Permission

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"Yes, I'd love to. If Mom will let me."

My first ever overnight, and with William, the sight of whose body had strangely stirred me.

Dinner I only partly remember. We sat at a round, massive wooden table and ate something from a mix, a Hamburger Helper casserole or lasagna. His mother was efficient and mechanical. The meal was put on quickly, something stirred and heated and heaped on the plate. My insides squirmed like crazy for fear I'd say or do something dreadful.

I was nine, always trying to make an impression with adults, and my father had told me Dr. Anderson was a physicist. I thought he had to be one of the most brilliant people in the world. Mrs. Anderson didn't speak, a face poised vacantly over her plate. It was all boys talking, William and Dr. Anderson and me and William's younger brother, Brian. Baseball and Sputnik.

But the smells and sights of dinner are buried by the sensations after dinner—our early lights-out and my time under the covers. I'd hoped for something I couldn't put into words. William was lean and had skin so pale it burned in minutes in the summer sun. And his hair was red, a fresh-lit match of hair. He was not only smart in math and science—genes from his father, I reasoned—but the fastest runner in the class and of a graceful thinness, stretched in a way that was delicate, in a way that made me want to embrace him, carefully, protectively, though I knew that was absolute nonsense.
His room was in regular kid disorder, Erector set parts and comic books and baseball gloves and bats. All sorts of stuff piled, crammed, even, into a wall of built-in bookshelves over a built-in painted wooden desk. Not unlike the built-in desk and shelves in my sister's bedroom, though my mother would never have allowed such dishevelment.

And more stuff, dirty clothes, a few plastic dishes, drinking cups of clear colored plastic, between and on the outer sides of twin beds that divided the small square bedroom into thirds.

A sweet smell, sick-sweet, the smell of fig smear I got on my shrittail when I wiped my mouth after eating stolen figs at the back of a neighbor's yard—that's what rose up to my nostrils as I stepped into the room. I didn't mind at first, but when I pulled the covers back, the smell was intense and seemed to come from the sheets, whose surface was darkened, as if a shadow had settled there, from boy perspiration, body oils, body effusions.

This was mid-August, school about to start. I'd joined William earlier that day in the town pool's open showers; I'd noticed the slight rosy shadows around his scrotum while he talked excitedly about his summer vacation in Michigan. And then he'd turned to his father—an enormous pale nakedness I could not look at—for permission, before inviting me to spend the night. So there I was.

"What do you mean, take my clothes off?" I asked. "Of course not. I always sleep in my clothes. Don't you?"

He peeled his shorts down with a shake of his head, then his striped T-shirt over his brow, arms crossed, pulling from the bottom edges upward so that the shirt slipped perfectly inside-out and into a wad that he tossed. My eyes traced those bony shoulders (I wanted to encircle them, like tissue paper around a breakable gift) and those two pink dots, his nipples.

"This will be fine," I said, loosening the heel of a tennis shoe with the opposite toe, then loosening the heel of the other and kicking them free. I drew the covers up to my neck.
"Aren't you gonna be hot?"

"Nah," I said, "we don't even keep our cooler on nights."

He flicked off the light, then knelt by the bed. He prayed, but so I couldn't hear. He threw his covers all the way off and lay on his back, legs spread, arms to the sides. So that every surface, I imagined, could feel the cool of air fall from the overhead vent.

In minutes I could hear steady breathing, and sometimes gulps, sounds I charted, cocooned, sweating through my clothes. I took shallow breaths through my mouth, so as not to smell the sweetness that would make me queasy. I felt an itching over every inch of skin in contact with the sheets—my hands, my arms to the shirtsleeves, the back of my neck.

I became for the first time intimate with the voice of my heart, mechanical but reliable, my other companion, as I watched William sleep through the night. And then watched the growing glow on his skin as sunlight exposed him in delirious increments.