The Perils of Asthma

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A Finch Named Goldy

Bub Lilly was certain of four things when he was twelve: he had acute asthma, he hovered between eighty-two and eighty-five pounds, he did not want to play the trumpet ever again, and he longed to own a Zebra finch and name it Goldy and let it fly free in his bedroom. Like cleats on a slow, spongy, indoor track, these certainties flopped around the perimeter of Bub’s head, setting pace and direction for his life.

He spoke to his dad about it.

“Pop,” he said, practicing the speech alone in his room. “I remember when I was eleven and you said a man should speak up when he’s troubled or he would get crushed like a melon in his head for keeping it all inside or else it would all explode and that’s what I’m doing and I’m telling you I will never never never ever play the trumpet again, and you will sell it for
me and buy me a finch named Goldy and then we'll both be happy and men."

"Why would you name a finch Goldy?" his father would have said.

So Bub sat on his bed, his skinny butt crinkling the stiff green bedspread, and continued to heave with asthma, unsure about what to say to his father.

He sucked on his inhaler and decided not to tell him that he would never play the trumpet again yet.

Instead, the next day after band practice, Bub pretended that he threw his trumpet into the pond on the way home from school. Actually, he left it by the door in the band director's office—where the words "Mr. Gregory Bailey, Director," blared through the etched glass even at night when the school was quiet. Bub walked calmly to the edge of Garret's Pond, plucked the gleaming instrument from the plush mauve lining of his mind, thonked the mouthpiece into place, and sent the entire beast flickering and whooping through the sky with a sound like a mourning dove's retreat up, up, and out into the middle of the pond, where it hovered mystically on the water for a moment, then slurped down all at once, leaving behind only a black mysterious bubbling that made Bub grin knowingly.

While Bub stood looking at the pond, Mr. Bailey called Bub's mom and told her that her son was holding back the band.

"I'm afraid your son is holding back the band," he said.

"And he left his trumpet in my office after practice."

"I'll talk to him," Mrs. Lilly said.

Mrs. Lilly yelled up the steps to her husband and told him that Mr. Bailey said Bub was holding back the band.

"I'll talk to him," Mr. Lilly said.

They all talked during dinner.
“More squash?” his mother offered, oozing it onto Bub’s plate.

“Thanks,” Bub said, “are there any more almonds?”

“Your father finished them all,” she said, winking at her husband, signalling him to begin the conversation about Bub’s holding back the band.

“I dropped my trumpet on the way home,” Bub announced, suddenly sitting up straighter in his chair.

“When?” Mrs. Lilly said.

“After band practice. In Garret’s Pond,” Bub said.

“In Garret’s Pond,” Mr. Lilly repeated.

“In the pond,” Bub said. “Definitely.”

Mr. Lilly pensively crunched the fried almonds in his mouth.

“The case too?” Mrs. Lilly said, trying to hide a smile.

“No, not the case,” Bub said, thinking fast. “Just the trumpet. And the mouthpiece. I left the case at school. In Mr. Bailey’s office.”

“Bub,” his dad said, “Mr. Bailey says you’re holding back the band—”

“Why did you leave the case at school?” Mrs. Lilly said.

“I forgot it,” Bub said, looking down at his pasta. The white crescents were cold now and pocked with red pepper slices which Bub picked out and stuck in his pocket when his mom wasn’t looking.

“I wanted to play it on the way home, so I forgot the case,” Bub said, twiddling his fork nervously.

“Why are you holding back the band?” Mr. Lilly said.

“I don’t know,” Bub said, confused. “I don’t know what it means. I wanted to play the trumpet on the way home, so I forgot the case, and I slipped and dropped it in Garret’s Pond, and by now it’s all rusted up I guess, and that’s it.”
Mr. Lilly noisily exhaled, sputtering his lips.

"Do you like being in the band, Bub?" his mother said.

"It's nice," Bub said, avoiding his father's eyes, "but the best part is the spit thing. I like to pull on the little plug and watch the spit run out. The more I play it the more spit there is. Sometimes I spit into the mouthpiece, hard on purpose, just so I can open it up and let the spit come out, but it doesn't work. I think the spit gets clogged up inside and comes out later when you don't expect it at all. It gets stuck in the coils or something."

"But do you like it?" his mother said.

Bub was quiet. He switched from his fork to his butterknife, feeling its weight in his hand. He felt suddenly bold, and wondered if it was a good time to mention the Zebra finch named Goldy.

"Playing the trumpet is good for your asthma," Mr. Lilly said flatly.

It was the old argument. Bub had a million retorts planned. It makes my head soft. It hurts my heart. It gives me diarrhea. Bullshit. Mr. Bailey is a queer. It's a waste of good brass. I feel more like a flute, Pop.

Bub gripped the butterknife tighter, blade-down, and looked over at his father's curved back. He could see the bulge of the spine through the crisp blue shirt. It would be so easy, he thought, to just go on over and poke him in the back with this knife and leave it sticking there while he falls flat on his face there in the plate. Then Bub imagined he would pick up the scattered almonds one at a time and stand there holding them happily between his teeth while his mother looked on, puzzled, asking him if he liked being in the band or not.

"I quit the band," he said, standing up.

"What? No," Mr. Lilly said.

"Tomorrow," Bub said.
“You’re not,” his father said.

“I’m quitting the band tomorrow and selling my trumpet for money,” Bub said.

“Sit down, Bubba. You left the trumpet in Mr. Bailey’s office. He called your mother after school.”

“Tell him I quit,” Bub said.

“No.”

Bub shoved his chair behind him with the backs of his knees and walked away as slowly as he could stand it, waiting for the smack of his father’s hand across the back of his neck. He climbed the stairs heavily, dragging one arm along the thick oak railing, his chest tightening with the first of the night’s wheezes. Below him he could hear his mother, noisily clattering silverware as she cleared the table.

In his room the asthma hit harder. The wheezes came and went quickly now, getting ready to slow down and firmly settle like an engine in Bub’s chest, chugging a steady, patterned lullaby that had periodically kept him awake at night since he was five. The lullaby was most pleasant when the engine ran slowly, so Bub relaxed his chest by turning out the light and standing a few inches from the wall, leaning his forehead against the poster his father had hung to inspire him when he was in the fourth grade. It was a reproduction of an aerial photograph of the 1980 Hilton Junior High School Marching Band, taken directly overhead from a helicopter which had been flown in special. Bub’s father, a math teacher at Hilton Junior High, had helped Mr. Bailey design the formation. In the picture, Mr. Bailey sat comfortable and cross-legged in the exact center of the football field, flanked by tight, expanding circles of the ninety-seven band members sitting on the grass with elbows locked. They were all decked out in their new orange and mint green uniforms. For the coup de grace—
as Mr. Bailey told the photographer—the band members were surrounded by widening circles of supine musical instruments, organized by order of appearance in the Hilton alma mater, with the brass and woodwind bells all turned counterclockwise, and the bass drum at 12:00. The band members sat either back-to-back or foot-to-foot, all the smiles tilted up at the camera, the high fuzzy white hats forming jagged circles of their own, which layered down smaller and smaller to finally embrace Mr. Bailey’s upturned face in expanding folds of cottony white love.

Bub didn’t know that his father had helped to design the poster, but he still sensed that it had some odd historical power over him. When he slept, a car’s headlights occasionally arced along his bedroom wall and the fuzzy white hats gave him two long secret winks.

In his room, Bub rocked familiarly from side-to-side on his forehead against the poster, faintly aware of some memory of dinner stuck in his throat, catching fragments of the conversation downstairs between wheezes.


They were talking about him, Bub knew. He could tell that he and his mother had won by the lowering volume of his father’s voice. Soon all he heard was the slowing pull and release of the asthma engine in his chest. He reached a comfortable rhythm, getting to where he pretended there were tiny bunches of bubbles packed into the pasta crescents lying somewhere beneath his lungs. With each exhale he managed to release a few bubbles at a time, which rose up to scrape and tickle his throat, then escaped out onto the bed, where they popped and left small damp circles. Now he would be able to fall asleep if he propped himself up on an extra pillow. Now he

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could pull down the poster and lean his forehead against the blank, cream wall.

Tomorrow, he decided firmly, he would quit the band, take the trumpet to the pet store, leave it by the birdcages, and carry Goldy home in a tiny, fold-out, colored box.

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No Sheetin Way

The next day was Saturday, so Bub couldn’t quit the band, but his dad stood talking to him in the living room about it anyway. Bub knelt on the floor, folding the newspapers, while Mr. Lilly talked.

“Being in the band is your own business, I guess. Quit if you want, but let’s just get one thing settled right now. If you want to quit the band you’re on your own with it. I can’t go to Mr. Bailey for you. He’s a friend and a colleague. He’ll be surprised, and I’ll be the one who he stares at. You’ve got to do it and tie it all up yourself. Like a package.”

He waited.

“Okay,” said Bub.

“Now next week is the first football game. So do yourself and Mr. Bailey and the whole team a favor and quit on Monday morning first thing if you’re going to do it. If you’re going to go through with it that’s the right way. Or else you should at least stick out the season. And don’t expect me to quit for you. Like with the Boy Scouts. Not this time.”

Bub had stopped folding his papers and was just staring at his father’s mouth, sort of entranced by how the lips never quite seemed to close, yet moved around far too much on the face, always a few utterances ahead of themselves. He knew when his dad was about to end a speech because an odd sort of punctuation
started creeping into his lips. A dash here. Two periods in a row there. Something similar to a sputter or a tentative throat-clearing or the beginning of a muffled cough. Any one of these was a sure trigger to Bub that his dad was through thinking things to say for awhile.

"And Bubba," Mr. Lilly said, stepping back gently into the stairwell, "your Mom and I talked it over and if you still want to I hope you won't feel like I pressured you into going in in the first place. I know it's not like the army or something, where you have to join up. I think, that is I hope, I didn't really talk you into something. You didn't want to do it anyway, that's okay."

"Okay," said Bub.

“Now let's get those papers out,” Mr. Lilly said, sort of musing up Bub’s hair in his mind.

Bub hiked the two Hilton Times paperbags over his shoulders, ran down the porch steps, and rode off on his bike, happy to be away from the house and outside the circumference of his father's voice. He turned down the alley in the middle of the block, thinking that there were probably only about ten paperboys in all of Hilton, and some of them were girls.

His paper route was the most unpredictable thing in his life. Every day he guessed the number of pages that he thought would be in the paper, and almost every day he was wrong. On the day before Thanksgiving of the previous year, the paper had been quadruple-thick because of the Christmas advertising, and Bub was off by fifty-six pages. He had to make two trips and his shoulders were sore for three days.

But there were victories as well. Using the thumbs-turn method, Bub could fold a paper in three seconds, with the empty white spaces between the columns matching up exactly to the folds. He could read the front page in under seven minutes, and
usually found at least one typo with ease. With his friend Spotty's help, Bub could do his own half of the route in under thirty minutes.

He stopped his bike and waited in the alley behind Spotty's house.

"How many today, Booble?" said Spotty, skidding his back tire neatly up to within a few inches of Bub's. He rarely called Bub by his given name, but delighted in coming up with variations and testing out the reaction. "Booble" was a brand new one which Bub completely ignored because he had no idea what it might mean.

"Thirty-two," said Bub, lifting one of the bags over his head and handing it to Spotty.

"I knew it! Absolutely," said Spotty. "Every third Saturday."

"You didn't know it," Bub said quietly, uncertain.

Spotty's real name was Scotty, but he had nicknamed himself Spotty two years before because of his tendency to freckle, and the name had stuck. Even Mr. Bailey called him Spotty.

"So you're really quitting," Spotty said, incredulous, hoisting the bag over his own shoulder.

"Yup," Bub said. "First thing Monday."

"No way sheet," said Spotty. The printer's ink from the bag strap had smudged a neat curl across his pudgy chin, but Bub didn't tell him. "No sheetin way. Bailey Boy will have a turd. An outright turd. Right there in the bandroom."

"A turd and a half," Bub said, confident.

"No sheetin way."

"It's definite," Bub said. "I told my dad even."

"To hell you did. Two turds at least."

"Yup."
“You told your father, no freakin sheet? Mister Math. I’ll bet he cussed you out.”

“No way.”

They straddled their bikes side by side in the alley, tips of the handlebars touching, looking like ludicrous fraternal flesh and metal twins with a bulging sac at opposite hips.

“I’ll bet he railed your Buttinski. A wall shot. I can see it now.”

“Nope. He told me it was a package for Bailey Boy. A favor. That the band isn’t the army. My dad is weird.”

“Your dad is gay,” Spotty said. “No freakin way. You’re definitely sheetin my ass. Spank my monkey. Spank it.”

“You’re a queer,” Bub said.

Right away he knew he shouldn’t have said it. Spotty was pretty fat, Bub knew. He was almost fourteen, outweighed Bub by over seventy pounds, and his bike reached two inches higher and was a BMX. It also cost fifty-two dollars more. Bub noted most of this, with far less precision, as Spotty tried to sort of jump off his bike and punch Bub in the chest all in one motion. He ended up kicking his own bike over onto Bub’s, his foot caught under the pedal, and they all sprawled together into an unruly heap on the stones. The neatly folded papers formed a slowly growing island around them as the two boys squirmed together briefly, then Spotty tightened his hold around Bub’s chest and someone’s sissy bar. It was their fifth fight.

“Take it back Bubbowl.”

“You’re a freakin queer.”

“Take it back Sally.”

Bub weakly kicked his feet against Spotty’s ankles a few times, then, in a sudden gasp, the engine in his chest churned and the asthma took over. Wheeze in. Wheeze out. Wheeze in. Out. Wheeze in was always first. Bub didn’t know why.
“Lemme up. I got asthma.”

By now Spotty was half sitting, half lying, on his own front
tire and Bub’s stomach. The rim of Bub’s back wheel nearly
bent from all the shuffling weight. A woman with two big
bows of hair framing her head stood watching them from the
mouth of the alley, a Chow Chow straining at the leash in her
hand.

“Take it—” Spotty said, shifting his weight and nearly
cracking two of Bub’s spokes “—back.”

was kiddin. Spot. You’re. The main. Monster.” Bub wheezed
in hard and high-pitched so Spotty would hear it.

Spotty loosened his hold but made no move to get up. Their
fights usually ended this way.


“Hold your breath.”

Bub held his breath while Spotty floundered off him and
picked up his bike. The woman with the two big bows walked
on, losing interest, but the Chow Chow kept glancing back.

“Okay, let it out,” Spotty said, starting to worry. “Careful.”

Bub let out his breath, the center of his chest pinching
coldly, and remained sitting on the frame of his bike,
gradually slowing his breathing down.

“Where’s your inhaler?”

“The freakin thing. Doesn’t help.”

“Is it better?” Spotty said, breathing heavily himself.

A train. Just starting. To go. Like. In the movies. Listen. To
the train. Go. That’s just. How it is.”

“What about when it speeds up?” Spotty said, getting
interested.

“The train? Or me?”
“The train.”

“Then,” said Bub, “I can’t hear it. Anymore.”

“Oh,” said Spotty, confused. He puzzled over Bub’s answer a few seconds. “You’re a freakin queer.”

Bub continued to wheeze. He righted their bicycles and gathered the papers back into the bags while Spotty surveyed the damage.

“Two torn papers. One shirttail out. Your chain’s off. Grease all over your pants.”

“We’d better. Get going,” Bub said.

“Hang on. I scratched your neck a little. A stone in my pocket. Three dimes on the ground. One penny. An asthma attack. And a partridge in a pair of trees.”

Spotty grinned at Bub comfortably. He was his elder, his conquerer, his paper partner, his pal.

Silent, Bub slipped his chain back over the sprocket and wiped the grease from his fingers onto his paperbag, almost obliterating the “I” in “Hilton.”

“You got an ink smear. On your chin,” Bub said.

“Thanks,” said Spotty, wetting his palm with his tongue and wiping it under his mouth.

“Hey, are we still Bubs?” Spotty asked, holding out his hand for Bub to slap.

“Still Bubs,” Bub said, lifting his leg over his bike seat.

“Hey Spotty—” Bub said quietly, slapping the outstretched palm with a crack. “Go.”


Bub ground the words out with his straining legs as he sped towards his half of the route, while Spotty puffed his way
along in the opposite direction, vaguely curious as to how the asthma had gone away so fast. Bub's half of the route had four big hills and Spotty's had only one, but Spotty had more traffic to dodge and there was a donut shop on Front Street. He usually got a chocolate eclair, and sometimes a Tahitian Treat. Bub made no stops, and usually finished passing first. The winner got to hard-knuckle the loser one time for each minute the loser was behind him. Sometimes Bub waited twenty-five minutes behind Spotty's house before he showed up. He would practice hard-knuckling on the leaves of a small Maple tree in Spotty's backyard.


Forty minutes later, Bub got to give Spotty twelve hard-knuckles. The last one took a little bit of skin. Spotty shook the sting from his hand, excitedly telling Bub the news.

"I'm quittin too Bub. I'll quit with ya. Screw the flute. I don't give a flying frick about the flute. I'll tell Bailey Boy I got a disease."

"AIDS!" said Bub.

"Yeah, yeah, AIDS. That'll scare him off. He won't touch
me. He'll throw the flute in the freakin garbage. Freakin AIDS. He'll have a fricking frog. Outright."

"Wait, wait, wait. I got it," said Bub, holding up one finger profoundly. "Tell him he can blow the flute himself."

"Yeah, yeah! You're a genius, Boo-Boo. You can freakin blow it freakin yourself Bailey Boy. Freakin-A."

"You can Saran Wrap it for all I care," Bub said.

They chortled together for awhile, Bub theatrically falling off his bike with laughter, then they made more specific plans. Both boys agreed that they should quit separately on Monday so that Mr. Bailey couldn't try to talk them out of it. Somehow, they figured, he would be much more stunned by two separate quittings on the same day, and would probably be left in a comical state of speechlessness.

Swelling with dreams of band-freedom and a docile Mr. Bailey, Bub and Spotty split like two jets behind Spotty's house—not knowing that the real reason two such able pilots couldn't face quitting the band together was because each one would be waiting for the other to do the talking—not knowing that the real reason they wanted to quit was because of the odd quivering in their shoulders when the instruments got heavy, and the blank look that Mr. Bailey gave them as if they were large potatoes propped in their chairs, and the strange scariness alive within that wide stretch of noise when the whole bandroom tuned up all at once.

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They're All Odd Numbers

Mrs. Lilly's first name was Lillian. She had no middle name. In the beginning, she had toyed seriously with the notion of refusing to marry John because of the last-name issue.
“If only it was the other way around or something,” she had said quietly when she was twenty-three. "Lilly Lillian sounds better than Lillian Lilly at least. It's all backwards.”

“So you go by Lill,” John said, shrugging and twiddling one end of his moustache, an hourly habit in those days. “And nobody notices. Not backwards at all. Perfectly natural. Lill Lilly. Sounds very sure of itself. Confident. Like a President's wife.”

He chuckled lazily and cuddled closer to her on the couch, but she wasn’t quite convinced. Nothing was wrong with her own last name, she supposed out loud, and maybe it wouldn’t be so strange if they both took on her name instead of his. It was 1969, she argued—people were ready for radical things to happen. But John pointed out again that her current last name—Smith—would end up being silly and embarrassing for them both, especially at the wedding.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” John said, standing up in front of the couch and blessing the congregation in imitation of a priest, “it gives me great pleasure to present to you, for the first time in history, Mr. and Mrs. John Smith. Applause, applause.”

Lillian didn't clap along, but managed a grin.

“Then,” John said, “they'd give us enough bus fare to explore Virginia on our honeymoon. Someone would slip me a little pickax and a compass and a condom at the reception, and you'd turn into a fat old prairie-wife.”

He guffawed, delighted with his articulate wit.

“What about a different last name?” Lillian suggested. “Like Esterhaus or Stockholm. Something foreign. What about our kids?”

Then John explained carefully, squaring his shoulders and using both hands to shape his point in the air, that his father was a Lilly, his mother was a Lilly, and so on, and he wasn’t
abou t o฀snu b฀hi s฀parent s฀o r฀defec t฀to฀anothe r฀countr y฀o r฀eve n฀talk฀abou t฀childre n฀jus t฀yet ,฀an d฀thu s฀ende d฀thei r฀first ฀rea l฀tiff .฀Two฀day s฀late r฀whe n฀the y฀wen t฀t o฀th e฀courthous e฀t o฀ge t฀th e฀marriag e฀licens e฀th e฀last-nam e฀issu e฀wa s฀al l฀settled ,฀an d฀a฀smilin g฀woma n฀hande d฀the m฀thei r฀licens e฀an d฀a฀congratulator y฀Newlywe d฀Gif t฀Pax—a дrawstring plastic bag stuffed with one tube of Crest, a six-ounce bottle of Tide, some generic cologne, a sampler of Stayfree Minipads, two Tampax tampons, six caplets of Midol Maximum Strength, a packet of food and car coupons, and two Massengill disposable douches.

Lillian was responsible for taking care of the Gift Pax, as she was for ordering the flowers, choosing the wedding music, and filing for the name change. In a pensive mood a week before the wedding, she dumped the insides of the Gift Pax bag out onto her bed when her parents weren’t home and arranged everything into categories. The contents of the largest pile, she realized, had been chosen for a woman, aimed at some mythic deirrigation that was to be a natural part of her life to come. The messages stamped on the items were unescapable—“Open This End” and “Do Not Flush” and “It’s Easy”—the same cadences and commands she’d been marching to for ten years, since she’d first noticed her body emptying itself against her will, but now it was all somehow intimately connected with John. Tiptoeing barefoot like a naughty adolescent boy, she chose a tampon and one caplet of Midol from her pile, took them into the bathroom, and filled the sink with water. Dropped in the sink, the tampon burst out into a languid white butterfly-shrimp, while the Midol steamed up into mystic fragrant pebbles, eventually finding their way into the white fluff. This was what womanhood must be, she thought—floating around bloated with bits of debris clinging to you, until finally the weight made you sink. Or lying dormant, dissolving away
into white space—silent while the world watched; suspicious that what really mattered was that a woman learn to properly stanch and flush her own blood, to embrace both the vitality and the ugliness of her flesh. Lillian paced around the upstairs rooms, swinging her arms—feeling herself a lonely teenage girl, emptied of all that was dreamy or glorious. She lingered in the bathroom and leaned her head against the cool window, breathing mouthwash mist onto the frosted glass. She thought about calling off the wedding, or asking John to somehow prove his love, or at least demanding that he learn to poke fun at his last name.

After she and John had been married for two years, Lillian developed a secret fondness for her new name, saying it aloud over and over with her hands sunk to the wrists in warm, sudsy dishwasher, enjoying how the name jaunted and clicked between the teeth and the palate. She stared into the little lemony bubbles nestled into a teaspoon and delighted in watching her lips say the name upside down.

She got to the point where she could say the name, over and over, without noticeably moving her lips. For the first time, she wondered if she had the stuff to be a ventriloquist. She noticed that only the "Lill" part of the name required her to expel any air. When she was pregnant with Bub, something seemed cozy and instinctual and dogmatic about bobbing her head slightly as she repeated the name, and during her labor it all became her mantra, her cradle, her "Lillian Lilly Lillian Lilly Lilly Lillian" way of rocking herself through childbirth.

John greeted Bub's birth with far less certitude.

"Why doesn't he moan or something? He's too quiet," John said, scowling and nervous. He laid his son's four-hour-old little body in the crook of Lillian's arm and leaned over the hospital bed a bit nearer to her lips. The woman in the next
bed coughed loudly.

“They said they’re going to put him on a respirator,” John whispered confidentially. “What’s wrong with him?”

Lillian tilted her head on the pillow and looked at his face, gingerly stretching out her lips a bit as he kissed her. The moustache was gone now and had been replaced by several tiny pinches in the upper lip. John’s one of those people, she thought, whose lips you just never really notice until the moustache is gone. The moustache had made him droopy-mouthed and serious, but its absence revealed new edges to his smile and a squirminess to his mouth that Lillian had never imagined. She learned how to grin as she kissed him.

“Piss,” said the woman in the bed next to Lillian’s, turning on her side to face the Lillys.

“Don’t worry hon,” Lillian said. “He’s just delicate. Like a flower. Like a wet new flower. He’ll be fine sweetie, he’ll be fine.”

“They said his lungs aren’t big enough yet,” John whispered. “He’s breathing through his nose, I think. Listen.”

“He’s okay.” Lillian stroked her husband’s forearm. Bub had already spent fifteen minutes clutching her pinky finger in his fist, crying and squirming in healthy little jerks, and she knew he would be all right.

“Pisssss,” the woman insisted, sitting up in her bed. “I stink like shitty, shitty, pisssss.”

John looked over just as she struggled her hospital gown off her front, revealing coin-sized purple blotches dotting her sides, her skin folding downward in a pattern that suggested her body was dripping away into a slow, patient puddle.

“Get these damn things off me,” she said, scratching up and down her sides, squinting directly at John. “Get them. Off.”
John looked away and stared down at his own son, who was as buoyant and fat as a puppy.

Bub was on the respirator for two days, and they had to listen to his breathing carefully at home for about a week.

"I think he's groaning a little," John said anxiously, sitting on the couch at home, holding Bub against his shoulder to burp him. "I heard him gurgle, sort of, but it wasn't like a wet sound or anything, it's like he has a little pebble stuck in there. A couple of pebbles. It was a groan, sort of."

"He's fine," Lillian said, gazing at them both dreamily from across the room. This was her favorite part of motherhood—the watching. She had never seen John so childlike, so worrisome. If Bub sputtered a little of her breast milk out of his mouth, John wanted to call the ambulance. If Bub frowned hard John laid him on the carpet and stuck his ear to the small chest to make sure the heart was still beating. Inside Bub's chest, he could hear a perfect, pumping cadence, with just a touch of congestion rolling around once in a while—"It's like, like a tiny tumbleweed that blew off course," John told Lillian excitedly, "but it sounds healthy too, just blowing around happy there, warm and safe. A good sound. An ocean."

Lillian had never known her husband to be quite so imaginative and childlike, and she loved to sit back and watch.

But sometimes his imagination failed him, and John felt at a complete loss with Bub.

"You burp him," he would finally tell his wife, carrying Bub by the armpits across the room. "You do it better."

"I hear him burp better than you do, that's all."

"What does it sounds like to you, anyway?"

"I do it like the dolphin," Lillian said, patting Bub's back. She had recently become vegetarian, and used animal
metaphors generously. "I use my sonar to find the air bubble, and poke it right up out of him with my long nose."

Bub eeped out a burp in confirmation.

"That kid is turning you weird," John said, shaking his head and walking off.

Lillian had to admit it was true. Since she'd had Bub, she'd been getting weird. She had cravings now not for juices and popcorn and carob, but for words and facts and cleanliness. She'd spend hours at a time just on the letter "p"—musing over the definitions of words like "plaid" and "plutonium" and "pluvial"—fascinated that she and Bub were just along for the ride, while all the words were out there reverberating somewhere near the stratosphere whether anybody liked it or not. She told Bub about some of the words when they were alone the way some parents sing softly to their children long after they've fallen asleep.

Facts were no less fascinating for Lillian, but pure trivia was useless. Facts were those things which had historical significance but were usually misunderstood—like the fact that Henry the Eighth, infested not with a burning groin but with bleeding gums, had not really died of syphilis but of scurvy—probably as payment, Lillian thought, for hoarding mountains of meat—and the fact that the four gospels for the New Testament were selected by a timid monk with a facial tic in the south of France, and the fact that Isaac Newton really did get hit on the head with an apple, forcing the thing that fixed Lillian's feet to the earth to be set into motion. She sought a similar kind of motion through cleaning. She cleaned their apartment with ruthless abandon—adding or removing smells almost daily—resting Bub on her hip while she dumped something pine-scented into a bucket or sprinkled baking soda over the carpet. When the apartment was finally filled with enough of
the cleaning smells, she would sit on the rocker with Bub and smell everything and not talk at all for awhile.

After twenty-three months of perusing, with Bub at her side, most of the weirdness she could find, Lillian agreed with John that it was time she did what she was trained for and she took a job teaching social studies at the Hilton Senior High School. Fridays in her classroom were devoted entirely to facts.

John’s story was entirely different. Along with Bub’s birth and Lillian’s flair for weirdness came John’s new-found imagination, usually spilling out of his lips in strange half-metaphors, sawed-off similes, and quasi-clichés. He couldn’t quite squeeze his imagination shut; selectivity wasn’t important as long as he had an audience, and his usual audience was either his eighth grade class of inattentive algebraists or a skinny, starchy-smelling Bub. If John thought of something to say he said it. And what he usually thought of were things tactile, wistful, and tawdry. Like a huge brown shopping bag with no writing on it. Like short lengths of rope knotted together into two legs of a monstrous nearly-equilateral triangle. Like spit on a skewer. Like the name “Bub,” which John had chosen himself.

Such inspirations occurred suddenly to him and just as suddenly he gave them birth through speech, dropping them out on the ground where one of his students or Bub or any passerby could give them a quick once-over. But as Bub grew, John seemed to have less and less time to think of things to say, and before he knew it Bub was six years old, then seven, then almost eight and John hadn’t told him even half of what he meant to yet.

He made up for some of the lost words while Bub was in the hospital recovering from his first bad asthma attack. He sat at the foot of his son’s bed for hours, explaining to him that
Lillian was at a P.T.A. meeting and would be in to see him afterwards, and that he had bought Bub a trumpet for his eighth birthday, which he could learn to play the same way Ali boxed if he practiced hard enough, and that they were getting a specialist in to see him who knew every cough in the book; Bub half-listened and smiled and was glad to just lie down for a few days and not have to think about anything but the mysterious illness budding in his chest, which didn’t hurt really as much as it reminded him that he was breathing all the time.

When the doctors agreed that Bub simply had plain old asthma, which had, in this case, combined with a virus to form a bad bronchial cold, Bub’s doctor—Maynard Masters—had a private talk with Mrs. Lilly.

After five minutes of restraint, Doctor Masters finally got to the point.

“When you breastfed him, did you switch back and forth from the bottle to the breast at random, or were you careful to be consistent?”

Lillian thought about throwing out her arms and raising her whole chest at him defiantly, as if this would be evidence enough that her son had been properly nourished since birth and that Bub’s asthma had evolved in his own chest, not hers. Instead she just shuffled around in her seat.

“He hardly touched the bottle until he was almost one-and-a-half,” she said. “Until he started making sounds like words.”

“Good.”

“We’re lactovegetarians,” Lillian said, trying to sound superior. She wanted to show him up on at least one thing—this man whose name sounded like a half-hearted apology and who, since she’d sat down, had been twisting apart paperclips and dropping the segments in meaningless patterns on his desk. She was half expecting him to accuse her of weaning Bub
on spinach and peanuts, or claim that her breast milk ran green, but the doctor just gave a quiet satisfied "Humph."

"So he gets lots of milk and eggs," he said. "Cut back on them. They could be irritating his bronchial passages, and too much cow's milk could flare up some wheezier bronchitis and some recurrent otitis media later on."

"What else?" said Lillian, trying not to feel one-upped, and thinking of letting out a quiet "Humph" herself.

"He should watch out for dust. Keep his room clean. Maybe get an air cleaner. Steer clear of pets. And we'll test him for allergies while he's here."

Lillian felt a little like Doctor Masters had just put in a bid on her house.

"And give him a hamburger once in awhile," the doctor said, standing up and sticking out his hand jovially. "There's nothing wrong with a little protein."

"Go to hell," Lillian said.

A few hours later, John and Lillian stood together next to Bub's hospital bed and explained that it was just asthma—nothing to worry about and easy to outgrow—and that Bub would be home soon and blowing on the trumpet for therapy and changing his diet some maybe. John held up a chart that he and Doctor Masters had drawn up together. The chart, he explained, told Bub how many anti-asthma pills to take once he got home.

**PREDNISOLONE DOSAGE: 5 mg**

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“So now,” John explained to his son, “we have a plan. You just take these little pills like on the chart and you’re all better. And we keep an eye on your chest. We’re all set.”

“You’ll be fine,” Lillian said, squeezing Bub’s hand. Bub stared at the chart for awhile.

“They’re all odd numbers,” he said.

“What?”

“When you add them up,” he said, pointing to the piece of paper dangling in front of him from his father’s hand, “they’re all odd numbers.”

“Across or up and down?” Lillian said.

“Across.”

John quickly checked Bub’s math and nodded his head. “Good boy.”

“Now get some sleep, sweetie,” Lillian said, kissing his forehead. His father squeezed Bub’s hand and pulled down the chain above the bed, leaving only a flat layer of fluorescent light spilling in from the hallway and crossing Bub at the ankles.

“Good night,” he said to their silhouettes.

Nobody moved for a moment.

“Mom,” Bub whispered, “how many days till I’m eight?”

“Two.”

“Will I be home then?”

“Yes. Promise.”

“Know what?” Bub said. “I got asthma when I was five.” He had been waiting all day to tell them. Now that this thing he’d been aware of for a long time had a name, he wanted to give all the parts of the asthma a name. The part that made a coiling sound in his sinuses needed a name. The part that turned things over in his lungs needed one too, probably the same one that would be given to the little hand that crawled around inside and tickled his throat. But the part that most
needed a name was the one that enabled him to bring forth, almost any time he wanted, a tremendous raw bark from his chest, which he usually cupped in his hands or muffled in his pillow because he liked to feel how powerful it was.

"No Bubba," John said quietly. "You haven't had asthma before. Just a couple days ago."

"I was five," Bub insisted. "I had it. At least twice. And then again when I was seven. I still am seven. I didn't know what to do. I stayed in my room. But it was a long time ago. I just never told you." Bub was still whispering. He liked to whisper in the dark.

"It's okay. You're okay now," Lillian said.

"I didn't know what to do," Bub said, relieved to finally be telling them, "so I just sat down and waited, and I breathed and coughed, and finally my chest went to sleep. That's what happens. My chest goes to sleep."

Mrs. Lilly smiled in the dark, as if she and Bub were sharing an old secret. She thought maybe her son would be an artist.

"Get some rest," she said. "You're a good boy."

She and John walked out, and Bub lay thinking about how the asthma had made his chest go to sleep ever since he was five, and wondered what would happen if his stomach and his legs and even his feet went to sleep all at the same time.

The boy in the bed next to Bub's couldn't sleep.

"Hey kid?" the boy whispered. "Did your bowels move today?"

"What? When?"

"Your bowels. The nurse asked me if my bowels moved today. Did yours?"

Bub pictured tiers filled with black and swirled bowling balls, like the ones where his father bowled, suddenly tipping
and emptying all the balls off onto the floor.

"I don't know," he said.

"Me neither. I said 'no way.' She said they're gonna haveta feed me jello. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Bub whispered, the words sounding flat and small and permanent in the dark.

"I'm going home this weekend," the boy said.

"I'll be eight in two days," Bub said.

Bub turned on his stomach and eventually forgot about his chest and stomach and legs and feet going to sleep, and he stopped hearing the clacks of bowling balls against each other. Instead, something funny happened in his head. During the next few years, it would happen again and again during the oddly suspended moments just before sleep, but this was the very first time it happened. On the black and pink screen of his closed eyelids, Bub began to see things. He saw a tiny flat man in a hat who suddenly inflated and bulged big, then a rounded gray elephant which zipped down into a black dot, then dozens of undersized balloons that burst into silent startling circles. He sensed somehow that these things belonged to sleep, and that they belonged only to his sleep. Nothing else could have them. Nothing else could quite know the puzzling lilting going on in the dark spaces before him, and Bub would never try to tell anyone about it. It was his, and not even the asthma could touch it.

Lying on his stomach in the hospital bed, Bub imagined a thick brush, like his mom's wallpaper paste brush, filled with red paint and gently swishing over his body. It started at the heel of his right foot and did one leg at a time, working slowly upward in gentle half-strokes, the numb heat from the paint tingling his skin only where the brush had been. It did his legs, his entire back, then went down to his stomach and
started up the front. By the time it got to his chest he was asleep.

-4-

The Ground Blossoms

On Sunday morning, the day before Bub and Spotty planned to quit the band together, they stood beneath the crucifix in their black and white altar boy outfits at Saint Catherine’s Holy Catholic Church. As Father Jim asked the parishioners to call to mind their sins, Spotty, with hands folded and profile to the congregation, began to develop an erection—his second one that day. Luckily, his cassock and surplice and stomach rode on his body in such a way as to hide his altar erections from sight, but he was nervous about it anyway, so he used a trick he’d learned almost by accident a few Sundays before—hiking up his cassock, slipping his hand deep in his right pocket, and curling his fingers skyward, thus sliding the erection up and around unnoticed until its underside was held secure by the inside lining of his zipper.

“That’s number two for today,” Spotty whispered to Bub, as the choir led the congregation in the Glory to God. “I had one when I was lighting the candles—a big one then—and one now.”

“You’re a sex fiend, Spot,” Bub whispered out one side of his mouth.

Spotty and Bub had nearly mastered the art of whispering out the side of the mouth so their fathers wouldn’t notice them talking on the altar. It was harder for Bub, because he usually got stuck standing on Spotty’s right, which meant he had to use the left side of his mouth—the same side his father could see if
he watched real hard. Bub was beginning to be able to say certain words without really moving his lips.

Suddenly everyone stopped singing and Father Jim let out a cough to warn the boys to be silent. He could hear their whisperings well enough to make out a few words, and he had cautioned them before about talking during mass, mostly because their words tended to become giggles, then sputters, then, in Bub's case, outright chokes and violent coughs. Hearing the priest's cough, Bub tensed. He knew that Father Jim might be able to tell if he even thought about doing some sins while he was serving on the altar, and he vowed to himself not to talk to Spotty for the rest of the mass.

There was one time, Spotty had warned Bub, that Father Jim had somehow figured out Spotty had been having an erection during mass, and after mass he had taken him into the dark confessional booth, made him pull down his pants, and slapped his hard penis with a cold spoon.

"Did it go down?" Bub had asked, fascinated.

"It got bigger," Spotty had said, rounding out his eyes.

"And it stayed bigger too."

But that had been a year before when Bub was only eleven, and he had since ceased to believe the story, and was thinking that maybe Spotty didn't even know what an erection was.

While the choir sang the Responsorial Psalm, Spotty nudged Bub in the side. "Get any hard ones today, Bobby? I think maybe I had one this morning too, when I woke up, and this one's been on for about five minutes already. Five freakin minutes. What time is it?"

"Be quiet," Bub hissed. "I think he can hear us."

"What time is it?" Spotty said, a little louder.

"Twenty after ten."

"Time me," Spotty said.
When the congregation stood up for the Gospel, Bub noticed Father Jim rolling his head a bit to one side, and he felt a piercing glance, almost a burning in his own neck, as if God himself had frowned directly at him. Actually, Father Jim was simply stretching his neck to crack it, limbering up for his Homily about Doubting Thomas. Thomas, the priest had decided to affirm, was perhaps the most intelligent of the apostles. He was an early biologist. He was courageous enough and articulate enough to challenge Christ’s resurrection from the dead on the grounds of physical evidence. He wished to probe Christ’s side with his own fingers, to peer into his heart with his own microscope. “In short,” the priest planned to say in closing, “Doubting’ Thomas was not all thumbs.” He was a little concerned that the pun would be lost on his audience. He thought that perhaps wagging both thumbs in the air would be effective.

Just as Father finished the Gospel reading and people settled into the pews, Spotty nudged Bub again. “How many hard ones today? For you. How many?”

“Four and half,” Bub said, just to shut him up.

Bub wasn’t sure if what he’d been having the last few months could be called true erections, but he kept an approximate count of them, and one day he’d had twelve between breakfast and dinner. Spotty had sworn that it was impossible unless you had a lot of kids, but Bub had not backed down, and Spotty told him that if he had too many in a row he would go completely bald and his fingernails would rot.

During Father’s Homily on Thomas, which was sprinkled intermittently with the laughter of both nervous and amiable parishioners, Father Jim kept being distracted by jokes that he might pepper through his Homily the next week. The dwindling view that the Catholic Church was simply a place to
"pay, pray, and obey" came to mind, and T. S. Eliot’s remark about the church as “rugs, jugs, and candlelight” seemed equally promising, but the priest worried that too much humor might extirpate his meaning. Prudently, he closed his Homily on Thomas with a spontaneous blessing for all the “Doubting Christians” in the world, stretching forth one palm and closing his eyes tightly.

All through the Homily, Spotty and Bub had to sit next to each other on the hard wooden seats that had starshaples cut into them where their butts rested. Sitting in the seats, they faced the congregation directly, and Father Jim’s Homilies lasted about ten minutes, so real conversation was extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Spotty kept nudging Bub secretly, reporting on his erection’s progress and asking what time it was, hissing that he was going to set a new record. Actually, his erection had gone down after about two minutes.

Later in the mass, when the boys were putting the little cruets of water and wine down on the table where the priest couldn’t detect their whispering for a few moments, conversation was much easier.

"Thirty-two minutes," Spotty said to Bub as he picked up the towel Father Jim would soon use to dry his hands. "A new freakin world record."

"You’re going to hell for sure," Bub whispered back, a hint of awe in his voice.

Bub thought a lot about hell while he was in church, and most of the time he was convinced that both he and Spotty would indeed be going there someday. Father Jim had told them in catechism class that hell was reserved only for those with the really terrible sins, but Bub figured that an altar boy’s sins had to be bigger than most people’s because everyone could see you right up there on the altar, and he seemed to think up his most
terrible sins exclusively during the mass. He believed that if Father Jim committed even a small sin he would have to go to hell for certain, because, as the town’s only priest, he was responsible for the sins of every soul in Hilton all at once, so if he slipped up and died he took everybody’s sins with him and spent the rest of eternity doing penance. Or, even worse, Bub thought, maybe they all ended up in purgatory together—all the sinning priests and sinning altar boys, and they had to keep marching through an endless mass in a huge church that nobody came to, all the sinning priests preaching together and all the sinning altar boys forced to stand up the whole time, with none of the boys allowed to say a word to each other until they finally reached eternity or somehow lucked their way out of purgatory and into heaven. The only thing he could figure out about purgatory for certain was that it was just a little bit cold.

While Father Jim broke the big host into pieces he thought about how brittle Christ’s bones must have been by the time the spikes were pounded through his feet, and the congregation put up their kneelers, readying themselves to begin the slow shuffle up to the altar for Communion. Meanwhile, Bub’s mind started carrying out its favorite sin, which he returned to almost every week. He pretended that he had a gun in his pocket which fired a thin bullet—a deadly accurate, unexploding, placebo-bullet that strictly obeyed all the grass-roots laws of geometry. It didn’t go through things but ricocheted neatly rubberlike off them, gradually working its way towards the thing he was secretly aiming for. He imagined that each item hit produced an appropriate sound as the bullet bounced off—a clear ping from the top of the Virgin Mary’s statue’s head; a muffled thunk from the wooden beams or the altar or the podium from where the gospel was read; a thick bong from the tall brass flowerholders on either side of the altar; a hollow rap from any of the glossy
white walls or the curved ceiling which took up a major portion of the space within his firing range—but nothing ever broke and no one ever got hurt, so Bub could shoot it off week after week with no one the wiser. Sometimes he meant the bullet to eventually run into Father Jim, but he never quite had the guts to let it come too close to the crucifix hanging above him, thinking that Jesus himself might come right down and hold up the gun in his pocket for everyone to see if he dared to hit the crucifix. In Bub’s mind, the bullet left a solid white jetstream behind itself, forming masses of complicated, overlapping lines all over the church, and it almost always petered out before actually hitting its target.

On this day, while Bub waited for the priest to hand the cups of wafers and wine around to the Eucharistic ministers, the bullet was eventually headed over to the tall red box, where the collection money was dumped and guarded between two sets of steel teeth, but the bullet’s path was abruptly halted when Bub had to stand up and follow Spotty down to the aisle where the people were filing up for Communion.

Bub’s job was to stand next to Father Jim and hold the round gold plate under the host as it was pulled from the cup and laid on somebody’s outstretched tongue or in the cradle of their cupped hands. His plate actually spent little time exactly under the host during its movement, because usually he couldn’t tell if the person was going to use his hands or his mouth until it was almost too late. Some people switched from week to week, or worse, they made a last minute decision. The important body parts were at different elevations and the people were at different heights, and Bub also felt very weird when people opened their mouths like that in front of him—some of the mouths gaping wide and the heads tilted back and even the lips curled up so he could see the gums bulging out, and other
mouths, usually the younger ones, just barely open and the little snake-tip of the tongue slipping out only long enough to barely catch the round wafer before it disappeared backwards and out of sight forever. The whole process was so complicated and weird for Bub that he just held the gold plate somewhere near the person’s bellybutton most of the time, and stared at their faces to keep track of how many of them kept their eyes closed through the whole strange thing. Father Jim had explained to Bub that the bread was transformed into Christ’s actual body during the mass, and, as you ate it each week, your own body gradually resembled Christ’s body more and more. But Bub wasn’t convinced. No matter how many wafers he ate, he looked nothing like the body pinned to the cross above him, and he couldn’t help picturing a miniature Christ actually stapled onto a little cross made of matchsticks or toothpicks and lodged somewhere at the bottom of his stomach, upsetting the works with the sharp wooden edges, and the trickles of blood from the wounds coating all the other ugly remnants of food down there. He always made sure to chew his own wafer into the tiniest possible pieces before swallowing.

When Mr. Lilly, who always took the host in his hands, came up, Bub jerked the plate down so he would be sure to have it under his father’s hands, and he bumped Father Jim’s arm just enough to knock the host down onto his plate. Startled, Bub tipped the plate and watched as the wafer flip-flopped, seemingly in slow motion, down to the floor.

Father Jim carefully bent at the waist, holding the cup up high, and reached down to retrieve the host. Mr. Lilly never took his eyes off his son.

“Dad. Sorry. I didn’t see you. I can get another one.”

Mr. Lilly hissed at his son to be quiet while Spotty sputtered audibly from somewhere nearby, and the priest carefully laid

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the retrieved host in Mr. Lilly's still-waiting hands.

"Be sure to consume it," he said quietly.

Mr. Lilly took the host, placed it on his tongue, and headed back down the aisle, his son's appalled eyes never moving from him until he reached his pew, as if Bub believed that God would at any moment come charging right at him out of his father's back, seeking restitution for his sin.

After mass, while Bub and Spotty were extinguishing the candles and Father Jim was in the sacristy, pulling the green robe over his head safely out of hearing distance, Spotty told Bub that now he was the one who was surely going to hell.

"Wait till lunch. Mister Math is gonna jam that Communion cracker right down your throat. He didn't eat it; I know he didn't. I saw him put it in his pocket and he's gonna save it till lunch and make you eat it with all the dirt and footprints and stuff all over it and you're gonna choke on it and go straight to freakin' hell."

But Bub didn't say anything. He was trying to pinpoint the funny feeling he had going on in his chest. It wasn't asthma; it seemed something like it but was a lot weirder—not because he was worried about what his father would do over lunch, nor because he knew that the little round host was a little fragment of God, perhaps a toenail or an elbow, and he had dumped it right out on the floor as if it was a nickel. What alarmed him was that he had actually sinned BIG with Jesus hanging right behind him, and his father had stared right back at him without blinking and swallowed the wafer down, and Bub's mind, in a panic, had automatically set the bullet off with no particular destination; there was nothing he could do to stop it and no way to know what it might hit, and it must still be out there caroming back and forth off things all on its own. And, on top of it all, Bub thought maybe he had a bit of an erection.
All the way home in the car his father surprised him by not mentioning what had happened at Communion at all, giving Bub the desperate urge to tell somebody about the whole strange mess—about Goldy and the band and the bullet and purgatory and maybe even erections—but he didn’t know who. All that his parents talked about in the car was Bub’s grandmother.

Bub’s grandmother had been in the Hilton Manor for two years with Alzheimer’s disease. Two months after her husband died, the police had found her wandering in the woods almost sixty miles from Hilton, where she had hitched a ride from a teenage boy, and Lillian had decided to put her in the home. Every few months one of the doctors at the Manor advised Mrs. Lilly that her mother could pass away at any time, or that she might sink wholly into senile dementia, but she doggedly continued to live on, slipping in and out of timelessness, talking almost incessantly, as though her constant filling of the air with words would resuscitate her nearly obsolete kidneys, and lungs, and heart, and feet.

Today, Lillian’s mother—Anna—was aware that it was Sunday and that her daughter would be visiting; despite the naugahyde straps connecting her arms to the bed rails, she had managed to prop herself up in bed and comb her hair. Just after she watched a church service on television, confused by the hit-and-run hymns of the evangelist’s choir, the seizure hit.

She had seizures every few weeks. By now Anna knew what the seizure would do to her: her breathing would happen in her throat instead of her chest and the rapid little gasps would shiver down along her arms and legs and then back up to her head, and she would be forced to talk: to tell the room everything she saw, no matter how empty and terrible it all was, not knowing which place she would end up in today—in
the bed, on the ceiling, in the television, through the window—but knowing for sure that she was not going to die today, no, she was not going to die, because if she was going to die today all the foolish body-whirling wouldn’t be so very real and slippery and stupid.

When the Lillys walked into Anna’s room after church, the seizure had just started, and she put all her effort into trying to tell them about it.

“Just put me. Put me. On the ground.”


Anna tried to control her words by holding her head still.


“Hi Gramma,” Bub said brightly.

“Oh God. They’ve got me in big belts.”

Lillian squeezed her mother’s shoulder tightly so she would know someone was in the room with her. A nurse came in and stood at the foot of the bed, holding a syringe filled with green liquid, saying that Anna hadn’t slept the night before and that she was on all the medicine they could give her, and the best thing they could do now was to help her calm down.

“She’s having a seizure,” Mr. Lilly said. “Get the doctor.”

As the woman in the white dress left, Anna felt the bed shaking and remembered she was somewhere in a room. She saw two tall figures turned a little sideways and shimmering next to her, then Bub’s face was clearly suspended in front of her, his eyes bulging like a toad’s, his mouth flapping open, then closed. Open, then closed. It was her grandson, come to play.


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“She’s having a seizure,” Mrs. Lilly said to the doctor as he glided into the room—he was all whiteness, all calm, fluid motion.

“The tree. Blossoms. On the ground.”

“Where are you Mrs. Smith?” the doctor shouted.

“She’s dreaming,” Bub said.

“Hush,” Mrs. Lilly said.

“Oh. God. Oh. Take this shit. Off me.”


“Hush Bub,” Mrs. Lilly said.

“Yes. Yes. Dreaming. God.”

“Do you know where you are Mrs. Smith?” the doctor said.

“It’s a dream,” Bub said. “She just can’t sleep.”

Anna was suddenly soothed because Bub was there—staring innocently in her eyes, unafraid and untouchable. He lifted her, cradled her in his arms, and gently lowered her to the ground. Where the blossoms were. He laid her down on the pile of white petals—all softness, all rest.

Then the doctor talked to her, and there were no things in the room but his voice. He asked her how old she was and what day it was and where she had just been. Anna told him she was seventy-one and it was Sunday and that she had just fallen out the window. He hiked up her robe and squeezed her stringy calves a few times, tapped on her knees with a little triangular hammer, then asked her if she knew his name. He gave her two words to remember: “green” and “apple.” After two minutes she forgot the words, but remembered the doctor’s name.

The doctor led Lillian and John into the hallway, and Bub sat next to his grandmother’s bed, nervous and happy. He
leaned close to Anna and talked.

"I dropped Communion on the floor today Gramma. Dad had to eat it."

"Bub," she said, reaching out and touching his cheek. "It’s terrible. Bub. Stupid."

"I shot off the bullet and he just walked away, and he didn’t even say anything about it Gramma, but I sinned."


"It was spring," Bub said.

"Yes. We sat. Together. On the ground."

"It was a dream Gramma."

Anna was starting to remember everything. Her daughter fed her dinner at 5:30 every night. Last night was mashed potatoes and string beans. Her son-in-law squeezed her hand so tight that her arm shook. Her grandson never blinked when he looked at her. There was a cherry tree underneath his bedroom window. Green was spelled g-r-e-e-n.

Anna heard her daughter sniffling in the hallway, and there were long pauses after the doctor spoke.

"You’re a good boy. Oh. God."

"It was weird, Gramma. And I swore in church. A couple times."

Anna was so tired that she could hardly hear Bub’s words anymore, but he looked as if he was about to cry.

"Go to confession," she said.

"I can’t." Bub knew it was true. He and Spotty agreed. Bub could never go to confession again, they had decided. He was beyond confession: he was wheezing his way into hell.

"Confess. God will. Save you."

Anna groped for Bub’s hand, squeezed it, and told him that she was going to sleep now. He watched her face smooth itself
out as she closed her eyes and drifted farther and farther away from his words, and he realized that his grandmother must know how to paint herself to sleep just as he did, and maybe that was where he had first learned it. Maybe she had taught him how to do it a long time ago while he bounced up and down on her couch or dug a hole in her garden. Maybe she was painting herself red or yellow or white right in front of him right now. She had invented it when she was just a little girl.

As her breathing slowed and the room seemed to darken, he pulled the blankets up over his grandmother's chest, so nobody else could see her body as it changed colors for him—so nobody else could know their secret.

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The Talking Screen

As Bub slipped into line for the confessional booth a few hours later, the same mood filled the air as when he sang in the shower—every noise he made had the danger of spilling into something that sounded like a series of snapped twigs, a virulent rolling cackle, a confused commotion that would instantly make people turn their heads if they heard. In his shower at home, the danger ended when Bub turned off the water, but in the church it followed him long after he left the confessional that day—echoing faintly in the background as he rode his bike, or played his trumpet, or revved the engine in his chest, sick for sleep.

Each Saturday and Sunday afternoon in the back of Saint Catherine's church, two confessional booths waited underneath two ghostly white triangles—a little like stout, convex dunce caps—that glowed. Father Jim controlled the glow of the left
triangle with a light switch; the other triangle lit when a confessor made contact with the kneeler inside the booth.

Bub stood in line outside the door, watching the triangle blink on and off above him, and watched the people walk back into the shadowy church when the triangle went out for a moment, to kneel and mumble things that he couldn’t quite catch, but which sounded remarkably like his father’s muffled voice filtering up through the floorboards of his bedroom.

He’d only been to confession once, when he’d made his first confession in the second grade. All he could remember about it was that he had peed his pants, and he knew that peeing your pants in church was a very big sin, so he had never gone again.

Waiting in line, he imagined what the ideal confessional booth would be like inside—a dimly-lit maze of holey wooden walls and sloping floors, with maybe a skeleton or a bat dropping down harmlessly once in awhile. There was a rotten board around one corner and he could fall screaming down into an abyss of almost one-foot deep, to jump out laughing and then wait secretly for Spotty to fall into the hole behind him. Maybe even one of those funhouse mirrors that made your body waggle into distorted blobs and skinny tubes. And Father Jim waiting at the end of the maze to shake his hand and buy him some cotton candy.

Father Jim’s visions of the confessional booth were very different. He had the view that the modern confessional needed to be demystified—darkly hushed sin-drops did not reconcile one with God; open grief was the ticket. Although he kept one-third of the confessional booth dark and compartmentalized at the insistence of his parishioners, he hoped for a time when all confessions would be face-to-face or
even shared openly with the faithful community. This would allow the priest to be perceived as more than a mumbler of charms or spells and would give the parishioners easier access to the rainwater of mercy—rainwater was his favorite floating metaphor. The confessional booth in which he sat, he thought, was still too much like a sentry box, an airplane toilet, a poorly lit space capsule, a coffin tipped up. Certainly reconciliation with God took place, but not, as far as Father Jim was concerned, in the most purging of environments.

When Bub entered the confessional booth, he found it was a high wooden box lit by a pink nightlight, with a wide padded rail—a kneeler—running along one wall, and a stiff square screen, like a window screen, in the middle of the wall above the kneeler.

The screen talked.

Fascinated, Bub stepped up onto the kneeler, which set the triangle outside his door glowing, and tentatively touched one corner of the talking screen with his index finger, wishing that it would reveal a secret doorway.

It talked again.

Then he saw a fragmented version of Father Jim’s face fuzzily moving around just a few inches away behind the screen, the nose and chin darker blotches than the rest, and the forehead overly shiny. The hair was just a few connected black boxes. Bub couldn’t make out the eyes at all, but there were two oblong areas of seeming vacancy, and he knew it was Father Jim because he recognized the smell. Except when he smelled like burning incense or sweat, the priest smelled distantly of mint toothpaste.

Bub sat down sideways on the kneeler and began flicking the pink nightlight on and off with his finger. He wasn’t sure
what to say; he didn’t feel like confessing now that it was all so stifling and unimaginative. He wanted a nightlight for his own room.

“May God be in your heart and in your mind so that you may make a sincere confession, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Bub said nothing, but could feel the priest’s expectation brimming over in the little booth.

“Are you there?” Father Jim’s voice said.

Bub flicked off the nightlight and stood on the kneeler, both hands pressed against the screen. All the priest could see of him was an imprint of two small hands fanned out a foot from his face.

“Hi,” said Bub, his voice feeling strangely powerful in the dark.

“All right. Begin.”

Five years before, in training for first confession, Bub had had to compose a list of his sins and read it off in front of the whole catechism class. His list had admitted to deceit, messiness, minor sloth, open annoyance, and the dream of running away from home, but his life had gotten much more complicated now, and he had no list to rely on. He remembered a trick that Spotty had mentioned though: to make up at least five small sins really fast in case you got stuck, but secretly think inside about your real sins when you said them, and the priest would give you your penance and let you go home unscathed. Bub would resort to this if he had to.

“I didn’t throw my trumpet in the pond.”

“Pardon me?”

“I didn’t do it. But I pretended I did it and I saw it sink to the bottom in my head. It got all black water up into the tubes
and all, and the only way to get it back is to dive down and pick it up, and you couldn’t play it anyway. All the water would run out.”

“Did you lie to your parents about it?” Father Jim said. He realized during the speech that it was Bub. He didn’t remember Bub ever coming to him for confession before.

“No, I didn’t tell them all of it.” His voice felt thinner now.

“Are you sorry for it?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Good. What else?”

Nervous, Bub jumped back and forth from the kneeler to the floor, unknowingly clicking the glowing triangle above his door off, then on, off, then on.

“I got asthma again. Four times in two days. When I get it I sneak down in the middle of the night. I eat a bunch of Raisin Bran, then I crumble up some other raisins from the real raisin box and some Corn Flakes and mix ‘em all up in the Raisin Bran box. So nobody will know. If it’s really bad I get up on a chair and open the freezer and breathe in it cold for a long time. The air in there is a lot better. Really clean. But I only breathe it until the asthma goes away, and I didn’t tell mom. I think she’d get mad.”

By the tugging inside his pants, Bub knew then that he had to pee. He fluttered his arms around a bit and hopped back and forth—an odd but impressive imitation of a hungry baby sparrow, begging to be fed. The two people in the line outside the door could see the triangle blinking on and off and hear Bub hopping around inside, but they waited their turns, reverently refusing to meet each other’s eyes. Bub reached down and squeezed his penis area between his fingers, holding
back the urine with the pressure.

"It's okay," Father Jim said. "Now slow down. Why don't we have face-to-face confession, Bub."

The fuzzy boxes of the priest's body disappeared from behind the screen and stepped around to the back of Bub's booth, sliding open the purple velvet curtain and magically revealing two chairs. Bub walked in, entranced. The chair seats were bright green bulgy squares of fabric that lay in a warm inviting grid. The priest sat down on one chair and motioned Bub to the other one.

"Hey, it's a curtain. Like at the circus. I thought it was a wall."

"It's all right. Now sit down and we'll finish."

"I can see you now."

"Yes. Go ahead and sit down. I picked these chairs out myself. How long since your last confession?"

"I can't remember," Bub lied.

Father Jim didn't believe him, but felt suddenly delighted by Bub's presence. He was actually a charming boy, the priest thought, with the unparted hair and round, unwrinkled face that you found on thousands of boys his age. That face might appear suddenly on any bottle of medicine or any cereal box. The thing that made him really different was the asthma. This confession was the most interesting one he'd had all day.

"What sins can you remember, besides the trumpet and the asthma, that you haven't told me about yet?"

Bub sat down. He didn't have to pee anymore. It was strange to be looking directly at Father Jim's face. He was used to staring up at him over his chest, fascinated by all the nose hair. Now the face was lit only on one side and the nose seemed to have disappeared completely. He could make out little cracks
in the lips and noticed, for the first time, that the hair on the priest’s sideburns was actually curly. He also appeared to have hair growing out of his ears. The gray, fragmented light reminded Bub of the way things looked in the hospital at night.

“I lied. A lot. And I dropped the Communion in church. My dad ate it. I swore. A couple of times. And I quit the band.”

“No. I lied. I didn’t quit. I just want to.”

“Okay. How are you doing right now? Is anything wrong?” Father Jim knew that Bub was an emotionally intense boy, and that he and Spotty were in the band together. Maybe the two boys had had a fight on the altar that morning. That could be what he’d overheard whispered pieces of, and perhaps that was what was behind all the meandering sin-blurbs that Bub was coming up with.

“My gramma died,” Bub said. “Well she didn’t really die—she’s okay. But I think she’s gonna die. Soon. She told me to come to confession, so I came.”

“It’s good that you came. You’re being very truthful. Are you sorry for your sins?”

“Yes,” Bub said, “and that’s all.”

Father Jim bowed his head and prayed spontaneously for a few moments while Bub stared at the top of half his head. He thanked God for bringing Bub to confession; he prayed for the boy’s good health and peace of mind; he hoped that Bub might interrupt him to talk some more. Then the priest talked Bub through his Act of Contrition, assured him that this confession had cleansed his body and soul of those sins remembered and not remembered, and told him that he would be praying for Bub’s grandmother. For his penance, Bub was supposed to say ten Hail Marys and two Our Fathers, and when he got home he

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was supposed to tell his mother that he’d been eating the Raisin Bran at night. He decided not to say anything about the Raisin Bran, and he couldn’t remember all the words to the Hail Mary, but after leaving the confessional he knelt at one of the front pews and said a bunch of Our Fathers absentb, all the while unable to think about anything but all the real sins that he had failed to confess to Father Jim. Ripping off cupcakes from K-Mart with Spotty. Spitting on the floor at school, and once on the back of a teacher’s high heel by accident. Lying during confession on purpose, and then forgetting how many prayers he was supposed to say. Skipping confession for years and telling his parents he was going, while he really sat in his secret place in the woods, hoping for a thunderstorm. Stamping great big dirty words into the snow last winter with Spotty, that you could see from really high up in an airplane and, he just realized, probably from heaven too. Setting off the bullet right into the organist’s belly. Making loud noises on purpose while his father slept on the couch. And erections. Countless erections, or things that were like erections, and not just in church, but on the bike, in the car, in school, and twice at dinner.

Bub thought over all his sins as he knelt at the pew and wondered if God could kill him right then and there, while Father Jim finished up with the other two confessors. Then Father clicked off his triangle and went around the church closing the windows and turning off the lights soundlessly, until he glided up to where Bub knelt in the darkened church, sniffing just a little with his head down.

“You’re certainly doing a lot of praying today, aren’t you Bub.”

They were alone in the church together.
“I have erections,” Bub blurted out.

His chest gurgled a bit, threatening to start chugging, but his ears were much more alarming. A strange hum kicked around in them, forcing him to look around, startled, and forget all about Father Jim for a moment, while all the statues simultaneously turned their heads to look at him. There was the Virgin Mary, peeking over her blue shoulder and closing her eyes knowingly, and Joseph, wincing the way his father did when he practiced the trumpet. The tall brown saint with the rope around his waist didn’t seem to move at all, but Bub swore that he made a little sound, like a chuckle. Then the hum stopped and he looked up at Father Jim, who had his hand on Bub’s shoulder.

“What do you think about when you have erections?”

“My bike. Nothing. I don’t know.”

“It’s okay.” The priest was happy. Here was a boy convinced of his guilt, but unable to name the thing which troubled him. Here was youth, fresh and green.

“I almost had one when I said the Our Father.”

“It’s all right,” Father Jim said. “It’s perfectly natural. It means that you’re healthy. God forgives you.”

Bub wondered if God had erections, and realized that it must be an incredible sin even to think about it.

“Do you need a ride home?”

“No, I have my bike,” he said, standing up and wiping his face. “Thanks.”

“Talk to your father about it. And don’t worry. They won’t hurt you.”

Bub walked out of the church, hearing the heavy metal side door suck shut behind him, and ran to his bike, feeling that he could float if he wanted. Now tomorrow he would quit the band.
and tell Mr. Bailey and Spotty and maybe even his mom that he'd been to confession and the priest had looked right at him and said that he didn't have to play the trumpet at all. He could glide up and down like a bird if he wanted—dash around like a finch, darting from bush to bush. He was free.

All the way home on his bike he had an erection, he was sure, that was larger than his thumb.