—Allen Sherman is allowed to come. At the pool, her red bathing suit is all nipples and I'm all eyes. She sits in the sun and I'm standing in the shallow end, seeing her nipples. I'm getting hard in the cold water. Her bathing suit is like it's invisible. The water is cold and Allen Sherman says, “It's cool we can see her tits,” but I remember Mr. Strether saying they were areolas.

Allen Sherman stands in the shallow end next to me. When I look at him I can see the head of his penis is stuck up over the waistband of his trunks, against his stomach. “For your viewing pleasure,” he says.

“That's nice.” He just smiles, stands there, showing me his head. This isn't the first time he's showed me. He knows it's big and that makes him confident about showing it around. I guess he's funny that way.

I swim away, out to the deep end, feeling the water swish on my body and rush past my genitals. I hang on the side in the deep end, watching the girls go off the boards in the diving pool. They have bikinis on, some of them, and it isn't much different than wearing underpants. They would do anything to keep you from seeing their underpants at school, but get them to the pool and you can see their legs clear up to the tops.

Tammy won't swim with us, but after a while she gets up and walks to the diving pool, her feet slapping on the cement. Her butt comes out of her bathing suit a little, but not in a bad way, in a way that's kind of good, like just the sides of the bottom are showing: lines above her thighs. She waits her turn in the high-dive line like the others, then she climbs up the ladder like she's not worried at all, even though it's the highest board she's going off of, and strides to the end, bounces once—her body doing a shake when she hits and her breasts making one simple, gentle bounce—and comes up kicking high into the air, holding her arms out to her sides, rotating until her head points down, and then arms-forward she slices into the pool.

When she gets out I can see her nipples even better. They're darker from the cold water and the suit clings to them now that it's wet, outlining them perfectly. I can see through the suit they're brown and shriveled, like your fingers when you stay in the water for a long time, only harder.

Allen Sherman is looking at girls' butts underwater. He's missing the world, I think, and I'm glad to have Tammy. He ducks underwater and swims behind a girl and grabs her. She screams, but he's already swimming in the other direction, weaving in and out of the mothers teaching their babies how to kick.

The night I'm supposed to go to Catherine's party, I help my dad fold laundry. The sweatshirt I want to wear doesn't go into the dryer because we don't want to shrink it, so it's been drying on a towel all afternoon, and it still feels damp.

We're having pork chops and frozen vegetables again for dinner, something that's become one of my semi-favorites, and Dad still won't let me cook my vegetables in the microwave. "Can I still wear that shirt, even if it's not dry?" I ask.

"It'll dry. But until it does you'll be wearing a wet shirt."

"Right," I say. "That's okay."

He makes a face. "Are you excited?"

"I'm not excited," I say, then, "Why do you think they invited me?"

"Why? I think they probably like you and want you to come and have fun."

"None of them like me, I don't think. I'm sure they don't. They think I'm a total nerd." The vegetables look finished so I drain them and put the pot on the table. My father brings over the pork chops.

"It'll be fun," my dad says.

Outside I can hear Mike's car pulling into the driveway, spraying gravel against the garage, the horn already honking. "So you think I should go then?"

"I think you should do what you want to, but I think you'll be missing a good opportunity if you stay home."

Tammy comes down wearing a short-cut skirt, not quite a mini. "I'll see you men tomorrow," she says.

"Okay," my dad tells her.

When she sees I'm not wearing my usual weekend sweatpants and T-shirt, she knows something's up. She comes back into the kitchen. "What are *you* all dressed up for?" she asks.

"Me?"

"He's going to a party tonight," my father says.

"*Really?*" Tammy looks like she just heard I won a beauty pageant. She's got her hands balled up in the middle of her chest like I'm some kind of sucker darling, and she's almost to the point of cooing. "*You're blushing,*" she almost sings.

"It's a boy-girl party," my dad says. "With dancing."

"*Really.* Are you going to dance with the ladies tonight, killer?"

"I'll probably dance," I say.

"Sounds good to me," she says. "But don't stay out too late." She winks at my father, as she heads out the door. I can hear Mike revving his engine in the driveway.

"Do you think my shirt's dry yet?"

He cups his hand on my elbow, feeling the sleeve. “It’s not bad,” he says. “You’ll be fine.”

My father puts down his knife and fork and shakes his head. “I’m sorry about all the trouble I’ve caused you by moving us out here,” he says.

“Dad, you don’t have to—” He holds up his hand.

“I know you were more confident in Boston than you are here, and that you had better friends. You seemed happier there. This year hasn’t been the easiest, but I wanted to say I’m proud of how you’re adjusting. This party will be fun.”

“But it was Mom’s fault, wasn’t it?” I ask. “Mom was the one who made you sell the house and then we had to move out here, right? It’s not your fault. Mom’s the one who left!”

He nods. “I know, Noah, but it’s not just your mother. Everything was both of us. We made some decisions together.” He just looks at me, not smiling. “It can’t be blamed on either one of us. It’s just something that happened.”

“I wish it hadn’t happened.”

“I know,” he says. “I don’t blame you. I wish it hadn’t also.”

Neither one of us says anything for a while and then my father starts cutting his pork chop. “Eat your food,” he says.

I eat a bite of vegetables, some pork chop with applesauce on it. “Mom was the one who wanted to leave, right?”

He goes on eating, then nods. “I’m sorry it’s had to affect you like this,” he says.

“It’s not that bad here,” I tell him. “We’re doing all right.”

“I know, Noah. I know.” He looks at his watch and acts surprised. “You should get up there,” he says. “It’s almost a quarter past eight.”

“Okay. Okay.” I run upstairs to try and gel my hair and when I come down my father tells me I look good, that I’m going to have fun. I give him the biggest hug I can give him, and then I’m out the door.

Outside the sky is red where the sun’s setting and clear blue in front of me, starting to darken. It’s the hottest night we’ve had in a while, and I hope my sweatshirt will keep me cool. The hill up to Catherine’s is too steep to ride, so I walk my bike beside me. At the top I start pedaling. The air blows past as I ride, cooling me and drying my shirt. I like the way it feels.

At Catherine’s, I lock my bike to the street sign on her corner. I brush my hands off, make sure I’m not sweaty. Tonight I’m supposed to be a dancer, some kind of ladies’ man who knows how to slow dance and hold girls’ waists. “Fa, la la, la la,” I say, testing my voice. As I walk through the house I can hear music playing in the back, and when I get to the deck, I see most of the kids from my class—“the cool kids!”—Paul Napolitano and Tony Armaresco and Mark Sanders are all there, Zach Taylor and Amy Tasker, Alison Olesky, Katie Martilla, even the Zelli sisters! The nerdiest kid is Andrew Dawson, but he’s got leukemia or something, and that means everyone has to be nice to him, like there’s a rule he has to be included.

Allen Sherman comes over and claps me on the back. “Relax, my man. We’re here to have fun. Talk to some ladies.” He walks off, headed for the Zelli’s. After a little while Mark Sanders takes Tina Zelli out into the middle of the deck and the two of them start rocking back and forth with his hands on her hips and hers on his shoulders. His arms aren’t straight, but he’s not hugging her either. They’re just swaying from one foot to the other with his

hands on her hips! By the time the first song's over, Tony Arm, Paul Nap, and Zach Taylor have girls and they're dancing, too. Tony Arm is dancing with Catherine Gill!

By the second song, all the girls are dancing and Andrew Dawson and I are the last two boys on the side. When I see Stacy Zimmerman standing by the sodas, I go over and ask if she wants to dance. It's gotten so it's more embarrassing *not* to be dancing than it is to try and dance, is the best that I can understand how I pull this off. Stacy must be thinking the same, because she says yes and we move out onto the edge of the group.

I put my hands on her hips and Stacy's hands come up on my shoulders. I can feel her jeans and where her belt is, and even, just a little, with my first fingers, where her skin is above her belt, where her body sticks out over her jeans. Her shirt is thin, some kind of silky material, and her skin feels soft and smooth through it.

When her hands move on my shoulders I wonder if she's uncomfortable, if I should let her move them down onto my arms. I realize I'm hard and I don't want to bump up against her or for her to brush me and find it, so I turn my hips away from her. I use my arms to hold some space between us. We keep dancing. It's just another slow song off the radio, something I can barely hear, but it doesn't matter because all I have to do is sway with Stacy.

I want to say something cool but I have no idea what it should be. Telling her she has big boobs seems entirely incorrect. "Hi," I say.

"This is a nice house," Stacy says.

"Nice deck."

"Yeah."

I feel like I should still say something, so I ask if she likes the music. She says she does but she also likes some of the fast stuff on the radio, too. She lists a couple of bands. "Yeah," I say. "I like them."

After the song ends everyone moves to someone near them who has no partner. I dance with Amy Tasker and Katie Martilla, girls I wouldn't even have thought of asking to dance with me, and they're actually nice about it. None of them bumps into me, either, so I don't think they realize I'm hard. I seem to be doing okay. After a few songs, I'm standing in front of Catherine Gill when the music starts and we're dancing.

She's wearing a dress. I don't know where her hips are, exactly, but I put my hands where I think they are and then I slide down until I feel them, careful not to be gropey. My hands are sweaty, but I don't think she'll be able to feel it, and I wonder if my shirt is still damp but she doesn't say anything. "I like your party," I say.

"My mom just had this deck added on," she says, and right then, right when she says this, someone bumps into her from behind and she knocks into me, bumps full on into my wood.

"Sorry," she says. "I—"

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm sorry about the badminton."

"The what?"

I don't know what else I can say or what I should do. If one of us says "shuttlecock," I think I'll die.

"Oh, let's just dance," she says, and I do that, I just dance with her, listening to the music—a slow song I don't know the name of—and somehow I keep my mouth closed.

All the cool kids in my class are on that porch, dancing, and there isn't much talking, which seems okay. The night is warm, and my shirt is dry. I see them all around me; I'm dancing with Catherine Gill and everyone else is

there. There's a light on Catherine's face that doesn't seem to be on any of the others' and her smile is brighter than anyone else's. I hold my hands on her tightly, and sway with her slowly, as slowly as we can, until the song is entirely over.

Catherine slides away, smiling, and after that I take a break. Allen Sherman's by the chips and carrot sticks. "Pretty good party," he says.

"Yeah." I'm afraid he'll accuse me of liking Catherine Gill, but he goes off to dance with Stacy Zimmerman.

Pretty soon someone says it's the last song, and then before I know it, the party starts winding down. I go over to Catherine to thank her, and I tell her I'm glad I came. "Thank *you*," she says. "It was nice of you to be here."

I sneak away from the others and take my bike, go the wrong direction for a block so I don't have to ride past all the mothers picking people up, then cross back over to my street and head home. Catherine's smile looked prettier than ever when she said goodbye to me, the air's blowing past and it's like the bike is going on its own, I'm hardly pedaling. I hold my hands up off the handlebars for one second, two, before clapping them back down. Something about the whole night, the party, my shirt, dancing with Catherine seems funny; I start laughing. "It's all okay," I say out loud, to no one. The wind's rushing past me and I almost feel like I'm flying—this is how I should've dried my shirt, I realize.

I start pedaling faster when I see the hill coming. I want to ride it as fast as I can. Even if there's a big street at the bottom, with cars, I feel like I can fly down the hill and there won't be anyone in my way. I want to ride it fast this one time, can feel there won't be cars coming. Everything will be fine. *I'm going to ride the hill.* I pedal harder to get there going as fast as I can, and then at the top I stand on the pedals, leaning over the handle bars, feeling the wind on my face. The air's blowing faster than ever, the ground beneath my feet is a blue of dark concrete, the circle of light from the streetlight flashing past beneath me. Though the big street's coming, I don't slow down. I don't even look up. I watch the pavement flying past beneath me. I'm going like lightning. At the bottom I'm going faster than I ever have. The world is silence and stillness.

All around I can see the houses I've always seen, only now I feel like I know them, understand all of what's going on inside, who these people are and why they should feel the way they do about us. I see the trees on our neighbors' lawns, the grass freshly groomed, and the squared-off fine hedges lining the foundation of their homes. Behind the lights in the windows they are happy and I'm looking toward our house, trying to get a sense of how our windows look from the outside, when I hear the first horn. The first screech of brakes.

Then I see the truck.

I hear his screeching brakes and the horn but he's right on top of me and I pull my brakes as hard as I can, and skid on the ground, falling. My leg's caught underneath, under my bike, and I slide on it; the truck's brakes make a sound like an eagle screaming but it's stopping, it stops before it hits me. When everything resumes my bike is still between my legs with the truck's lights blaring right at me.

The driver opens his door and gets out, runs around to the front where I am. "You all right, kid?" I can see his dark pants in the headlights. He is a big man.

"I think so," I say.

He picks me up under the armpits. "Let me see you," he says. My leg hurts to stand on and my hands sting. My elbow hurts. The man bends down, puts his face in front of mine, his eyes glaring. "Do you know you could have killed yourself!" he says. "I didn't see you. I could've hit you! Do you realize that?"

I sit down, trying not to cry. I can see the blood on my hands.

"Do you see this?" the man says, pointing at his truck. "This is a truck! Do you understand what that means? Let me show you something!" He bends down then, and holding his hair apart with both hands, shows me his scalp. I see a line across his head where the brown hair doesn't grow. A white line. "Do you know how I got this?"

he says. "Just like that," he says, pointing to the truck. "Riding my bike when I was young and dumb as you. Not looking, no helmet, just like you. You see that scar? Twenty-five stitches it took. And I was *lucky!*"

I can't help it anymore; I start crying.

He shows me his scalp again. "I almost just killed you, kid. Do you understand that?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know," the man says, shaking his head.

"Can you stand?" he asks. I nod and he helps me up. He lets go of me, picks up my bike. "Where do you live?"

"Over there," I lie, pointing behind some houses down the street. "I'm okay," I tell the man. "I can walk home."

"You were lucky," the man says, shaking his head. "You got to be more careful next time. This is a hell of a thing this life." He pulls my face up by my chin so that I'm looking into his eyes. "You want to lose it?" I shake my head, wiping the tears off my cheeks. "I didn't think so." He puts my bike on the sidewalk, then walks around to the front of his truck, spits a long, dark stream on the road, and gets in.

My bike's handle-grip is scraped off on its side, on the side that I fell. It's a white grip that had ridges full-around it, but now they're scraped so that the plastic's flat on that side and I can see the metal underneath. The handle bar seems turned in a little, curved more than it should be, like my father's finger.

When I push it, the front tire wobbles, but the bike still rolls. I walk it back up the hill, to the garage, and lay it on the grass behind my house. I don't want to cry, but I am, and then, walking up the porch steps in the dark, I see the kitchen light still on, and my dad at the table. I stand up straight and wipe off my face.

When I go in, he looks up and I can see his face go from good to bad. He gets up and comes over. "What *happened* to you?" he says.

"I fell."

He holds my thigh steady and touches my knee. "Does this hurt?" He brings me to the sink and holds my hands under the cold running water. I can see bits of white skin wiggling on my palms. He rubs my back. "Do you feel okay?" he says this, getting the paper towels.

"I'm sorry," I say, trying not to cry.

My dad hugs me, holding my head against his chest.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"It's okay, Noah," he says. "I know you didn't. Of course you didn't." He holds me until I stop crying, then puts my hands back under the cold water. They're stinging, tingly with the cold. "How was your party?" he asks. I nod and move my hands out of the water to let him wet a paper towel. He kneels down and rolls up my pants leg, touches the scrape gently. "Run some cold water on that elbow, Noah."

I roll up my sleeve and hold my arm under the cold. It shocks at first, and I see blood running down the drain. "I danced, Dad."

"I'm glad, Noah."

For some reason I laugh. “It was fun, Dad. The people were nice. Even the girls.” I watch the water take the dirt away from my elbow. It comes clean and I can see the fresh white of the scrape.

That’s when Tammy walks in; she’s standing at the back door, with Mike. I stand up straight and wipe my face off with the backs of my hands. “What happened to *you*?” she asks, rushing over.

“He fell.”

“It’s just a scrape,” I say.

“A couple scrapes!” She takes my hands in hers, holds my palms up to see. “Oh, Noah,” she says.

“I fell off my bike.”

Very lightly, she kisses my left palm and then my right.

“He went to the party,” my dad says. “Even danced with girls!”

Tammy’s face brightens. “You danced?” She makes a sweep around the kitchen as if she’s waltzing, and finishes with a spin and a curtsy. “With girls?”

“Not like that,” I say. I can’t help laughing.

“Of course not big guy. But you danced.”

My dad stands up. He pats my shoulder and holds my elbow up to take a look.

“And were the ladies all very crazy about you?” Tammy asks. “Because they *will* be.” She steps closer, almost as if *we’re* dancing, and she touches her finger to the end of my nose. Then she kisses me, right on the side of my face. Mike laughs.

“Let’s head up, Tam.”

“Okay,” she says. “Night, Tiger.” She winks and follows Mike upstairs.

“We should get you up to bed,” my dad says, closing the door behind them. He puts his arm around my shoulders and leads me into the dining room. “I’m glad you had a good time,” he says.

I’m still thinking about Tammy’s kiss. As we limp across the rug, I try not to look at the holes in the table, but I see them, all three. I know the table’s worse than my bike, but I think of the plastic grip and the bent handlebars. “Can you tell me if my bike’s okay, Dad? The handlebars bent a little, but I think it’ll ride.” I try to turn back toward the kitchen. “Come see it.”

“You’ll show me tomorrow, Noah.”

“I want to show you now, Dad. My bike’s okay, I think, but we should see.” I look at my palms, the red still tender.

“In the morning,” he says. He rubs the back of my head, squeezes my neck. “It’s late,” he says, and turns me back toward the stairs.

We move into the front hall together, my dad’s hand under my arm, and when I see the staircase, I remember we forgot to do our exercises. When I tell my dad he just says, “You’ve had enough excitement for today, pal. Maybe we should take a few days off to let you heal.” He pats my back. “We have to get you better.”

“We can do the other ones,” I say. “Even if my leg hurts and my hands, we can still work on our midsections.”

“We’ll see,” he says.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him, and I think I *will* be fine: I danced with Catherine Gill at a real party, my bike will ride, and Tammy kissed my face. Everything is fine.

“Come on now, Noah. Up to bed.” He points me toward the stairs, holding my arm so I can hop up without bending my knee.

I don’t want my dad to start missing workouts, though, or for his back to get soft, so I squeeze him around his middle with both arms. I tell him, “We’ll do our sit-ups, Dad. Tomorrow morning. We’ll rebuild our backs into iron.”