

For John

“I’m not going!” Eric shouted through clenched teeth. “I don't have to!” He wiped his nose and blotted his eyes on his sleeve. But his father's patience had run out.

“If I say you are going, that's that! Now get into that bathroom, clean yourself up, and put on your good clothes!”

When he spoke like that, there was no point in arguing, but he still hated his dad for forcing him. Shuffling toward the bathroom, he slow-walked it as much as possible.

“Get moving!” roared his father.

Eric slammed the bathroom door as loudly as he dared. He muttered to himself as he splashed cold water on his face. Then he remembered John.

Even if he didn't go, John would understand. John never needed words. He always knew what Eric was thinking.

Taking a handful of Kleenex from the box, he stuffed them into his pocket and crossed to his bedroom. His parents were in theirs. For the moment, the house was quiet. The echoes of their argument and his pleading still rung in his head. Sitting on his bed, he undressed sullenly, grumbling to himself, forcing his feet into socks. Then, faintly, but clearly, through the wall, he heard his parents talking. They were trying to whisper, but failing.

" ... only a child, Kurt. Do we have to force him? Surely, the Booths will understand."

“You're too soft on him. We all have to face it sometime. Time he grew up and found out what life's about.”

“This ... is not what life is all about. Our son is only twelve! If only you paid more attention to him you'd ... twelve, Kurt. He’s still very young.” There was sadness and pleading in her voice

“All the more reason for him to go. A kid ought to face it! Maybe if

Johnny'd ...”

The drone of his father's electric shaver cut off their conversation.

They always talk about me that way, he thought, pulling on his grey flannels. His dad always seemed to be mad at him, and his mother was always defending him. Strange. His dad wanted him to be different and his mother wanted him to stay the same forever.

Sometimes, it seemed like he could do nothing right. He could never please his father, no matter how hard he tried. Lately, he had given up trying. Now, he and his father argued constantly. A tiny black nut of resentment was growing inside him, feeding on their quarrels. He wished things were different. More than anything he wanted to love his father, but the months of arguing weighed him down.

John said everybody felt that way when they were teenagers. John had known a lot about that kind of stuff. Just last week they'd talked about girls, but not in the sly, dirty way that lots of the guys at school did. John wasn't like that. Quietly, patiently, John had talked, until it became gem clear. There were none of the blunt and greasy words the other boys used. John did everything like that. He seemed to push aside all of the layers that didn't count and found the kernel of truth inside.

“Eric,” his father's voice was softer now, calling him away from his thoughts. “Time to go.”

During the long ride across town it rained. Through the car window, only the headlights, the misty streetlights, and the red glare of traffic lights glistened in the wet gloom. Rain drummed on the roof as the car sped down the darkened streets. The wipers flapped, flapped, flapped.

A tense silence, like dark syrup, seemed to have filled the inside of the car. While his dad smoked, staring at the road ahead, and his mother sat quietly in the front, Eric sulked, uncomfortably alone in the damp, back seat.

His face was hot and dry with the tightness that comes from crying. When he closed his eyes his thoughts tumbled aimlessly. A hundred images rushed

through his mind. But then, there was John and his spirit calmed. Instead, he began searching his memory for the peaceful times they'd spent together.

He remembered the day he and John took a bus to Cove Road field to watch the Italians and Hungarians play. The sharp scent of newly cut grass and sweat and autumn leafsmoke drifted around them. He closed his eyes and day hung bright and jeweled before him.

They'd stopped before a dark Italian man, stripped to shorts and soccer boots. He performed magic with the soccer ball. With a flick of his toe he lifted it and tapped it from foot to foot. Magically, the ball slithered up his body until he was bouncing it from knee to knee. In the time it took he and John to exchange a look of joyful astonishment, he'd bumped it up onto his head where he bunted it at least a dozen times before he let it drop and started the whole exercise once more. When the whistle blew he grinned at the boys, grabbed his shirt from the grass and ran onto the field, tapping the ball ahead of him.

“Wow, that was really something!” John cried. “See how easy he made it look? Just like juggling, wasn't it? You know ... I wanna do that!” John had such a look of determination that Eric was sure he would. When his friend decided on some project or other, you could be certain he'd follow up.

Many times that fall they returned to Cove Road field, but always John insisted in getting there early. He had to see what he called the ‘control exercises’. He enjoyed the games, but, more and more, he became obsessed with the magic tricks they saw before the same. “Pure sports” he called it.

Once soccer ended and the long winter closed in, Eric forgot about their visits to Cove Road, but John didn't. For Christmas he asked his parents to give him a soccer ball with alternating black and white hexagons. All winter he practised in his basement.

On the first really fine Spring day, one of those days when the wind blows warm and the sun dapples the new lawns with green gold, John called Eric to come over. “Got a surprise for you,” he said. Out on the lawn, they tapped the ball back and forth a few times.

“Now watch,” John said.

He stopped the ball and deftly flicked it up, turning it precisely one way and

then the other. Kicking it higher he took it higher, controlling it neatly on one knee and then the other. The hardest part was yet to come, but with a seemingly effortless motion he popped the ball into the air above his head. When it dropped he was underneath, nudging it back up with his forehead. In full control, his smile widened and his eyes shone with pride. Finally he dropped it to the grass and trapped it, exclaiming “Hah!” in triumph. Now, Eric held that picture like a momento of his friend.

His father wheeled the car off the glistening street into the half-empty parking lot. The building, heavy and formal, sat well back from the road. Eric followed his parents inside, but hesitated near the door. They stopped to wait for him.

Something made him set his face and walk inside. Something he couldn't name made him pass his father, satisfied now that his boy was becoming a man, but who really wasn't, and his mother, who smiled tightly. Something new inside him forced him down the long corridor to where Mr. and Mrs. Booth stood, red faced inside a too-quiet room. Something he had to know made him leave his parents and the Booths with their muted voices and awkward silences. Something John had taught him made him step alone toward the coffin, even as his mother reached to stop him.

He stepped across a chamber constructed to deaden sound. All, except crying, were sucked into the thick rugs. The furniture and drapes seemed heavy, hanging limply as if they too were weeping. Even the light was strained through dark, hooded fixtures. The casket sat within an alcove.

With new courage he moved toward it.

He had been eating when they called about the accident. Now, he remembered every scrap of food. He remembered his mother's shocked face. A soccer ball. Traffic. Killed instantly.

The words had rung in his head, without meaning, for three days.

Now, as he approached the coffin, he connected ‘killed instantly’ and his friend. He halted a moment, a few steps away.

When he finally looked, he felt gripped, strangled by emotion. John’s body held him fixed, trembling, and incredulous, unable to breathe. This thing ...

wasn't John. The face was a horrific white mask. John's eyes and mouth were shut in an expression that was never his. Such a fake, such a sham, such a reconstructed horror that he was overcome by revulsion. He felt close to throwing up.

He turned and ran, pushing his way past his parents, the Booths, and the other faces until he found himself in the parking lot. For a long time he cried, trying to heave the memory of the room out of himself.

Once, his father approached him.

"Leave me alone!" Eric hissed, "Get away!"

"You can't talk to me ..." Kurt began, but his mother tugged his father away from him and left him alone with what they thought was his grief.

Then, standing alone in the parking lot with his tears and convulsions subsiding, Eric heard a new voice. As the rain ran down his face he recognized John's soothing voice, full of life and speaking to him.

In the car, on the way home, he stared angrily at the back of his father's head.

"Now. *You* watch!" he whispered, glaring.