

THE MERCY OF STRANGERS

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Evan walked out the back door to the patio, across the small yard and jumped up on the cinderblock wall, his palms on its rounded top, his belly taking his weight as he swung his right leg up and over and gathered himself, like a cowboy in the saddle. He was eight years old. The wall was five feet high. He slowly attempted to stand. He went from sitting to one knee. Then he crouched, his shoes on the top of the wall. He rose up, as if by hydraulics and an invisible hand crank.

We watched him from the kitchen, out the open glass door. This was a dozen years ago, what seems now like another lifetime. We watched him with curiosity and wonder and pride as he took a single step forward, and then another, his arms outstretched like a gymnast on a balance beam, concentrated, determined, the afternoon light catching the soft hair on his thin, bare arms. He wobbled. He windmilled. He jumped down onto the red crusher fine gravel, into the narrow space between Christine's autumn sage and whirling butterfly, and tumbled into the buffalo grass.

Evan brushed himself off, scratches cross-hatching his arms, and climbed back on the wall and started again. He scooped forward, inches at a time, like a caterpillar, talking and gesturing to himself, narrating. An adventure story in the mind of a child in the solitude and quiet of a morning, existing only now in memory.

Once, a roadrunner joined Evan on the wall, its tail spiked at forty-five degrees, its head cocked as if perplexed. Christine saw the roadrunner, but Evan did not. He was facing the other way. She wanted to tell Evan, to call out, but knew this would startle the roadrunner, and the wonder of the moment would be lost. The roadrunner hopped into Pam's and McD's yard and was gone.

One spring day after school, Isaac joined Evan on the wall. Isaac stood easily and started walking. Evan attempted to stand. He wobbled and windmilled and jumped down. Isaac jumped down to join him.

"I got this," Evan said.

"It's OK," Isaac said.

They climbed back up and instead of standing, Isaac straddled the wall. They scooped forward on their bottoms in the direction of the Schranks' backyard.

Isaac said, "We must escape from the giant on this narrow footbridge over a deep chasm."

"So we have to hurry," Evan said.

"But at the same time," Isaac said, "we cannot falter."

Evan and Isaac had been inseparable since preschool. Isaac's parents were Ayurvedic practitioners, and on playdates Isaac arrived with dal and other mushy, unknown-to-us meals packed in metal containers in his lunch bag. He was the same age as Evan, but a foot taller. He leaned into Christine, put his arm around her waist, held her hand.

Christine was standing at the counter, going through the mail, when Evan and Isaac rushed up the patio steps into the kitchen.

Evan shook his head. Isaac's mouth hung open.

"What?" Christine said.

"We saw a man in a window," Evan said.

"A young man," Isaac said.

"Two or three houses over," Evan said.

"The third house," Isaac said.

Christine said, "A young man in a window three houses over."

"He had a red Isotopes hat on backwards," Isaac said. The Isotopes were Albuquerque's minor league baseball team.

"You're so good with details," Evan said. "I forgot about his hat."

"Thanks," Isaac said.

"You need to say what happened," Christine said.

"He pulled his pants down," Evan said.

"He *what*?"

Rocky rose from his spot on the rug, came over and stood next to Christine. He was a white Springer Spaniel-Australian Shepherd mix with black spots on his coat and a black patch

over one eye. In a previous life, he'd been a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas, traveling from village to village with only a robe and bowl, offering comfort and solace to all.

Christine said, "What do you mean he pulled his pants down?" She felt dizzy, a numbness in her arms. She could feel the heat flowing through her body. "Did he show his private parts to you?"

"Yes!" Isaac said.

"He showed you his penis?" Christine shouted.

"No!" Evan said. "He turned around."

"He pointed at us," Isaac said, "and he turned around."

"Then," Evan said, "he pulled his pants down and showed us his bare butt!"

Christine leaned into the kitchen counter with both hands. If this man had been jerking off to them, she would be sprinting down the sidewalk on her way to kill him with her bare hands. She shook her head. She could handle this. "He *moon*ed you?"

"Yes!" both boys shouted at the same time.

"He mooned us," Evan said. "That's exactly what happened."

Isaac said, "I've been warned about this since I was little."

Christine suppressed a smile. She didn't want Isaac to think she was laughing at him.

What happened was wrong, and strange. But it was also a story for later. It was funny and not. The boys couldn't understand this. A performance of measured, adult seriousness was required.

"Then what?"

"A girl appeared and pulled the curtain," Evan said.

"I think she was his girlfriend," Isaac said.

"He was laughing," Evan said.

"I'm going to kick his ass," she said, the mature resolve of seconds earlier had dissipated like smoke in wind.

Evan grinned.

Isaac nodded, though this was not the way they talked at his house.

She looked at the clock. It was quarter to five. Evan's older brother, Oliver, was at soccer practice three blocks away. Pick-up was at five thirty. The plan had been to walk with Evan and Isaac at 5:15 to get Oliver from practice.

Christine's call to Isaac's mother went to voicemail. There was no way to distill the odd situation and its complexity, the wall, the scooching and mooning. She didn't leave a message.

"Should we be on the walls?" Isaac asked.

Christine scowled, irritation rising inside her. Of course that's what kids should be doing. Playing outside. Climbing trees and walls. What had happened to childhood? Did every outdoor

activity have to be scheduled and supervised? Like every mother everywhere and across all time, she depended on strangers to do her children no harm. This dependence ached, throbbed, dull and low and insistent amidst the rhythms of her days. What she felt was feral vigilance ever at odds with the longing to give her sons the world, independent, strong, unfettered by fear, by the innumerable limitations that had been placed on her growing up, that were placed on all girls, then and now, on their bodies and minds. She had the irrational belief that strangers in *her* children's world would be kind, decent, would demonstrate the larger truth that people are generally good. In order to not go insane, she had to believe this. But the young man with the red hat on backwards had not followed the script. What he'd done wasn't predatory, but it was weird. And confusing. And he had enjoyed it.

Isaac said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Christine said. "You boys did nothing wrong."

"Have you ever been mooned?" Isaac asked.

"Good question," Evan said.

Christine had been mooned many times. Her college roommates, Steph and Mary, did a lot of mooning. She mooned them back. She sometimes mooned me. She'd flashed a boob at me only a few days before.

"No," she said. "Never."

"Mom," Evan said, "are you really going to kick his ass?"

She pushed herself away from the kitchen counter. "Yes." She had to do something. *Something* had to be done.

I was in a department meeting when Christine sent me a voice text hundreds of words long. I stopped reading halfway through and excused myself quietly. When I biked up the driveway, Christine, Evan and Isaac were standing on the front porch. I took off my helmet and leaned the bike against the garage.

Evan came down the steps and stood beside me. "Something strange happened," he said.

"I gathered that," I said and gave him a hug.

"Let's go have a word with this guy," I said to Christine.

"Let's," she said.

"What about us?" Evan said.

"You're staying here with Rocky," I said.

"Thank you," Isaac said.

I looked at Christine. She didn't want to leave the boys home alone. "They'll be fine."

"What are you going to do?" Evan said.

"Not sure," I said. "But I might punch this guy in the face."

"Violence doesn't solve problems," Evan said.

Isaac nodded.

"That's true," I said.

"You're going to punch him anyway," Evan said.

"I might," I said. "Depends."

"Stop it," Christine said. To the boys, she said, "Stay here. We'll be back in a few minutes."

We walked two doors down Lafayette and turned right onto Frontier. Christine said, "We're just talking. You're not punching anyone."

All through the years our boys were in elementary school, Christine and I walked them to Monte Vista each morning, and one of us was waiting when the bell rang at the end of the day to walk them home. Christine was a nurse; I was a professor. We had flexible hours and made it work. No daycare. Their entire childhood, the boys had only one babysitter, a former graduate student who came over for Thanksgiving dinner. She was more like an aunt than a babysitter.

I didn't trust babysitters.

My older brother, younger sister, and I had many babysitters growing up. One of them had lived across the street from us in Lincoln, Nebraska, on Stratford Avenue. He was seventeen. We were seven and five and four. I idolized him. He taught me to play basketball on the hoop attached to the garage in his driveway. One summer, I went across the street most every evening and rang the doorbell and asked if he could come out and play. Sometimes he did, sometimes not, but he left the basketball out so that I could shoot on my own whenever I wanted. I shot baskets on that hoop for hours and hours. I was little, and the rim was ten feet high, so at first, I shot underhanded. Eventually I could heave the ball with all my strength and make a basket with a two handed jump shot. Shot after shot, hour after hour, until one day I stopped shooting baskets on that hoop forever—though at the time I could not have told you why.

Years later, when I was in my twenties and was dating Christine, memories of what this babysitter had done came flooding back to me. I shared these memories with Christine. I had never spoken of them before. I had not thought of or remembered what had happened even once in twenty years.

Years later, when I was in my thirties, when I was a father of two small boys, I searched the internet and found the babysitter. He lived in Winona, Minnesota, a small town on the Mississippi River. I called and his wife answered. He wasn't home. He worked the night shift somewhere. I told her that I'd grown up across the street from her husband and wanted to get in touch. She said that she would tell him, that he'd be glad to hear from me. I didn't leave my

number but said I'd call back. A few days later his wife answered again. He wasn't home. Something about her voice had changed, and I guessed that he knew who was calling and why. That he would never take my call. That maybe he had told his wife some story to put me off. I hesitated. I didn't know what to do.

She said, "Is something wrong?"

My voice caught in my throat, but I said, "Yes."

She said, "Oh."

I said, "I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but I have something terrible to tell you."

There was silence on the other end of the line, and when she spoke again, she said, "Tell me."

My heart was racing, and there was a sharp pain in my chest, but I told her everything.

When I was done speaking, she said, "I'm so sorry."

For a while, neither of us spoke.

I had imagined that in finally confronting him, I would be some kind of avenging angel. I wanted to hold him accountable for the damage and sorrow he had caused. When it occurred to me that I might never speak to him, that he might never take my call, another possibility blossomed in my mind. In telling his wife what happened, I could hurt him more deeply than I ever could by confronting him. By listening to his stammering denial. I did not think, then, that the truth finally being spoken, thirty years later, was only one link in a chain of cause and effect that perhaps had begun long before he did the awful things he had done, long before he was seventeen, perhaps when he, himself, was only a five-year-old boy. I had no compassion for him. I thought, "What he deserves is to go to jail for a long time. But maybe this will be another kind of exile." I wanted to ruin his life.

But in the silent aftermath that passed between his wife and me, I did not feel righteous or satisfied. I felt a sadness opening below me that had no bottom. I felt the shock and anguish of this kind woman on the other end of the line. I imagined her life in the hours and the days to come.

After some time had passed, she said, "I believe you."

I couldn't say anything.

Then she said, "I'm going to go now."

I said, "Goodbye," and we hung up.

I did not think of this babysitter and what he'd done as I walked with Christine around the corner to confront a man who had flashed my child. I did not remember my phone call and conversation with the babysitter's wife. I did not remember what that experience had taught me, emptiness instead of vengeance, the terrible longing when

there is nothing left to do. I did not think of any of this because the memory is never there.

At the second house from the corner, Christine said, "This is it."

The house was small, like ours, but the stucco was chipped and faded in many places. A red Camaro was parked halfway in the driveway, halfway in a yard of dirt and weeds.

"College kids live here," I said. "Three or four guys, maybe. It's a rental."

We stood there a moment without speaking. We could hear the cars rushing by two blocks south, on the six lanes of Lomas Boulevard. We crossed it walking the boys to and from school each day, two elderly crossing guards stationed on opposite shores in their orange vests. Jack and Norman.

He silenced me. I'd blocked it out. It's like I have amnesia.

Jack was tall, commanding in posture and gesture, sharp with his whistle and firm with the small red stop sign. You wanted Jack in your foxhole. Norman was shorter, round and soft and warm.

His yellow gloves were too big for his hands. Cars edging over the blinking fifteen-mile-per-hour limit hurt his feelings. It was rush hour now, the crosswalk empty, the traffic heading east to the foothills from downtown, from the hospital and the university.

I went up the steps to the porch and rang the bell.

A thin young man with short brown hair came to the screen door. He had a red Isotopes hat on backwards. He wore a lime green tank top and board shorts. A young woman stood behind him.

"Would you mind stepping outside so my wife and I could have a word with you?" I said. I stepped down off the porch.

The young couple followed. We stood there, the four of us, in the dirt yard, forming a rough circle. An awkward silence ensued. The girlfriend wore a large gray T-shirt which came down to the middle of her thighs.

Christine said, "I think you know why we're here."

The young man said, "No. No, I don't."

"Our son and his friend were on the wall of your backyard, and they saw you, and you saw them," Christine said, her voice trembling. "You don't remember that?"

"No," the young man said, defiant. He did not care that we were upset.

"They're eight years old," I said.

"They shouldn't be on people's walls," the young man said. "Then they wouldn't see things they aren't supposed to see."

"So you did see them," Christine said.

"I didn't say that."

The girlfriend had been looking at Christine. Now she said, "Come on, Pete."

Pete shot his girlfriend a look.

The girlfriend said to Christine, "He saw them."

"You know what you did," Christine said to Pete.

"No," Pete said. "I don't. Why don't you tell me?"

I said, "What you did to our son and his friend was unsettling. Disturbed. We should call the cops. I'm definitely going to call the cops."

"Go ahead," Pete said. "They were trespassing. I was in my house."

"You need to apologize, Pete," I said. "Or I'm going to punch you in the face." The words had flown from my mouth, and I meant them.

Christine put a hand on my arm. "He's not

sorry," she said. "And he's not going to be." She turned to the girlfriend. "He's a fucking asshole. What are you doing with him?"

The girlfriend stared at Christine.

"I know your landlord," I said to Pete. "He's a friend of mine. He's getting a call. We'll see if you'll be living here next month." None of this was true.

But he didn't know that.

"Who cares," Pete said. "I graduate in two weeks and I'm outta here."

"Good riddance," I said.

Then I said, because I could sense the moment slipping away, "What kind of pervert pulls his pants down and shows his ass to little boys? Are you a sex offender? Are you on the registry? Is that who you are?"

"Fuck you," Pete said. "Keep talking like that and you're the one getting punched in the face." He had not looked ready to fight before but he looked ready now, his arms loose at his sides, his fists clenched.

"Try it," Christine said. "Try it, and I'll claw your eyes out of their sockets."

Pete looked from Christine to me and was about to say something but then stopped. He said to the girlfriend, "These people are psycho." He went up the steps and yanked open the screen door. He held the door open for the girlfriend. But she had not followed him. She looked down and kicked at the dirt with her bare foot.

Pete went inside.

Seconds passed in silence as we stood in the late afternoon sun in the barren yard.

A car drove past on the street behind us and turned onto Lafayette. Normally, I would have looked to see who the driver was, and if it was someone I knew, I would have waved. I would have waved even if I didn't know the driver, as long as they weren't driving too fast. If they were, I would have put out the palm of my hand, a gesture which meant, "Come on, slow it down."

The girlfriend made eye contact with Christine but didn't say anything. Then she went up the porch steps and inside the house.

Christine turned to me and said, "Let's go home," and she walked away down the sidewalk. A majestic ash tree stood on the corner of Frontier and Lafayette, and Christine left the bright sunlight and entered the shade of its yellow leaves. She turned the corner onto our street. She didn't look back.

I knew what I was going to do when I got home. I would give Evan and Isaac a high five and a hug. I would say that we had told the strange, dumb neighbor that what he had done was wrong, and that he knew it. We would walk to Bataan Park and pick up Oliver from soccer practice. Isaac's parents would pick him up and we would try to put words to what happened. I would order a sausage and pepperoni pizza, the boys could have blackberry IZZEs, even though it was a school night, and afterwards we would have cookie dough ice cream. But all that was yet to come.

Not this same night, but not long after, Christine and I were sitting at the kitchen table, the dishes done, the boys put to bed, the magic hour and its reckless energies spent, the night winding down, the house quiet. We'd been drinking wine and eating dark chocolate.

"I haven't told you something," Christine said. She was wearing her black cotton night shirt which had once been a dress. All her nightshirts had once been dresses. This one, bought for five dollars at Buffalo Exchange, was originally from Ann Taylor Loft, but she thought it was too short, too skimpy, that she was too old for it now.

"A memory came to me when you were reading to the boys. If I tell you, maybe it will leave me alone."

The lights were on in the kitchen, but not above the table, so we sat mostly in shadow.

"I remembered something that happened at Walmart a few weeks ago. Maybe it came to me because of what happened to Evan and Isaac." She sipped her wine. "Oh, he was a scary fucker. Even though it was the middle of the day."

She made a face. I could see she was feeling mushy, a little drunk, which was not like her.

"I was in the cold medicine aisle, over by the pharmacy. A man appeared beside me. He came up close. Too close. I saw the bad skin on his face before I really saw him. Pockmarks. He'd had acne when he was a teenager. I stepped back.

"I can't remember what he said first. Maybe he just said hi and I said hello back. That was my first mistake. He was making way too much eye contact.

"He said something like, 'What are you buying?'

"I was buying zinc, and he waited for me to say something. When I didn't, he said something like, 'Do you really think that works?'

"Right away I was scared. I knew he was trouble, and I needed to get out of there. I knew what kind of person he was. It's like I could smell it on him. And I knew that something about me made him think he could approach me like that, scare me like that, intimidate me. I've learned that much from Bonnie. It's like I have a target on my forehead."

"You told me about this," I said. "This is ringing a bell."

"I told you a scary guy approached me at Walmart."

"You did." I remembered feeling angry, but there was nothing to do.

"I told you, but I didn't really tell you."

"Keep going."

"I was wearing a sundress. I'd put on makeup. I looked nice. I'm not sure why but I felt like dressing up that day. It's stupid and wrong to feel responsible for what happened. But I do. A little. Like I played some part. Because I was dressed up. For no reason. Like I was asking for it.

"He was wearing a cheap suit, cheap dress shoes. He wasn't a lawyer. He wasn't an executive or administrator. He looked like some kind of salesman. But he was attractive. Even with his bad skin, he was handsome. He was pleased with himself and his handsomeness. His hair was full of product, a little too long. And combed straight back.

"I didn't answer about the zinc. I turned my back on him and walked away. I went to a different aisle. That was a good choice. I had a few things in my cart, a few things left on my list, but I thought, 'I need to get the fuck out of here.' I went to the cashier. I thought about telling her. I thought about asking for an escort to my car. But it was the middle of the day. That seemed a little drastic. Then I saw him checking out, two registers over. He was looking at me. He didn't have a cart. He was buying a pack of gum or a candy bar, something small.

"I paid and hurried out to the Subaru. I was fumbling around in my purse as I walked through the parking lot. I walked fast. I looked over my shoulder, and he was following me. He wasn't hurrying. I felt like I was in a horror film. I finally found my keys, and I was about to open the door, and he was there standing next to me again, too close.

"He said, 'Hi.'

"God, I was so scared. I didn't say anything.

"He said, 'Do you want to go somewhere?' Or, 'Do you want to get a drink somewhere?'

Something like that. He was that direct. He propositioned me. He had this shit-eating grin on his face.”

Christine paused and studied me.

I said, “This is all new. I haven’t heard any of this. You weren’t this specific.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“And then?”

“I made another mistake. That’s what I’m still beating myself up about. This is why I never told you. Because I didn’t shout, ‘Get the fuck away from me. You fucking creep.’

“I said, ‘I have to pick up my son from school.’

“The man looked at his watch and said, ‘What time does school get out?’

“And again, I screwed up, I said, ‘3:50.’ I answered his question. I was so scared. It was like I was mesmerized. Hypnotized. And the whole time, while he was standing there too close to me, in the back of my mind, I was thinking, ‘He’s done this before. Some woman goes with him, and he fucks her in a cheap hotel, and she goes home and never sees him again. He knew there were women who would go with him, lonely women, or scared women, and he thought I might be one of them. He fucked strangers, and maybe he raped and killed them. I couldn’t stop myself from imagining it. I got lost in my own dark thoughts, right there in the parking lot, my own worst case scenarios.

“I thought these things. But I also thought, ‘How sad and bizarre that some woman would take him up on his desperate request.’

“He said, ‘Come on. It’s only one o’clock. We have all kinds of time.’

“That brought me back to myself. He wouldn’t take my terrified ‘no’ for an answer. I thought, ‘What is wrong with me? Did I lead this man on? Is this my fault?’

“I kept trying to politely get out of the situation. I was so fucking polite. For his sake. That’s the insight. That’s what I’ve come to understand. I didn’t want to call him out. To state directly what he was doing, and that he was pathetic. I didn’t want *him* to be embarrassed. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Instead of shouting in his face. Instead of unleashing all my rage. Instead of letting my rage protect me, the way I would protect my children, or a friend, or anyone. That’s what I supposedly learned with Bonnie. Shut the whole fucking thing down. I’ve practiced with her. I’ve done the screaming and the shouting in her office. And then I just— failed. I blew it. As if I hadn’t done any work with her at all. It’s infuriating. It shouldn’t matter if it was a dark alley or the Walmart parking lot on a weekday afternoon. I should have made a scene.”

Christine stopped and looked at me. I could feel my own rage in my face. I also felt like I was about to cry. I said, “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate you saying that. But I did do something wrong. I can hear Bonnie in my head, not letting me off the hook. I am not a child. I am an adult, and an adult says, ‘Get the fuck away from me.’

“But no. We stood there, and this creepy motherfucker said, ‘What do you say? My car is right over there.’ And he pointed.

“I didn’t look where he pointed. He was blocking my way. I had taken a couple of steps back, and he was standing next to my driver’s side door. There was another car parked beside me, so the space was narrow. I would have to push past him to open the door. He could have stopped me from getting in the car, and we both knew it.

“My fear took over then. I needed to get in the car. Our old car. No fob. No button to unlock it. I had to use the key. I said sternly, ‘I am leaving,’ and I stepped toward him.

“He took a small step backward so I could get to the car door. But I had to stand so close to him to get it unlocked. I’m sure he saw my hands shaking. And he was pleased. He wanted that. But I got in with my bag on my wrist and got the door shut. When I pressed the lock button, I glanced at him. He had moved closer to the driver’s side window. He was standing there with a small smile on his face, eyebrows raised, like I might roll down the window and change my mind. But either way, I had already given him some of what he wanted.

“I jammed the key in the ignition, threw it in reverse and didn’t look back. I tore out of there, turned onto Carlisle, and I could hardly breathe.”

She shook her head. “Every woman has stories like mine. I tell myself, ‘Don’t make such a big deal out of it. Get over it. Move on.’”

“You got away,” I said.

“He silenced me. I’d blocked it out. It’s like I have amnesia. You know exactly what I mean.”

“I do.”

She looked down at her hands and was quiet for a time.

Christine said, “We’ll tell our boys as much as they can handle, as soon as they can handle it. But in the end, it will be up to fate, whatever that is, and the mercy of strangers.”

The years have passed, and our boys are grown. They are both in college, in their apartments, living their lives. I come into the house from the shed I built during the pandemic. An eight-by-ten writing studio in the backyard where the

treehouse used to be. Christine is in the kitchen drinking coffee in her blue bathrobe.

"Remember Pete?" I say. It has been more than a decade since Evan and Isaac were mooned, but Christine has recently read yet another draft of this essay.

"Of course," she says.

"I just realized how I really felt," I say. "It just came to me."

"I think I know what you're going to say."

I nod, because of course. She understands me. We understand each other. "I didn't just want to punch him in the face," I say. "I wanted to slam his skull into the dirt over and over."

I sit down at the table. Christine comes over and sits beside me. "I know."

"So Dad," Evan says. "That's a good story about the guy who mooned me and Isaac. Kind of dark, but I see what you're doing, what you're getting at. It's more a story about you and Mom than it is about me, which is fine. Getting mooned was strange, but it wasn't traumatizing or anything. Still, there's a couple things you should know."

Evan is nineteen and home on holiday break from college in Montana. "First, when that guy mooned us, we were like, 'We gotta get *out of here*.' We were panicked. But we had to go so slow. We were scooching. Scooch. Scooch. And not just that, we were scooching *backwards*. It took us forever."

Evan pantomimes his eight-year-old self straddling the wall and scooching backwards. "So that's one important detail for your readers. Mom will probably remember the second thing, because I told her beforehand. I said, 'I'm going to talk about getting mooned at show-and-tell.'"

"Mom said, 'I don't think you should do that.'"

"But I did it anyway. I told the mooning story to John Malin and the whole third grade class at show-and-tell."

"No," I said.

"Yes!" Evan said, his face bright, smiling at the memory. "Absolutely. John Malin thought it was hilarious. The whole class liked it. I re-enacted the whole thing. The scooching. Everything. John Malin said no one had ever told a story at show-and-tell about getting mooned. That was a first for him, and he'd been teaching a long time."

"Thirty-three years," I said.

"You also left out the part about the cop coming to the house that night. A female cop. She was nice. I'd never actually spoken to a police officer before. She interviewed Isaac and me, and then I think she went over and interviewed the guy."

"I forgot about the police officer," I said.

Evan said, "I remember it like it was yesterday." •

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