

cloud dancing

a short short
story collection

j thomas erant

CLOUD DANCING

A Short Short Story Collection

by

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forces

CLOUD DANCING

On Kite Hill, children flitter about like butterflies while their parents sit patiently under perfectly blue skies, pleasantly oblivious to the shouts of joy and rings of laughter.

The man sitting alone in the shade of a small dogwood is equally unaware. He has other distractions to keep him occupied. His ears are tuned to the gentle breeze rustling the leaves, his eyes glued to the heavens. He'd come hoping to see dragons or Martian spaceships, maybe even Abraham Lincoln's head; instead, all he finds are wispy white clouds.

As a child, he spent hours upon hours looking up at the clouds from that very spot. Each one told a different story, each one held a different secret. Now, when he looks up, all he sees are clouds. No sad-eyed elephants, no three-masted clipper ships and, sadly, no dead presidents either.

Of course, things are different now. He's older, wiser, and his mind is less willing to give itself up to imagination. If he had known that being an adult would mean looking for the Buddha and finding only clouds, he never would have been so damned eager to grow up in the first place.

"What are you doing?"

The voice seems to come from nowhere and everywhere, at the same time. It surrounds him, enveloping him with its concern. His first thought is that it's merely his mind playing tricks on him, and, normally, he would simply dismiss it as static, but there is something undefinable about the voice: it seems to sing to him like a siren's song. So he turns back, expecting to find one of the bored housewives hovering over his shoulder. Instead, he finds a dream.

Enveloped in the warm glow of sunlight, backed by the softest cerulean blue, she looks every bit like an angel. He looks into her as though she were a reflection and allows himself to become lost in her grace. She, in turn, looks at him with a hint of curiosity and amusement flickering in her eyes. Her gaze is unabashed and intense, but there's

something comfortable in the way she's looking at him. They haven't been like that for a very long time.

"When you were a kid, didn't you ever look up at the sky, hoping to find animals or people's faces in the shapes of the clouds?"

"Sure, everyone does," she concedes as she sits down beside him, allowing her knee to brush lightly against his thigh. "My mother used to call it 'cloud dancing'."

"What does she call it now?"

She smiles the smile of a Cheshire cat and answers, "A waste of time."

Lately, he's been having the same thought. But a part of him wants so badly to believe that there's more to it than simply a child's game.

"What about you?" he asks, trying to change the subject. "Do you still do it? Go 'cloud dancing' I mean."

"No."

That one simple word slams into him, hard. It feels so callous and cold, so very different from what he expected.

"Why not?"

She tilts her head slightly to the right, purses her soft pink lips and ponders his question. It's a familiar look. "Because," she answers, "It's not real."

"But wasn't it fun?" he wonders, out loud.

Amused by his childlike tone, she replies as honestly as she can. "Sure it was ... in a silly, puerile sort of way."

Her gaze is so incredibly direct, so unyielding, that he just has to look away. So he returns his gaze skyward, but he isn't expecting any great revelations. Then it hits him, the sudden recollection that it isn't the seeing that really matters. The important thing is in the looking. Effortlessly, like morning light through sheer curtains, the amorphous clouds seem more quixotic, more animated. And the man thinks he almost sees a dolphin playing at the edges of infinity.

"What do you see?" she asks, whispering softly in his ear.

The warmth of her breath tickles his spine. Something about her tone, or maybe the softness of her words, drips with sincerity. She actually seems to care and that surprises

him. Despite the odd sensation of belonging, the fact remains that she doesn't really know him. Not really. There she is, though, sitting with him on the top of Kite Hill surrounded by happy children and dandelion spores. He wants to tell her about the dolphin, but he knows that there are things much more mysterious than clouds; things much more beautiful than infinity.

Her face is so close to him, her lips only a breath away, and his chest feels as if it is about to cave in on itself. There are so many things he wants to say, so many thoughts he wants to share. He thinks to himself, *I see what I have been looking for my entire life. What has eluded me until you spoke and gave me meaning.* The words get caught in his teeth, though.

“What do you see?” she asks again.

“I see love,” he answers.

BOBBY GENTRY, I HATE YOUR GUTS!

My brother Bobby is so annoying. I hate him. I really do.

Daddy says I should just ignore Bobby, the same way he does, but it's a whole lot harder than you might think. Bobby has this knack for getting a rise out of me. He can always find the right buttons, then he just keeps pushing and pushing until he wears me down. I hate him. I really do.

It's been a long hate, too. Going all the way back to when we were little kids. I reckon it started out like most other brother-sister rivalries, with the usual name calling and 'Who do you love best??' competitions, but it turned into a full-blown hatred of the boy one summer afternoon when I was nine years old. It was on a Tuesday, as I recall.

Bobby and I were at our grandparent's farm. We go there every summer, because school's out and our folks work during the day. I really love their farm. They have this big old two-story white house, a vegetable garden, a great big red barn (with a hay loft and everything!), and it's all surrounded by a forest. We used to sit on the front porch every afternoon, drinking homemade lemonade and telling each other stories while warm summer breezes licked at our ears.

Officially, the forest surrounding their farm is called "Hanson Woods" (on account of it being owned by Old Man Hanson, and whatnot), but Bobby and I know it better as: "Bogeyman Forest".

We'd always heard stories about Bogeyman Forest. About the time Daddy nearly got himself killed by a bear. And, then again, about the time he broke his leg trying to swing from tree to tree, using a vine like he was Jungle Jim or something. But I reckon our favorite story was about the time Daddy followed Tolley Creek all the way past Hanson Hill, even though Gramps told him not to go and discovered "Red Rock Pond". It was called Red Rock Pond because of this really big, red rock at one end, and the way he went on and on about that pond, you'd think it was some kind of heaven on earth; the prettiest sight this

side of Shangri-La or something.

But that was like a hundred years ago, and Bogeyman Forest had changed a lot since then. Daddy said it wasn't safe for kids anymore, so Bobby and I weren't allowed to go in the woods; which didn't bother me, because, once, I saw this humongous snake come out the woods and it scared me something fierce. I hate snakes. I really do.

But that's not the story I want to tell. Sometimes, I'm bad about getting off the point. Gran says I'm the only person she knows who can start off talking about learning long division and end up talking about Jimmy Watson's crazy cowlick ... it's real weird, it looks like a wave or something. He tried to put Crisco on it one day to keep it down but that just made it worse because it stuck straight out and looked like a unicorn's horn. But, anyway, back to Bobby....

It was around the middle of summer (late July, I'd say), and I was outside playing under the pecan tree with my favorite doll, Queenie. Actually, Queenie wasn't so much a doll as she was an ear of corn. Gramps was shucking corn one day, and I was bored, so Gran took one of the ears out of the bushel basket and drew a face on it with one of her magic markers and, just like that, I had myself a doll ... a really great doll, at that. The best part was that the corn-silk looked just like real hair (I could comb it and everything). I loved Queenie. I don't think Gramps was all that happy, though ... he called it a waste of a perfectly good ear of corn. But he let me keep it anyway.

Come to think of it, I'd probably still have Queenie today if Bobby hadn't cut all of her hair off just to get back at me for making a better grade than him in science. I hate him. I really do.

So, anyway, there I was, playing under the tree, minding my own business, when I saw Bobby walking towards me. I knew he was coming over to bug me, so I took a deep breath and reminded myself to just ignore him like Daddy said.

"What'cha doin'?" he asked.

Bobby was always asking stupid questions like that.

"Nothin'."

That's all I said. Of course, what I really wanted to say was: What's it look like I'm doin'? I'm playing with Queenie, you stupid goober. But I couldn't say that, because the

trick to ignoring people is to say as little as possible ... my daddy taught me that.

"Good," he said as he sat down in the shade ... in my shade.

I knew what he was doing, so I braced myself. Bobby made a big deal about wiping the sweat off his brow, but I knew he was faking because it was still early and, besides, it wasn't even hot yet.

"I just finished readin' a great story. Wanna know what it was about?"

"Nope."

I'm real good about saying as little as possible.

"Yep. I found it up in the attic...."

"What were you doin' up in the attic?" I interrupted. That was a mistake, I know, but Gramps never let me go up in the attic, and it chapped my hide that Bobby could.

Bobby just shrugged and said, "Gran told me to go up and get a suitcase down. I think maybe they're goin' to visit Aunt Olive next weekend or somethin'."

I was burning up with envy, but I didn't let it show.

"There's lots of real interestin' stuff up there," he continued. "Like an old timey record player, and a rockin' chair that Gramps built by hand when Dad was just a kid ... like you." Bobby knew how much I hated to be called a kid.

"And boxes. Lots of boxes. Boxes by the truck loads! They were filled with old clothes, old shoes, old hats ... just about anything and everything you could ever think of finding in a box. I even found a box full of Dad's old toys and books and stuff."

"How'd you know they were Daddy's?" I asked. I really didn't want to ask, but it was like I couldn't help myself ... I just had to.

"Oh, I don't know. I reckon they just looked like stuff he would'a had."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, let's see, there were model airplanes and trains and books about cars and stuff. I even saw his old high school yearbook in there."

"Wow! I'd love to see that," I exclaimed.

Bobby shrugged again. He was always doing that ... he knew how much I hated it.

"Yea, it was interestin'; I'll give it that."

Then he stopped talking long enough to pick up a rock and throw it at a cute little

squirrel (Bobby could be real mean sometimes).

"But what I found that really caught my eye was this book about this guy, he was about my age, I reckon, and he was always doin' this real adventurous stuff. Like once, he built a raft, then he and his buddy floated all the way down the Mississippi River."

"I don't believe you."

I'm still not sure why I said that. Daddy would have been so disappointed in me, but maybe I was interested in what he was saying, after all (just a little bit, mind you).

"No, it's true! Really! This guy, see, he and his friend took off down the river in search of freedom and adventure and stuff. And, man oh man, did they ever find it!"

He was beaming with excitement (he does that sometimes), but I was starting to lose interest. I've never been all that impressed by adventure (me, I've always liked oven sets and mermaids). But Bobby didn't care that I didn't want to listen to him, he just kept right on talking like I was glued to every word.

"You know, I'd love to be able to do somethin' like that. But there's just nothin' adventurous to do round here." He was quiet for a while, while he pondered the idea. Then he looked at me and asked, "Hey, you got any ideas?"

I just kept playing with Queenie. I didn't even say a word.

But he wasn't really interested in my opinion anyway; because almost as quickly as he'd asked the question, he snapped his fingers and said, "Hey, I've got a great idea!"

I hope he knows he's not fooling anybody when he does that.

"You know that pond Dad's always talkin' about? There's probably loads of stuff to do there ... real adventurous stuff!"

"You know we're not allowed to go into the woods."

I knew he knew, but I just wanted to remind him ... it's fun to remind Bobby about the stuff he can't do.

"I know, I know."

He stopped talking and got this serious look on his face, like he was thinking real hard about something. I could tell by the way his ears were turning red and twitching that he was up to no good (Some people fidget when they lie, Bobby's ears twitch).

"But, you know, that was last summer. I'm a lot older now."

"Never gonna happen," I said smugly.

"Yea, you may be right," Bobby conceded. "They'd probably never let me go all the way to Red Rock Pond. Not alone, at least...."

He was definitely up to no good. His ears were shaking like Pudgy May's stomach just before lunchtime.

"But who could I get to go with me? Gran wouldn't want to go, that's for sure. Maybe Gramps would be willin'? I doubt it, though ... he said somethin' about goin' over to Old Man Hanson's farm this afternoon. Nah, that wouldn't work ... but who else would want to go?"

I knew what he was doing and I decided to go ahead and stop him before he got started. "I ain't goin' with you, Bobby. And you can't make me, so don't even try."

Bobby looked at me like I was stupid and said, "Don't be ridiculous! Why would I ever ask you? I mean, gee-whiz, you're just a girl."

"What's that supposed to me," I countered angrily.

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all. It's just that everybody knows a girl can't take care of herself in the woods. If I let you tag along, you'd probably just get in the way."

I was starting to get pretty steamed, let me tell you, but I didn't respond. Sticks and stones, and all that jazz. Meanwhile, Bobby was yapping his head off; telling me I couldn't do this and I couldn't do that, all because I was "just a girl", and that this was no different. I hate it when he does that. I really do.

But I kept quiet. Then he said, "Yessiree. Just about everybody with half a brain knows that." He paused for a couple of long seconds before taking the cheapest shot of all: "That's why I get to go up into the attic ... and you don't."

That was just more than I could bear. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, you goober," I screamed. "I'll show you! I can do anything you can do!"

"You can't go up into the attic. And you most certainly ain't brave enough to go to the pond with me," he gloated.

"Anytime you're ready," I challenged. I was so angry that I stood up and put my hands on my hips, just like Mommy always does when she's trying to make a point.

With a wicked little smirk on his face, Bobby said, "Well, fine, if that's the way you wanna be. But don't come cryin' to me when ya get scared."

"I AIN'T GONNA GET SCARED!"

It took about all of one whole second for me to realize what had happened. He'd tricked me into doing what he wanted to do ... again. I was so angry I wanted to scream, but it was already too late for me to say "no, I don't want to go" without looking like a scaredy-cat. And, what's worse, Bobby would have thought he was right, and I knew I'd never hear the end of that. I hate him. I really do.

Bobby said something about getting ready, then he ran over to the barn. About five minutes later, he came back carrying two bamboo fishing poles. He looked goofier than ever, because he was wearing one of Gran's old straw hats and he had his pants legs rolled up all the way to his knees. I had to laugh when I saw him, I couldn't help myself.

"Shut up," he said. It felt good to make him feel bad, like he was always doing to me.

"Here, hold this a sec," he said and handed me an old tin cup.

"What's in there?" I asked. He didn't answer, so I looked inside and saw a mess of worms wriggling around each other like spaghetti. "Ewww!!!" But Bobby didn't care; he reached right in there and pulled out a handful of worms. Then he stuffed them into his pocket; that's what really got me. "That's so gross!" My whole body was tied in a knot, like when the teacher rakes her fingernails across the blackboard to get everyone's attention.

Bobby just laughed, then he took a corncob pipe out of his other pocket and put it in his mouth. I'd seen it before. Our cousin Thomas used it in a school play once. I don't know where Bobby found it, but he looked so smug and pompous with that pipe in his mouth ... like he was somebody important or something. I didn't say anything to him at the time, but I thought to myself: If he smokes that pipe, I' am so gonna tell Mother.

"OK, let's go," he said.

"What about Gramps?" I asked.

"What about 'im?"

I had always known that Bobby was stupid, but I had no idea he was that stupid.

"Do you really think he's gonna let us go?"

Bobby smiled that wicked smile of his (Bobby was a real charmer, I won't lie to you), and said, "Listen carefully, I'm gonna let you in on a secret. It's maybe the most important thing you'll ever learn, so remember it just as long as you live...."

"Never, ever, ask questions that you don't want the answers to."

I didn't say anything at all. I just sat there looking at him, like he was some kind of nut or something.

"Do ya know what I'm talkin' about? Do ya see what I'm gettin' at?"

I was afraid to ask, but I knew he'd tell me, anyway.

"They won't be able to tell us we can't go, if we don't ask 'em."

My big brother Bobby; he was quite the morality teacher.

"OK," Bobby continued. "You go inside and spend some time with Gran. Go ask her for a drink of water or somethin'."

"Why?"

Bobby rolled his eyes, like it was a hassle for him to talk to me. "Think about it. If we're gone for a long time, someone's bound to notice. It's been about an hour since they saw either one of us, so they'll probably start wonderin' where we are soon. But, if they see us now, we'll have more time before that start missing us. Understand?"

I nodded. Bobby was real smart about stuff like that.

"Now, go inside and make sure Gran sees you."

He could tell by the look on my face that I was scared, so he gave me some suggestions. "Ask her for a drink of water; or maybe talk to her or somethin'? I'll call you out in a few minutes."

I was still a little bit scared, so he said, "Don't worry. I'm tellin' ya, they'll never even know we're gone. It'll be great!"

I knew he was probably right, but I was so nervous when I went inside and found Gran washing dishes that my voice cracked when I asked for a drink of water. I thought she was onto me when she asked, "So, what are you and Bobby doin' this afternoon?"

I hadn't expected that question. All I could think was: We are going to sneak off to Red Rock Pond, but I knew I couldn't say that. So I just stood there, with my mouth wide open, but no words came out. I mean, it's one thing to keep a secret from someone, but it's something altogether different to tell a boldfaced lie. I was just about to spill my guts when I heard Bobby call out my name.

"Bobby wants me to come out and play," I said quickly, hoping with all my heart that

Gran wouldn't ask any more questions.

She just smiled and said, "OK, have fun."

I didn't even thank her for the water. I just turned and left as quickly as I could. I wanted to get out of there so fast that I nearly broke my neck running down the steps.

"How'd it go?" Bobby asked. "Did she fall for it?"

"I think so," I panted.

"OK then, let's go," Bobby exclaimed. He propped the bamboo fishing pole on his shoulder, and off we went into the deep dark of Bogeyman Forest.

We entered the woods behind the barn, where an old tire hangs from my favorite pecan tree (and where I saw that snake I was telling you about earlier). And I have to confess, it was pretty exciting to be sneaking away like that. I mean, there's something fun about doing things you're not supposed to do, you know? But even that feeling of guilty pleasure (that's what Mommy calls something that you like even though you know you shouldn't) couldn't make me feel happy about what we were doing. I wasn't really worried about getting into trouble; I just don't like those woods. In fact, I hate them. I really do. It must have something to do with all of that dirt and all of those dangerous animals, I think.

But it didn't take long for my nervousness to become plain old boredom. We had been walking for hours without seeing anything interesting. Well, maybe we hadn't been walking for hours (the truth of the matter is that I over-exaggerate, sometimes), but we definitely hadn't seen anything even remotely interesting, and that's not a lie.

"Bobby, this is stupid. I wanna go back. I'm not havin' any fun, and you told me I'd have loads of fun."

Bobby didn't even look back at me. "Fine. You can go back anytime you want," he said over his shoulder. "But I'm not goin' back with ya."

He paused before saying, "You can make it back on your own, can't ya?" He asked it like it was a question, but it wasn't really a question because he already knew the answer.

"You know I can't go back alone!"

(I wanted to add "You stupid, beaver-toothed freak" ... Bobby had unusually big front teeth).

I was stuck, and he knew it. There was no way I could get back to the farm by myself,

I'd get lost for sure. All I could do was follow Bobby to the pond, and plot his untimely demise in my mind (which, of course, I did).

We kept walking until, finally, we came across a really steep hill. "This must be Hanson Hill," Bobby said. "We should be able to see the pond from the top."

I was hot and tired, and climbing up that stupid hill was about the last thing in the world I wanted to do, but Bobby was already scrambling his way up before I could complain.

It had rained the night before, so the ground was really muddy and slippery. We had to use roots and small pine trees (and sometimes even rocks) to help pull ourselves up. And just before I reached the top of the hill, I stubbed my toe on a tree stump or something. It really hurt, but I knew that I couldn't start crying because Bobby would just make fun of me.

At the top, I sat down on the ground and took off my shoe (to see if my toe had fallen off ... it felt like maybe it had); all the while thinking to myself: I hate this ... and I hate him. I really do.

That's when I saw it. A blinding light coming in through the trees, kind of like a single ray of sunshine slipping through a bunch of clouds. It was so bright that I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't make myself look away. It was so beautiful. "What is that?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Bobby was grinning like the man in the moon.

"That's it," he said.

He had this excited look in his eyes, and he began looking for a way to get off the hill. I think he was going to just slide down, but then he found something akin to an actual path. The next thing I know, he screamed, "Let's go!" and took off down the hill just as fast as he could go, whooping and hollering like a madman. And I was right behind him (hurt toe and all).

I'm a little bit ashamed to say it, but I was starting to feel excited about the trip. I mean, we were close, and it was kind of fun running down that hill (especially when I saw Bobby slip and fall down on his behind). But, like Mommy is always telling me, I'm something of a worry-wart, and I couldn't help but notice that the path we were on was

actually leading away from the pond rather than toward it. Bobby was so confident, it never even occurred to me that he might not know where we were going. I just sort of assumed that he did; I mean, who would be stupid enough to go into Bogeyman Forest without knowing how to get where they were going? Then I remembered ... Bobby would be that stupid.

"Wait!"

Bobby stopped dead in his tracks and looked back at me. He had this stupid look on his face. "What!?"

"Do you even know where we are?" I asked.

"Sure," he said smugly. "We're...." He was scratching the back of his head and looking all around, like he'd lost something. That's when I saw his ears twitch.

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!" I was screaming. "We're lost! How could you let this happen!?"

I was furious with him, and I only got madder when he said, "Don't worry." There we were, lost somewhere in the middle of Bogeyman Forest; I wasn't about to not worry.

Bobby never worried about anything. I used to envy that about him, but then I realized that there's a real fine line between being brave and being stupid.

But, as always, Bobby acted like he knew exactly what he was doing. He led us this way and that through the woods; past a big hornet's nest, over a deep gully (Bobby almost fell in, because he was goofing as he walked across the fallen tree trunk that we were using as a bridge ... it would have served him right, too), and all the way past Old Man Hanson's cabin (it was old and abandoned, but I heard that he used to make moonshine there). There was a rusty old tractor beside it, and I wanted to stop and look at it, but Bobby was in such an all-fire hurry to reach the pond that he refused to stop (even for a rest). I'd never seen him that determined before.

I, on the other hand, was getting tired and starting to lose patience. In fact, the thought of going back alone wasn't looking quite so bad to me anymore. But just before I could say, "I'm outta here", we stumbled across Tolley Creek.

It was exciting, because we knew Tolley Creek went right to Red Rock Pond.

Only we still had a problem: We didn't know which way to go. Bobby made a big

scene, acting like he knew exactly what to do. He'd been a boy scout, sure, but he had never been a very good one. But he thought he knew it all, so he spit on the tip of his finger, held it in the air and said, "Wind's comin' in from that direction." Like that even mattered. Then he went over to this big oak tree beside the creek and started looking for moss.

"Hmmmmm...."

"What," I asked anxiously. I was only nine, I didn't know any better.

"Well, seems there's moss on both side's of this tree," he said in a very confused tone that did nothing to inspire my confidence.

He even looked under a stupid rock. "Ahhh, I thought as much. We gotta go that way." He was trying to sound sure of himself, but I knew what was happening ... all that investigating and posturing and, ultimately, he'd decided to just go downstream.

He had a fifty-fifty chance. Lucky for him, he hit the jackpot.

We followed the creek until it disappeared behind a thicket of bushes and briers.

"What now," I asked.

"Wait right here," Bobby said.

I was about to ask him where he was going, but I never got the chance because he was already halfway up the nearest tree.

Gramps says Bobby can climb a tree just like a monkey and I believe him ... he was always the first one up the tree and he can climb up further than anyone I ever knew.

"I can see it," he screamed. "It's over there."

The problem was the thicket standing between us and the pond. "How do we get over there," I asked anxiously.

Bobby dropped down from the tree and said, "Well, as far as I can tell, the briers look to go all the way around, but there's got to be an opening, somewhere. I reckon if we walk around for a while, we're bound to find a way in ... eventually."

So we walked.

And we walked.

And then we walked some more.

It seemed like we'd spent more time walking around the pond than walking to it. I

wasn't happy, and I made sure Bobby knew it. "This pond had better be the best pond in the whole world!"

"Don't worry; it will be."

Despite Bobby's reassuring enthusiasm, we never did find an easy way through the thick briars. Even he was starting to wonder if we'd ever get through to the pond. He didn't say anything, of course, but I could see it in his eyes ... they looked like a deflated football. It would have been the perfect time to say, "I told you so," but he looked so sad and disappointed that I didn't really feel like rubbing it in ... and, let me tell you, that don't happen very often.

Then, suddenly, his eyes got big and wide, and I knew he had found a way in. I looked where he was looking, but all I saw was briars.

"What," I asked.

"There." He pointed and screamed, "There!"

I'd never seen him that excited. To tell the truth, I was beginning to wonder if maybe the disappointment of not being able to get to the pond after we'd come so close had made Bobby go a little bit crazy in the head, but he kept pointing and shouting, "There!" and I looked even harder.

In the end, I had to get down on my knees to see it, but there it was: a little opening under a mess of briars and thorny vines. I could even see the water through the little opening. It was exactly like starlight.

"OK," Bobby said, "Here's what we gotta do. You gotta go through there and see if there's another way in."

"Why me!?"

Bobby rolled his eyes like I was stupid or something (I hate it when he does that) and said, "I'm way too big to fit through that there little opening ... but you'll fit through well enough."

"But what if I don't," I protested.

"You will. Don't be such a baby." Bobby was always calling me a baby; he knew I hated it.

I looked through again, and I had to admit that I could probably fit through a whole

lot easier than he ever could. So I got down on my hands and knees and started to crawl through. I got stuck about halfway through, and let me tell you, I got nervous there for a while. But Bobby he told me to just get all the way down on my belly and wiggle through.

I thought it was kind of neat, at first, because I felt like a snake. Then I started to wonder if there were any real snakes somewhere in there with me, and that made me crawl a whole lot faster.

Finally (it seemed like I was in those briers for about a hundred years), I made it through to the other side, and found myself beside the most beautiful place I'd ever seen in real life. It was amazing. The water was bluer than Teddy Morrison's eyes (and he's got the bluest eyes in the whole wide world) and it was surrounded by sand; like at the beach.

The first thing I noticed was the giant rock at the other end of the pond. I didn't believe Daddy when he said the rock was red, but it really was ... it was the same color as Kevin Cullen's hair. It was sticking way out over the water, looking like it might fall in at any time. I felt like it was calling to me, somehow. I was drawn to it the same way gravity pulls old apples off the tree.

Right about then, I was beginning to think that maybe (just maybe, mind you) I'd been too hard on Bobby. But when I looked around for another way through the briers, I saw him standing right beside the pond.

Not ten yards from where I had crawled through that muddy, snake-infested thicket of briers (on my belly!), Bobby had found a clearing and walked in with no problems whatsoever! I bet he even knew about it before he told me to crawl through. He was always doing stuff like that. I hate him. I really do.

I was so mad I wanted to scream. In fact, I did tell him that I was going to tell Sue Ellen Krupp that he liked her, but he never heard my threat; his eyes were glued to the big red rock, and I could tell by the way he was gawking that it was pulling at him the same way it was pulling at me.

Bobby didn't even notice me until he started looking around; looking for a way to get over to the big rock. Our eyes locked for a couple of long seconds (it seemed more like hours, though), then we both turned and looked at the rock again.

I knew I had to get there before he did, because he'd end up hogging the whole

thing if I didn't. He was a lot faster than I was, but I was a lot closer to the rock ... and before he could even think to say, "I've got dibs!" I was already running just as fast as I could go.

It was slow going; it's hard running in sand, especially when you're wearing shoes, but I knew I had to get there first. Sand got in my shoes, and it scratched a lot, but I never let up.

Then I realized that something was terribly wrong.

My legs had stopped moving, and I could feel myself starting to sink. I looked at my legs and saw that I was stuck in a pool of quicksand. I don't know how it happened; I never even saw it, but there I was. And I was sinking even deeper.

Before I could even scream, I'd already sunk all the way down to my knees. As it turned out, that was as deep as the quicksand went, but of course I didn't know that then (I thought I was going to sink forever, like in the movies). All I could think to do was cry.

"Bobby, you idiot! Help me!"

But instead of rushing to help me, his only sister, he just stood there and laughed at me!! There I was, about to die, and he was laughing at me. My own brother! I bet he wanted me to die. I know I wanted him to die.

After I threatened to haunt him for the rest of his life, he finally got a long stick and used it to help pull me out of the muck. But he was laughing the whole time. I hate him. I really do.

At first, I was just happy to be alive, but then I realized that I had a much bigger problem. My jeans were caked in mud and slime, and I just knew that we'd get caught for sure now.

"Quit laughing," I screamed. "This ain't funny! Not funny at all!"

All I could think about was how much trouble we were going to get into.

"This is all your fault! And I'm gonna make sure Daddy knows it!"

That made Bobby stop laughing. He said he had to stop because his stomach was starting to hurt, but he knew good and well that Daddy would whoop him good. He told me to relax because he had a sure fire way to get out of this, and no one would ever be the wiser.

At first, I was skeptical, but I didn't know what else to do so I figured I'd give it a shot. But I promised myself that even if he did manage to find a way to keep Gramps and Granny from finding out what we had done, I was still going to hate him for the rest of his life.

Sometimes, I have to do that ... remind myself not to stop hating him ... because Bobby has this sneaky way of doing something nice every once in a while, when you're not expecting it, and it makes him seem nicer than he really is. He's tricky that way.

"First things first, let's go to the rock," he said.

As we walked over to the rock, Bobby was real careful not to step in any of the quicksand. I followed right behind him, even stepping in his footprints. When we finally reached the rock, Bobby jumped up on it like he was a mountain goat or something. He looked so happy up there that I almost admired him (just a little bit, mind you).

"Move over. I wanna get up on the rock too," I said. I knew he'd hog it ... but he moved over without a fuss; in fact, he even helped pull me up.

We just stood there for a long time, looking out over the pond. It was so pretty, with its bright blue water and millions of little sparkles that looked like tiny stars living just under the water. The only sounds I heard were the buzzing dragonflies and Bobby's heartbeat. And if I hadn't been covered in mud, it probably would have been perfect.

But I was covered in mud, and nothing else mattered. "My legs are still covered in mud," I reminded him.

"Yes they are. But it's just mud, right? So all ya gotta do is wash it off."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Simple. Just go sit on the edge of the rock, there where it sticks out over the water, and stick your legs in. The water'll wash off the mud for you."

I was flabbergasted. "What!? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say!" Then, just for good measure, I said, "And you say a lot of stupid things!"

He didn't say a word; he just smiled.

"There's no way I'm gonna stick my legs in that water."

"It's your funeral," is all he said. He was so smug.

But I wasn't about to let him off the hook. "Bobby, you idiot! If I stick my legs in the

water, my jeans'll get soaking wet. And then what am I supposed to tell Gran!?"

I'm actually astounded by his ignorance, sometimes.

But Bobby explained that it was the only way. "Besides," he added, "it's a really hot day; the sun will dry you off quick enough."

I wanted to go back and get some dry clothes, and he knew it.

"Don't worry, we'll go back directly. I promise."

So I sat down at the edge of the rock and stuck my feet in the water, shoes and all. I wanted to clean my shoes first, so they could start drying ... there's nothing worse than having to walk in squishy shoes. I hate it. I really do.

The rock was a whole lot bigger than it looked, and I couldn't quite stick my legs in deep enough to wash off all the mud. I told Bobby, and he said I should either scoot up closer to the edge and stretch my legs or I could just take off my jeans and wash them by hand.

Now, I know the second idea was the real winner, but I don't like being naked in front of other people. I never have. And I know Bobby's my brother and all, but I didn't want to do it. You never know when a complete stranger might suddenly come up and see you in your underwear. I mean, if you really think about it, people always seem to show up unexpectedly when you least expect it ... and, like my daddy says, that's just an embarrassing moment waiting to happen. But I'm sure I don't have to tell you that.

So, I scooted up close to the edge and stretched my legs out just as far as they could go. I wish I were taller, like Bobby (he gets everything ... I hate him; I really do). Well, anyway, I must've gotten too close to the edge, because the next thing I knew, I was slipping into the pond!

At first, I didn't know what had happened. I was splashing around and screaming my head off, because I don't swim all that well (Bobby says I swim like a rock ... he's real funny, ha ha ha). All I could hear was the sloshing water and my own muffled screams, but after a couple of seconds, I heard another sound. I heard Bobby laughing at me ... again.

"Quit laughing!" I was so angry that I accidentally swallowed some pond water; it tasted like dead fish.

"This is the last straw! I'm gonna tell Daddy! And you're gonna be in all kinds of

trouble!" He was still laughing. "Do you hear me!?" I screamed. "I'm serious! Now get me outta here!"

Bobby helped pull me get back up on the rock, but it was pretty obvious that he thought my falling into the water was about the funniest thing that had ever happened.

I was fuming. "That's right, you just keep laughing. Laugh all you want, big man. You'll get yours. You just wait." But Bobby just kept laughing, even worse than before.

"I'm gonna kill you dead, Bobby Gentry," I screamed. And I meant it too.

Bobby wasn't even fazed, though. He just kept laughing and telling me that the mud had been washed off. "You got what you wanted," he said (through the chuckles). "So what are you so upset about?" The moron.

"I'm soaking wet," I screamed even louder than before. "We're gonna get caught for sure now."

"Calm down." He jumped off the rock and said, "Here, just lay down on the rock and let the sun do its job. Pretend you're sun bathing; it'll be fun."

He wasn't even the least little bit worried. Nothing ever bothers him. I hate him. I really do.

I didn't have much of a choice (it was either that or going home and hanging my clothes on Gran's clothesline), so I sat down on the rock and made myself comfortable.

Bobby was sprawled out on the beach; he had that stupid corn pipe in this mouth and a glint in his eyes. I asked him if he was comfortable (I tried to sound like Mommy does when she asks a question that she already knows the answer to), and Bobby said there was nothing better in the whole wide world. The way he looked, all content and warm, I had to believe him, and so I did the same.

I was so comfortable, in fact, that I closed my eyes and almost went to sleep. I could feel myself getting drier. I especially liked the feeling when my eyelids got hot. It was the happiest I'd been all day.

Then all of that peace and harmony was torn away by Gramps' loud voice.

"Bobby! Susan! Bobby! Susan!"

Each time he called our names, we could tell that he was getting closer and closer.

Bobby jumped to his feet like a jackrabbit. I swear, I had never seen him move that

fast (and he set a record for the fifty-yard dash once).

I started crying, and Bobby told me to shut up.

"I hate you, Bobby Gentry! I really mean it; I hate you!"

I knew I shouldn't have said that out loud, but I was really upset. I was about to get into trouble for something that wasn't even my fault.

"What are we gonna do, Bobby? What are we gonna do?" I pleaded.

Bobby was looking all around, trying to find an escape. "I don't know," is all he could say.

"Well, isn't that great!" I was screaming and crying. I just knew this was going to be the worst trouble either of us had ever been in ... even worse than the time Bobby put a dead raccoon in our neighbor's mailbox.

Bobby handed me my shoes and told me to put them on.

"Why? What are we gonna do?" I asked.

"The only thing we can do," Bobby said. Gramps' voice was getting louder ... and that meant he was getting closer. "I reckon we'll just have to turn ourselves in."

"But we'll get in trouble," I protested.

"We're already in trouble," he said. "If we fess up now, our punishment won't be nearly as bad."

Punishment. I hadn't thought about that. I mean, I knew we were going to get in a lot of trouble, but it hadn't actually occurred to me that we might be punished.

"What do you think they'll do to us?" I asked apprehensively.

But before Bobby could answer, Gramps walked through the opening that Bobby had found earlier.

"Get over here," he bellowed. His voice was so big and loud that it echoed over the water and through the bushes, sending a flock of black birds into the sky. Gramps was as angry as I had ever seen him ... and I've seen him get pretty angry.

I put on my shoes and followed Bobby back to the other side of the pond. When we got there, Gramps didn't say a single word, he just turned and started walking back to the farm. I guess he must have been too angry to speak. I didn't know what to do; it's bad enough when adults scream, but it's even worse when they won't even speak.

Eventually, the silent treatment got to me, so I blurted out, "I'm sorry, Gramps."

He didn't respond, at first. Then I noticed the vein in his neck starting to bulge. That was a sure fire sign that he was about to blow his top.

At first, he only screamed at Bobby ... which wasn't so bad. In fact, I was actually kind of enjoying it, until he saw me trying not to smile. That's when he started screaming at me (I didn't like that quite so much).

"Bobby does stupid stuff like this all the time. But you..." he paused to find just the right words (the look on his face told me everything: he was really disappointed in me). "You're supposed to be smarter than this."

"I'm sorry." I must have said that a million times.

Gramps wasn't interested in apologies, though. All he said was, "No, you're not. If you were really sorry, you wouldn't have done it in the first place."

Then Bobby did something completely unexpected, he spoke up for me. He hadn't said a single word since Gramps found us. He never even said he was sorry. To tell the truth, I doubt if he even heard Gramps screaming at him. He just shuffled along, looking at the ground, and I automatically assumed that it had all gone in one ear and back out the other. Bobby was real good at doing that. But, suddenly, he looked Gramps right in the eye and said, "Don't blame her. I made her come along. She didn't even want to, but I made her come, anyway."

Gramps looked at me and asked, "Is that true?"

It was strange. I was so scared and confused that I couldn't even look at Gramps when I answered the question. Come to think of it, I couldn't even bring myself to say, "That's exactly what happened!" All I could do was stare at the ground and nod.

Gramps lightened up some, but he was still plenty mad.

"That may well be," he conceded. "But she still should've known better."

Then he stopped dead in his tracks, turned to look at us and said, "What the Hell were you thinkin'!?"

The vein in his neck was about to burst, but I don't think he was talking to either of us in particular. I think he was just asking because he felt like that was a question that needed to be asked.

"I don't know," Bobby answered. He never knew how to leave well enough alone.

"We were just lookin' for somethin' to do, I guess. You know ... an adventure."

Gramps looked like he was about to explode he was so mad. Bobby had said all the wrong things, but he didn't look scared at all; in fact, when Gramps wasn't looking, Bobby even winked at me. I didn't know if I should envy him or feel pity for him.

"I mean, you and Dad are always tellin' us about the neat stuff ya'll did when you were our age; about all the great adventures ya'll had ... and I guess I just wanted a story of my own."

He was good.

"You know, something I can tell my own kids ... and maybe even my grandkids ... about some day."

He was real good.

Gramps relaxed a little. That is to say, his face wasn't quite as red as before and the vein was getting smaller. Bobby was pushing all of the right buttons, doing what he did best ... manipulate.

"Say, how'd you find us, anyway?" he asked.

Gramps relaxed a lot. In fact, he actually smiled.

"Sonny boy, I know these woods like the back of my hand."

That was all it took to get him started. Before I knew it, he was telling us about how he discovered Red Rock Pond when he was even younger than us, and about going fishing with Daddy back in the day. He even told us about the time Daddy went to the pond without permission; he'd built a homemade raft using old logs and kudzu vines, but by the time Gramps finally found him, the raft had started coming apart and Daddy was stranded in the middle of the pond (Daddy never told us that part of the story).

I forced myself to look at Gramps, and I saw that he was in his own little world. Bobby looked over at me and smiled. I had to smile back. I didn't want to, but I just couldn't help myself. I mean, he was always trying to trick me and get me in trouble; and he always laughed when bad things happened to me, but he was still my brother ... and while I might not like him very much, I do love him.

I really do.

RUN

Abner Johnson wakes slowly, as all young boys must. First comes the soft orange glow slipping in through his closed eyelids like the hum of faded neon. Then comes the deep, bellowing voice of his father:

“Rise and shine, sleepy-head!”

Abner struggles against the intrusions, tries to remember what he was dreaming about before he was so rudely interrupted, but awareness has already taken hold and filled his mind with unwelcome (but ingrained) responsibilities. He forces his eyes open despite the pain that comes with suddenly brought light. He squints hard, groans just loud enough for his dad to hear, and proceeds to drag himself out of bed.

The solid thump of his bare feet on the thin gray carpet registers in his brain, where it rings louder than the reality of it ever possibly could. He shuffles his feet, dragging the floor all the way down the hallway and to the bathroom, where morning rituals invariably await his practiced hand.

Abner steps up on the foot stool so he can see himself clearly in the mirror. He rubs his eyes and leans in close for a better look. The reflection seems unreal, somehow ... like a vision of himself he once saw in a dream or a photograph. He purses his lips and cups his chin with his left hand. In exactly the same way his father does, Abner massages his smooth jawline and imagines what he'll look like when he's old enough to shave.

Next to the sink, his Evel Knievel electric toothbrush waits on its faux rock launch pad. Without offering a single directed thought, Abner squeezes out a dab of toothpaste on the tiny bristles and raises the toothbrush to his lips. One last look into the mirror, one last attempt to recognize the face staring back at him, and he flicks the switch to “on”. A loud hum fills the small bathroom as the electric toothbrush begins to work its magic. The vibrations excite and awaken Abner as the bristles gently massage his pinkish gums and delightfully small teeth.

After the requisite three minutes, he flicks the toothbrush back to “off” and rinses it under the faucet. A glob of toothpaste drops near the drain and Abner knows he should clean it up, but he just can’t be bothered. Instead, he cups his hands under the water, slurps it into his mouth, swishes it around and spits ... it’s the only part of his morning routine that he genuinely enjoys.

He leans in and looks at his reflection again. This time, though, he smiles wide and examines his teeth. White, like always. What’s the big deal about brushing two times a day?, he wonders aloud ... but not loud enough for his mother to hear.

His sandy-blond hair is disheveled and unruly. It doesn’t matter, though. There is no one Abner needs to impress, really ... it’s not like it’s “picture day” or anything. So instead of trying to put down his cowlick with a dab of water, he simply slaps his cheeks the way his father does after shaving and steps off the footstool.

On his way back to his bedroom, he hears his mom and dad in the kitchen talking about the president. He doesn’t really understand what they’re saying, but he knows his mom doesn’t like the man very much. She thinks he’s a “blowhard asshole” ... two words that Abner learned (the hard way) should not be repeated within earshot of his teacher, Miss Vogt.

Back in his room, Abner reaches into his closet and pulls out his favorite red and blue plaid pants. He wants to wear his koala T-shirt, but his mom demanded that he let her wash it after the grape juice incident so he opts for a burnt-orange long-sleeve T-shirt with purple stripes instead. None of it matches, of course, but he’s still young and doesn’t really care if stripes and plaids don’t go together.

The tangy aroma of grilled sausages and grits waft in from the kitchen, reminding Abner that it’s been nearly twelve hours since he last ate. But he can’t risk going into the kitchen too early. Not this morning ... not on Report Card Day.

Instead, he takes his time getting dressed, spending at least ten minutes just to tie his shoes. Afterwards, he sits on his bed and wonders if his mom will remember. To be honest, he doesn’t even know what kind of grades he can expect, but the anticipation of failure looms heavily in his thoughts. All he can do is hope and delay. It is perhaps the longest fifteen minutes of his young life.

Suddenly, there is a loud knock on the door and Abner's father looks in. He is a big man and his voice fills the room. "Feeling okay, sport? We missed you at breakfast."

Abner has always liked his dad. They share a special kind of bond, more like a friendship than the usual father-son relationship ... a relationship that invariably comes with a certain unmistakable *distance* built into it.

"No problem," Abner assures him. "Just taking my time, this morning."

Abner's dad smiles the smile of fathers; the smile that shows they were once kids too; the smile that says 'I understand'.

"Better hurry up, sport. You don't want to miss the bus."

They wink at each other as Abner shoulders his army green knapsack, heavy with comic books and crayons, and lights out for the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Abner puts his head down and makes directly for the door with a determined pace. Nevertheless, his mom still manages to stop him. She grabs him by the shoulders, spinning him around, looks long and hard into his cerulean blue eyes and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I am," he says with a noticeable tinge of whine in his voice.

"You need some breakfast," his mother says as she puts a blueberry muffin in his hand.

"Thanks, mom."

Abner pockets the muffin, secretly glad to have it, then spins quickly away. Before he can reach the door though, his mother grabs him on the shoulder one more time and swoops in for a goodbye kiss. It's nothing more than a peck on the cheek, but Abner still manages to take offense.

"Geez, mom, do you always have to do that??"

Abner has long believed that his mother's sole purpose in the universe is to embarrass him. He accepts that she might actually be doing it unwittingly ... after all, she was never a young boy, and maybe she simply doesn't know any better.

He has no idea that her thoughts are far darker.

Ever since she read the article in the newspaper about the ten-year-old kid who recently took a sawed-off shotgun to his school because some other kids made fun of his

big ears (or was it his disheveled, unruly hair?), Abner's mom hasn't been able to escape the fear that her own son might not be as safe as she always assumed.

Despite those awful thoughts, she still manages to find amusement in Abner's revulsion. She looks at the twelve-year-old boy squirming away from her and remembers the toddler that used to scream in crowded shops for his mom to take him in her arms and prove her love for all to see. She imagines the day when he'll be a grown man and, once again, he'll eagerly embrace her without shame.

"Be safe," she whispers.

"Yea, yea ... I gotta go, mom."

Abner skips down the steps two at a time. On one hand, glad to have escaped. On the other, terribly worried about disappointing her. Abner doesn't know much about girls, but he has always imagined them to be as soft and fragile as babies' toes. The last thing he wants to do is hurt his mother's feelings, so he makes a solemn promise to himself that he'll really dig in and work harder in math class. He'll do it for her ... he'll make her proud.

Math can wait, though. Today, he has bigger fish to fry. Today, he wants to try and swap an old Batman comic book for Spencer Jacob's 'Spider-man v. The Hulk'. No easy task, believe you me.

Abner bounds down the steps and races out the garage into the cool, open air. The clean air hits like a splash of water and suddenly Abner finds himself happy and optimistic. Math grades, motherly affection, even Spider-man comic books are nothing more than a distant memory. With a renewed sense of freedom and energy, Abner skips down the sidewalk toward the bus stop.

Goliath, the not so aptly named corgi belonging to the next door neighbors, notices Abner's glee and waddles out as quickly as his snub legs will allow. Abner instinctively makes a swinging arc away from the dog, but Goliath adjusts and keeps on coming.

The sight of Goliath running, with his little legs moving twice as fast as they should and his long head bobbing up and down in perfect rhythm with his gait, always makes Abner laugh and smile. So he stops long enough to let Goliath catch up and then reaches down for a quick pat on the head, as all boys must.

Goliath circles around Abner's legs, barking and begging unabashedly for the proper

degree of attention and affection. Dutifully, Abner picks up a nearby stick, tests its durability by bending it and throws it toward a thicket of bushes. Goliath happily bounds off in the direction of the stick, gathers it up in his teeth and brings it back. Abner notices an unmistakable pride in the dog's swagger.

Goliath drops the stick at Abner's feet, sits back on his hind legs, lets his tongue hang loosely to the side of his chin and waits. Abner smiles at Goliath's smug expectation and picks up the stick. Goliath does not make a single move until the stick is thrown, this time in the direction of Goliath's own yard. He darts off quickly though ... and returns much faster than Abner expected.

The bus stop is about one block away and Abner knows he has to hurry if he expects to catch the bus, but Goliath is intent on keeping up the game. Every time Abner throws the stick, Goliath grabs it and returns, dropping the stick at Abner's feet and blocking his path. And every time, Abner picks it up again and throws it as far as his thin little arms can muster. But the stick has the qualities of a boomerang ... it never seems to go quite far enough away and it always comes back.

In the distance, Abner can hear the bus arriving. He hurls the stick one last time then quickly rounds the corner and sees the bus waiting at the stop, its lights flashing red and yellow, caution and chaos surrounding it like a halo. Abner realizes immediately that he'll never make it in time, so he doesn't try.

Goliath happily drops the stick at Abner's feet as the bus pulls away.

No matter, he doesn't mind walking. In fact, he sort of prefers it. Abner looks down at Goliath and says, "Sorry, but I really have to go now. I reckon I'll see you tomorrow, though."

As he walks away, Abner looks back at Goliath. Obviously confused (or disappointed), Goliath looks at the abandoned stick then back up at Abner. Goliath makes a show of considering his options, and then, as if it never even existed at all, makes the decision to follow Abner and leaves the stick where it lay.

Abner stops in his tracks. Goliath stops as well.

"What are you doing?" Abner asks.

Goliath doesn't answer, but the look on his face seems to be pleading temporary

insanity.

This isn't the first time Abner has missed the bus, so he knows exactly how long it will take to get to school ... twenty-four minutes. He checks his watch, the one his grandfather gave him for his tenth birthday, and realizes that he's going to be late.

Abner shoos Goliath away with a flick of the wrist and starts walking toward school. After only a few steps, however, he hears the shuffle of paws on concrete and looks back to see Goliath still following.

Amazed, Abner stops and pulls at his tussled hair. "Stop!" he screams.

Goliath stops and looks curiously at Abner, who makes more motions with his hands. His gestures being far more animated this time.

Abner looks for another stick to throw but he can't find one. He tries everything. He begs and pleads, he charges angrily at Goliath in an effort to scare him away, he shouts epithets at the top of his lungs ... all to no avail.

Then it hits him. He'll just have to run. He will run as far and as fast as he can and simply leave Goliath behind in a trail of dust.

Abner makes himself look casual. He pretends that everything is okay and that he is happy with things the way they are. He shrugs and says, "Okay, you win."

Then, in a sudden burst of speed, he spins on his heels and runs.

Abner runs with the speed and determination of a rabbit. He darts forwards, running long and hard and fast, and hopes beyond hope that the short-legged dog will tire and give up before he does.

Abner puts everything he is into that mad dash. His arms swing like pendulums and his blood pumps like the pistons of a steam train. With every step he feels the hard smack of asphalt through the thin soles of his sneakers. His knapsack, feeling much heavier and more noticeable than ever before, sloshes back and forth, rocking angrily against the rhythm of Abner's stride.

Abner runs. He lets his mind drift away from the moment. He stops thinking about the knapsack, stops thinking about the smack of asphalt and the pebbles in the road, stops thinking about the burning sensation in his lungs, even stops thinking about Goliath. Instead, he imagines himself as a world-class sprinter. In his mind he hears the sweet

clamor of cheering. The unassuming houses of his neighborhood melt away and are replaced with flags and banners that bear his name. In front of him are glory and fame and throngs of adoring fans.

And, so, he runs.

Three, maybe four blocks later (he can't be sure), Abner finally stops running. The imaginary crowds drift back into the recesses of his mind and reality seeps back in. Each breath of oxygen burns like cinders in his lungs, so Abner bends over at the waist and clutches his knees as if it might somehow help ease the pain, might somehow prevent his chest from exploding.

Abner looks up at the sky. He'd never noticed how beautiful it is ... never noticed the contrasting shades of blue that, mixed with brief streaks of yellow and swirls of white, create the backdrop on the canvas that life is written on.

Once again, Abner allows himself to get lost in a moment and drift away. This time, he finds himself in a swimming pool, floating languidly on his back, his arms and legs outstretched and gently sinking beneath him. He watches with wonder as clouds and jet vapors drift aimlessly through his vision. He marvels at the calm. Soon, Abner's muscles relax and unclench. His breathing smooths out like the horizon and his heart slows to a palpable flutter.

In front of him, like a present on Christmas morning, is his school with its massive entrance and the school's motto, *Dum spiro spero*, tattooed above it. From the cacophony of voices and laughter filtering in from the basketball courts, Abner knows exactly how close he is without even looking. He smiles and silently congratulates himself for having ditched the dog and arriving before the tardy bell.

The urge to look back and gloat pulls at Abner's better judgment and he casually rotates his chin to his right shoulder. There, behind him, sitting patiently on his hind legs and showing no signs whatsoever of exhaustion, is Goliath. In his big brown eyes there is a twinkle of amusement. In the subtle tilt of his head there is the oddest indication of understanding.

In a fit of frustration, Abner screams, "Don't you ever quit?? Go home! Go home now! Pleeeeeaaasse!!!"

Goliath responds with mocking silence and a sloppy smirk.

Abner lets his head hang with the weight of a bowling ball and says to himself, "What am I supposed to do now?" As usual, his first thoughts are blank, then in his deepest, darkest moment of despair, his mind swells with possibilities.

Taking the dog back isn't likely to happen ... it's not practical and, besides, what would he do once they finally get back to where all of this started to begin with?

Likewise, he can't simply leave the dog there on the side of the street. What if something happened to Goliath? What if a car hit him? Or he was accidentally taken to the Pound? Or, even worse, what if some hooligan, like George Walker in the eighth grade, dog-napped Goliath and did the sort of horrible things George so enjoys bragging about at lunch?

No, for Abner there is one, and only one, viable solution ... he will simply have to take Goliath with him to class. His teachers will, of course, be angry and not terribly supportive of the decision. He'll very likely get sent to the principal's office. Despite all that, Abner knows exactly what he must do....

He must come up with a very convincing lie.

When I woke up this morning, I discovered that I was blind, but I didn't want to miss any more days of school because I know how important my education is so Goliath here is helping me find my way around.

Not likely.

This dog is an eyewitness to a heinous crime and the police say I have to keep an eye on him twenty-four hours a day or the murderer will go free.

What if the teacher saw that movie??

You're never going to believe this but he ate my homework. I know how people say that and they don't really mean it, but this time it's actually true, and to prove it I brought him with me ... So, you see, in a strange kind of way, it's sort of like I did bring my homework after all....

That is definitely pushing your luck.

"No," Abner says as he turns and begins the slow march to school via the teacher's parking lot. He speaks loudly so Goliath can hear. "No, there's only one thing I can do. I'll just have to tell the truth. I'll just tell Miss Vogt that I missed the bus and you followed me

all the way to school and now you won't go home."

Abner marveled at how convincing the truth can sound sometimes.

For good measure, he adds, "I mean, she'll have to believe that, won't she?"

Then, realizing that he has put most (if not all) of the blame squarely on Goliath's narrow shoulders, Abner politely asks if that's okay. "Whaddya say? You won't hold it against me, will you?"

His questions are answered with silence.

At first, Abner imagines that Goliath is angry with him, that Goliath will, in fact, hold it against him. Then Abner remembers that dogs can't speak. They can't even really listen ... maybe they can catch the sound of their names from time to time but that's about all.

Abner's thoughts drifted back to the time when his dad asked him if he preferred cats or dogs. Abner, bucking tradition, said "cats".

His father was astonished. "Why?" he asked.

"Because," Abner answered with confidence, "cats are smarter. Dogs are just plain dumb."

Abner's father conceded that cats were, in fact, smarter than dogs, but he added that dogs have a special gift that cats do not. "They may not be able to understand words," he said, "But they know the difference between the truth and a lie ... they can read it in people's eyes."

Reminded of this, Abner turns back one last time to look Goliath straight in his sad, brown eyes and tell him that it will all be okay, that there is absolutely nothing to worry about. What he sees, though, is not a scared dog, whimpering nervously and inching its way forward with its tail tucked between its legs. No, what Abner sees is Goliath walking away from him ... walking back in the direction of his home.

Abner watches with amazement (and a certain amount of regret) as Goliath's giddy gait casually carries him farther and farther away. No words are spoken, no sounds uttered. And, unlike Abner, Goliath feels no need to look back.