

A Better Place

Fall 1980

Casper

I put my tray down and took my place beside Stacey. She was my best friend, my only friend really. I liked her because she was nice to me, and she didn't look down upon me because of my worn clothes the way most people did. She talked to me like a real person, like I was worth knowing. I liked that.

I wasn't sure why she liked me. Maybe because I didn't drool all over her like the other boys. I just talked to her. I didn't try to look down her shirt. I didn't stare at her chest. I just talked, and I listened, really listened. Stacey knew I was really interested in what she had to say. The other boys just pretended they were interested, so they could be near her and check her out. I was different though, and she knew it. She knew I was real, and not a fake like the others.

The only thing I didn't like about Stacey was that she treated me like a little boy sometimes. I don't mean that she treated me bad, or ordered me around or anything; it's just that sometimes she acted more like a babysitter than a friend. I didn't like that, I wasn't a baby—I was fifteen. I was pretty short and thin, however, and looked younger than my age. I always had to wear my brother's old clothes too, hand-me-downs from my dad, which were too big for me and made me look even smaller.

Stacey stopped talking when Brendan Brewer walked toward our table. Her eyes devoured him. She wasn't the only one who followed him with her gaze either. I noticed that the other girls sitting near were watching him too, even though most of them were pretending not to watch. The boys watched him as well, with an envious look in their eyes and a touch of jealousy too.

I frowned. I knew it was stupid, but I didn't like it when Stacey paid a lot of attention to another guy like that. It wasn't because I thought of her as my girlfriend or anything. We were friends, just friends. I guess I was afraid that if she started dating that I wouldn't get to talk to her. I was also kind of protective. I knew what most boys at school wanted from her.

Brendan smiled at her as he passed our table and went to sit with his football buddies. Stacey sighed. I guess I could understand that. Brendan was the captain of the football team. He was a living, breathing advertisement for tall, dark, and handsome. He was smart, good looking, and athletic. He had muscles bulging in all the right places. Every girl wanted to be his girlfriend and every boy wanted to be him.

Brendan seemed like a pretty nice guy, but I still didn't like him too much. He'd never done anything to me, but then he'd never even bothered to talk to me. I didn't really expect him to talk to me. He was from a whole different world. He had looks. He had money. He had everything. I had nothing.

I watched Brendan as he sat down with all the football jocks. I guess I was like the other boys. I kind of wanted to be him too. I wondered what it was like to be tall and muscular, and to wear new clothes that actually fit and looked good. Brendan was wearing his letterman's jacket. It was maroon and cream and made him look like a real jock. I felt my heart grow a little tighter. I'd never have a jacket like that. I'd never have anything that Brendan had. Life just wasn't very fair.

I pushed it out of my mind and tried to enjoy my lunch. We were having cheese burgers and fries, with corn, and apple cobbler. It was really good. Most of the kids complained about the food in the cafeteria, but I thought it was great, well, most of the time anyway. Of course, most of the other kids knew they'd get something to eat when they got home. I didn't.

Stacey grilled me about our reading assignment for English. We were supposed to be reading *The Lord of the Flies*, but I don't think Stacey so much as picked up the book. She just asked me what it was all about.

"You know, I think you're just using me for my brain," I said, teasing her. "If I wasn't around you might actually have to read something."

"Don't ever leave me, Casper, I couldn't live without you," she said laughing. "Now tell me what happened in chapter 3."

I filled her in on all the details. Unlike Stacey, I always read the assignments. I really liked reading *The Lord of the Flies*. It was a good story and I couldn't wait to see what happened next in it. I had to fight myself to keep from working ahead. Sometimes I didn't have much to do after school, so I rationed out the things I enjoyed to make them last longer. We didn't have a television and I didn't have any money to do anything, so that left me with little to do.

Lunch was over all too soon and Stacey and I went our separate ways. School became a much more unfriendly place when she wasn't around. When I was with Stacey, no one bothered me. They wouldn't dare because she'd lay into them. When she was gone things were different. When I was alone I tried to be as invisible as possible and not draw any more attention to myself than I could help. That was the best way to survive in high school. The more invisible I could be, the less I got picked on. I was real good at it. I thought of myself as the "invisible boy."

I looked around the hall, carefully checking it in both directions, then quickly slipped to my locker and worked the combination. I jerked on the latch. It was stuck, of course. The old lock was tricky. If I didn't do the combination exactly right, it wouldn't open. If the dial was so much as a millimeter off it would hold fast. I quickly worked the combination again. I pulled. The latch opened. I opened the door just a crack and then a hand slammed it shut again.

"Having trouble with your locker again, Casper?"

Even before I looked up, I knew who was standing there. Brent Bairstowe was one of my least favorite people in school. He and his buddies, George Winters and Jimmy Pearson, made up what I called "the terrible trio." They lived to make life difficult for boys like me and I was their favorite target of all. I looked around, but Brent was alone. At least I didn't have all three of them to deal with.

I didn't answer Brent. I knew he'd twist anything I said and use it against me. I swallowed the small knot of fear rising in my chest and reminded myself that there was only so much he could do to me there in the hallway. Mr. Vanmeter, my science teacher, was on hall duty and was only a few feet away.

"Huh, Casper? Answer me! You think you're too good to talk to me do you?"

I hated it when he called me Casper, although everyone did. My real name was Clint, but I got tagged with the nickname Casper in grade school and it stuck. Jimmy was the one who started it. He said I was so thin and pale that I looked like Casper The Friendly Ghost. He started calling me that and so did everyone else. I didn't really mind it when others called me that, even Stacey called me Casper. I think most people thought it was my real name. I hated the way Brent, George, and Jimmy said it, however, like an insult. I especially hated it when they called me "Casper, The Friendly Runt."

"Answer me you little punk!"

Brent was getting mad. There was no way to win with him.

"My locker is fine," I said.

"So now you're calling me a liar," he said and pushed me up against my own locker. The knob dug painfully into my back. I don't know how he figured I was calling him a liar. It didn't matter really. Brent would find one excuse or another to hurt me. Like I said, there was no winning with him.

"I try to be nice and you treat me like shit," he snarled at me.

The bell rang. Brent gave me one last glare, and then ran off to class. I worked the combination to my locker again and finally managed to get my science book out. I dumped all the books I wouldn't need and picked up the ones I would. Science was my last class of the day and I intended to make a break for it as soon as school was over. I knew Brent would be looking for me, probably with his buddies.

I dodged my way through the halls after Science and quickly slipped out the front doors.

"Hey you little punk!"

My heart skipped a beat in my chest and I prepared to run. I looked to my right, in the direction of the voice. It was Brent all right, but he wasn't talking to me. He and his buddies had cornered another kid and were giving him a hard time. I wished I could do something to help him, but I was way too small to take on the terrible trio. If I intervened, all I'd do is get myself roughed up too. I hated being small. I slipped away quietly and quickly, before they could spot me.

When I felt I was safe, I slowed down, walking as slowly as I could. I wasn't eager to go home. I didn't like it there. It was a bad place. I was afraid when I was there. It hadn't always been like that. When I was little I always rushed home to my mom, to tell her what I'd done at school. She'd always give me a cookie and sit with me at the kitchen table and talk to me. My family had been poor then, too, but Mom had a way of brightening things up. She kept everything as neat as could be and decorated with flowers and things she could find that didn't cost anything. Life wasn't so bad then, but then mom got sick. She got real sick and had to go to the hospital. Dad complained about how expensive it was, how it used up all our money. I couldn't believe he talked like that, like money was more important than Mom. I'd have spent everything I had to make her well, no matter how much I had. I even gave dad the few pennies I had saved up, but he just laughed at me and called me stupid. He was only nice to me when Mom was around. I knew he was ashamed of me because I was puny. My older brother, Jason, was tall and strong. He was dad's favorite. I'm sure my father wished that I had never been born.

Mom didn't get any better. She just got weaker and weaker. Every time I went to see her she was worse. She promised me she'd get better, but she didn't keep her promise. She died. I was mad at her for a long time for that, but later on I understood. I was little when it happened, but I could still remember lying on my bed and crying. I didn't really know what it meant to be dead, but I knew I wouldn't be seeing her again.

That's when things started to get bad. There was less to eat after that, and often nothing. Dad acted like I wasn't even there. I felt like I'd lost both parents instead of just one. When he did notice me, it was even worse. He was always angry with me, like it was my fault that we were poor, like it was my fault that Mom died. And then, some nights when he came in late and drunk...I closed my eyes and blocked the pain from my mind.

I wished I had somewhere else to live. I dreamed about a nice family coming to take me home with them. We'd live in a big house and I'd have my own room. There would always be lots of good things to eat, and there would be a television, and maybe even a pool. I knew it was a fantasy that would never come true, but sometimes I liked to think about it and pretend. Sometimes I managed to lose myself in my own little world. I could be happy there for a while, even though I knew it wasn't real.

I could see the overgrown grass in our yard before I even got close. The neighbors were always complaining about how horrible our yard looked. I didn't blame them. The grass was knee high and dad's old pickup truck was sitting up on blocks in the front, rusting away. I'd have mown the lawn myself, but the mower hadn't worked in ages and Dad was in no mood to repair it. I didn't even bother asking him. I avoided him as much as possible. I tried to remain invisible at home, just like I did at school. If Dad didn't notice I was there, he wouldn't yell at me, or hit me.

I waded through the yard and opened the front door. It was hanging on just one hinge. There was no lock, but then we didn't need one. We sure didn't have anything worth stealing, except maybe dad's liquor.

The house was quiet, no one was home. I knew Dad would probably still be at work, if he bothered to go to work that is. My brother Jason wasn't home either. He usually didn't come home until late. He spent most of his time after school running around with his buddies. That was fine by me. I didn't like him. He was two years older than me and a lot stronger. He picked on me and called me names. He was a lot like Brent or George or Jimmy, only worse because I couldn't get away from him. I lived in the same room with him. Jason did his best to make me feel unwelcome. He made it clear that he didn't want me in his room. That's what he called it, *his* room, not *our* room. Jason was never nice to me. I was afraid of him, even more afraid of him than Dad.

I went into my bedroom and sat at the old kitchen table that served as a desk. It was rickety and squeaked. I opened up my books and worked on my homework. I wanted to get it done when no one was around. I wanted to finish before Jason got home so I could hide it somewhere. Sometimes Jason thought it was funny to rip up my homework so I had to do it all over again.

I was sure I'd have plenty of time, however. It was barely four and Jason would be out for hours yet, getting into trouble with his friends. I sat and worked, scribbling out an essay for English, reading a chapter for science, and doing a bunch of problems for math. I was done in less than an hour. All I had to do was read some in *The Lord of the Flies* for English and I could do that later.

I was hungry. I got up and went into the kitchen. I found some left over macaroni and cheese in the refrigerator. I heated it up on the stove and ate it right out of the pan. It was really good. I always had to find myself something for supper and most of the time there was nothing there at all. Sometimes, when I got really hungry, I'd slip into dad's room when no one else was home. I knew where he kept a jar of change hidden. He threw his change in there whenever he came back from the bars. Sometimes I stole a couple of dollars out of it and went somewhere and bought something to eat. I knew it was wrong to steal, but when I was really hungry I didn't care so much. Besides, parents were supposed to take care of their kids.

I didn't have to steal that night, however. I ate every last bit of the macaroni and cheese. I washed up the pan when I was done, so my brother wouldn't see it sitting there. If he did, he might yell at me for eating it. He considered everything to be his and I got hurt if I touched stuff.

I went back to my room and lay down on the bed. It wasn't even my bed, it was Jason's. I didn't have one. We were supposed to share, but Jason had claimed it as his. I'd put up a fight for it at first, but as always, Jason's muscles got him what he wanted. He was a lot stronger than me and I didn't stand a chance against him. I'd gone to Dad and complained, and I was instantly sorry. He just glared at me and told me to stop being a pussy and stand up for myself. Dad made me feel really worthless. Maybe he was right. I never could stand up to my brother, or anyone else for that matter. Maybe I deserved to be treated the way I was.

Jason wasn't home, so I lie on his bed and read. I didn't dare defy him when he was home, but I could get away with a few things when he was gone. The bed was soft and cozy, a lot more comfortable than the foam rubber mattress I slept on. It wasn't even a real mattress, but a thick piece of foam rubber like they use to make sofas. Luckily I was small, so I fit on it pretty well.

I turned the pages of my book and lost myself in *The Lord of the Flies*. There was something rather pleasant in reading about boys running around wild in only their underwear. There was something uncomfortable about the book too. It seemed a little too much like my own life. Sure, I lived in a boring little town in Kentucky instead of a tropical island, but life at school, and at home, wasn't all that different from life in the book. Sometimes I felt just like Ralph, frantically hiding as Jack and the other boys searched for me, a stick sharpened at both ends. I tried not to think about that too much and just concentrated instead on the more pleasant parts of the novel. I wished I could live on an island like that; it must have been wonderful to be in a place so beautiful...

I awoke with a start. Someone was shaking me roughly. They were gripping my shoulders so tightly they hurt.

"Wake up, you little wuss."

My eyes opened, Jason was on top of me, glaring at me. The room was dark except for the bare bulb overhead. I must've fallen asleep reading.

"What do you think you're doing on my bed? Huh?"

Jason climbed up on me, digging his knees painfully into my chest. He started slapping the sides of my face with his hands, one then the other, harder and harder.

"What - have - I - told - you - about - messing - with - my - stuff!" He smacked me once with each word for emphasis. My cheeks were hot and stung painfully.

"I'm sorry," I said, tears welling up in my eyes. He was hurting me.

"I'm sorr-ee," he said mocking me, pretending he was crying. He smacked me harder. It made me mad. I tried to push him off, but couldn't budge him.

"Oh, baby's gonna cry," he said.

I bit my lip and tried to keep the tears out of my eyes. I couldn't help it. He was hurting me. Finally, he grew tired of tormenting me and stopped. He lay down full length on top of me and stared into my eyes.

"You know, I might let you stay in bed with me, but there's a price," he said.

I swallowed hard, my eyes darting around. I tried not to look at him. I didn't like the look in his eyes. I'd seen that look before. I knew what it meant. Jason pushed himself hard against me. I could feel the bulge in his pants.

"Wanna sleep with me, Casper? Huh?"

I wiggled and squirmed, trying to get out from underneath him. He grabbed my arms and held me in place, pressing harder against me. He was starting to breathe hard. I was scared.

I struggled against him, but he was too strong for me. I grew more terrified with each passing moment. I cried and shrieked and screamed, but there was no one to hear. In my terror I did something I normally would not have done. I spit in my brother's face. He jerked back and I used the opportunity to bolt from the bed and run down the hall. Jason was hard on my heels.

"Get back here you little bastard. You'll pay for that!"

I ran into the bathroom and only just got it locked before he slammed himself against it. He pounded on the door and called me horrible names. He acted more like a vicious animal than a human being. He terrified me when he was like that.

I wasted no time, but lifted myself up and climbed out the window. I ran into the darkness, swiftly, silently. After a little while I stopped. I listened, but there was no sign of pursuit.

I rubbed my arms to warm them. It was a little chilly and I was wearing only a thin t-shirt. It was late, past midnight. I walked along the sidewalk toward the cemetery. I couldn't go home yet. I had to at least wait until Jason had fallen asleep. Then maybe I could slip in without him knowing, and wake up early and get out of the house before he got up. Jason didn't like getting up in the mornings, not for anything, not even to hurt me. The longer I could keep away from him, the better it would be. I knew he'd hurt me for spitting in his face, but it was better than what would have happened if I'd stayed in that bed. Jason didn't bother me like that very much, but when he did... I shivered. I didn't want to think about it. I blocked it from my mind and pretended it had never happened.

I walked on past the cemetery and onto the park. The moonlight was bright and made it almost like day. The park was empty. I curled up on a bench and wrapped my arms tightly around my body, trying to be my own blanket. I shivered. It was fall and it was chilly, not too bad really, but I wasn't comfortable. The bench was hard and hurt my shoulder, and my head. Compared to the bench, my little foam rubber mattress was luxurious.

I tried to forget about what had happened, and about being cold. I imagined that I was sleeping under a great palm tree, on a warm tropical island, just like in *The Lord of the Flies*. I was tired. I kept thinking of the waves lapping at the beach and the warm sand releasing all the heat it had sucked up during the day. I drifted off to sleep listening to the gulls.

I did not sleep easy. My life invaded my dreams. I was standing on a beautiful beach, a spear in my hand, wearing only a loin-cloth. The sun felt warm on my tanned torso. I was happy but it didn't last...

"There you are you little bitch!" yelled Jason. He was running toward me, followed by Brent, George, and Jimmy. All of them were wearing nothing but underwear. They all carried spears, except for Jason; he carried a long stick sharpened at both ends. I bolted, running as fast as I could. They were hot on my heels.

I was Ralph and they were going to cut off my head and impale it on the stick. I tore up the beach trying to get away, but I couldn't do it. Jimmy dove at my ankles and sent me crashing into the hot sand. They all piled on me; Jason held a sharp knife to my throat. I screamed.

I jerked upright on the bench, shivering from fear, and a chill in the air. It was early. I didn't have a watch, so I wasn't quite sure how early. I guessed about six or so in the morning. I thought about going home to clean up, but then thought better of it. Instead I pulled off my shirt and washed myself in the fountain. The water was cold and made goose-bumps on my skin. I washed my face and wet my hair down. I ran my fingers through my hair, hoping I wouldn't look too bad at school.

My stomach growled, but there was nothing to eat. I was used to that, however. I reminded myself that I'd get something to eat at lunch, and then maybe I could find something else when I got home after school. Being hungry wasn't too bad really, not when you got used to it, unless it lasted a long time. When I went without anything to eat for a long time I got all shaky, and my stomach hurt.

I flicked the water off my chest and arms with my hands, wishing I had a towel. I put my shirt back on and walked to warm myself up. I didn't really have anywhere to go, so I went ahead and walked to school. It was well before time for school when I got there, but the doors were open and I went in. It was a lot warmer inside. I began to lose the chill that had seeped into my body. I found myself a corner in the cafeteria and sat down in a chair. I put my head on the table and closed my eyes. I hadn't slept well on the hard park bench.

I must have fallen asleep, for it seemed only a few minutes later when I heard people walking by. I was still tired, but I felt better. I stretched and looked at the clock. I still had plenty of time. I walked to my locker and worked the combination. For once it opened on the first try. I was glad it did, because I caught sight of Brent out of the corner of my eye. I grabbed what books I needed and headed for first period English before he had a chance to spot me and start trouble. He didn't always come after me when he saw me. Brent had a lot of boys he picked on and he couldn't always get around to us all. I made sure to stay out of his way, however, just in case it was my turn.

I nearly made it to the relative safety of English class without incident. Just before I got there my brother came out of nowhere and shouldered me, nearly knocking my books out of my arms. I know that's what he meant to do. He looked a little disappointed because he hadn't succeeded. I smiled inwardly.

"I'll be seeing you later, bitch," he snarled at me, and then went on. I knew what he meant. I knew I'd have to pay for spitting in his face. Whatever he did to me, it was better than what would have happened.

I didn't have my copy of *The Lord of the Flies* for class. I'd left it at home along with a few other books. I didn't really need it anyway. I'd already read the chapters we were covering and I had a good memory. Stacey sat down beside me and asked me to fill her in on what we

were supposed to have read. I picked up where I'd left off at lunch the day before and brought her up to speed.

"You'd better be glad we're friends," I said. "Without me you'd be going to summer school."

She laughed. I noticed a couple of girls looking at me, like they thought that Stacey and I shouldn't be friends. I knew they thought she was too good for me, and that I was nothing, just a poor boy. I tried not to let that kind of thing get to me, but it did. I self consciously covered up the hole in my shirt and stuck my feet under the desk in front of me so they couldn't see my shoes.

I felt a wave of sadness wash over me. My clothes embarrassed me. I got a lot of looks from the other kids in school. Most of them were too nice to say anything, but I knew what they were thinking. I got looks from the teachers too. I think those looks were the worst, because what I read there was pity. I couldn't stand it that they actually pitied me. It made me depressed. Sometimes it was hard just to walk down the hallway, wearing clothes that were little better than rags. The kids with nice clothes didn't know how easy they had it. I'd never had a new shirt, pants, or pair of shoes in my entire life. All I got was hand-me-downs from my dad, and my brother.

The teacher started asking questions about our reading, and I lost myself in the discussion. I didn't speak out a whole lot, but when he called on me I could answer. In that, at least, I was as good as everyone else. I didn't have nice clothes, or live in a nice house, but I wasn't stupid.

By the time lunch rolled around I was starving. I was so hungry that I said "yes" to everything the lunch lady offered me. I think she could tell I was really hungry, because she gave me more than anyone else. I didn't turn it down either.

I took my usual seat beside Stacey and tried not to wolf down my lunch. I felt like shoveling it in as fast as I could, but I didn't want anyone to notice me eating like that. Besides, I wanted to make it last. I ate the lima beans first, because they were my least favorite. I usually saved what I liked best for last. I'm not quite sure why I did that, but I always did. I guess maybe I did it because it was something to look forward to, like the lunch that was coming up on Friday. We were having pizza. I loved pizza. I'd been thinking about lunch on Friday for days.

Brendan Brewer walked toward our table and Stacey and the other girls practically drooled over him. I heard one of them say "He's sooooo cute." He sat down not far from us. A few of his football buddies followed him and it changed the way everyone acted at the table. All the girls were stealing glances of him and talking to him. All the guys looked like they were trying to be impressive. It was like he was some celebrity or something. I guess he was, at least in our school. Everyone knew him and admired him. Not only was he captain of the football team, he was, without doubt, the best looking guy in school. He was handsome and had really nice muscles. Just looking at him made me breathe a little funny, but I didn't like to think about what that meant.

Yeah, he had nice muscles. I liked the way they bulged with his slightest movement. I froze, and then looked around quickly when I realized what I was thinking. I turned a little red in the face, even though there was no way anyone could tell what was going through my mind. I suddenly felt sick. Not physically sick, but emotionally sick, well, maybe a little physically sick too. I knew something was wrong with me. I knew I shouldn't be thinking things like that. Boys weren't supposed to notice such things about other boys. It was bad, unnatural.

I ate slowly, but lunch didn't taste so good after that. I didn't like to be reminded that there was something wrong with me. I didn't like it when I lost control and let myself think things about other boys like that. Sometimes I couldn't seem to help it and that really scared me. I didn't know what I'd do if someone found out.

I thought about Jason and how much I hated him. I think he's the one who did it to me. He's the one that made me like that. He gave it to me, like a disease. I hated it when he got like that, it terrified me, and yet some little part of me didn't hate it. Maybe some part of me even wanted him to do what he did. I shuddered. I pushed it from my mind. I just wouldn't think about it.

I knew deep down that what was wrong with me wasn't Jason's fault. It was me. The other boys were right when they called me names. Even though they didn't know for sure, something gave me away and made them treat me like they did.

"Hey kid, um..."

"Casper," said Stacey.

"Casper, can you pass me that salt?"

I looked up. I'd been totally lost in my own little world. I was shocked. Brendan Brewer was actually talking to me.

"Um, yeah sure," I said and did as he asked. I had to stand up and stretch way over to pass him the salt. His fingers brushed mine. I felt a tingle pass through my entire body. His eyes locked on mine for that brief moment and I felt like he could read my mind. My face grew hot. I turned my attention back to my lunch and hoped that no one was looking at me. When I looked up, I knew I was safe; all attention was focussed on Brendan.

Brendan kept looking in my direction. At least I guessed so. He might have been looking at Stacey, which would have made more sense, but I think he was looking at me. I wondered why he was looking at me. I was afraid that maybe he really did know what I'd been thinking. I sure hoped not. I didn't need yet another guy who was twice my size hunting me down to beat the shit out of me. I didn't look in Brendan's direction anymore, just in case. I didn't want the coolest guy in school to know what a total freak I was.

Brendan

I put down my tray and sat near Stacey Gibson and the cute little blond boy that always sat with her at lunch. I'd noticed him around school. He seemed nervous and afraid almost all the time, withdrawn and quiet, except when he was with Stacey. He talked more around her, and even laughed.

He was especially cute when he laughed, but he was cute all the time. I found myself drawn to his boyish good looks. He looked really young and I felt a little guilty about my attraction to him, but he was a freshman, so he couldn't be *that* young.

"Hey kid, um..." I realized I didn't even know his name. I hoped he didn't think I was a jerk for calling him kid.

"Casper," said Stacey.

"Casper, can you pass me that salt?"

Casper looked up. He seemed lost, like he didn't even quite know where he was. He looked surprised too, like it got to him that I'd spoken to him. I was accustomed to that look, but usually from girls. Seeing the expression on Casper's face made me hopeful.

"Um, yeah sure."

Our fingers brushed, and I smiled at him as I took the salt. I put a little on my lima beans, since I wasn't going to eat those anyway. I didn't want anyone noticing that I'd asked for the salt and didn't use it. I knew I was being paranoid, but I wasn't going to take the slightest risk that someone would find out about my secret.

I stole a few glances of Casper as I ate. Looking at him made me feel warm inside. There was something about his shyness that really attracted me. I was surrounded by jocks most of the time; loud, boisterous boys that thought they were God's gift to women. Seeing a boy who was actually modest was a novelty. Casper could easily have been conceited as hell. He was beautiful, with light blond hair and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. He was nearly too beautiful to be a boy.

I flirted with the girls some, and kept stealing glances of Casper. He was so slim that it looked like the wind could blow him away. I found myself wanting to put my arms around him and hold him tight. I liked the way being near Casper made me feel. I'd never felt like that before. There were a lot of guys that turned me on, like just about all of my team-mates, but something stirred in my heart when I looked at Casper. He was a boy that I definitely intended to get to know better.

I thought about Casper as I walked to PE. I wondered if maybe I'd better think twice about getting to know him better. He was a boy that I could really fall for. I'd done a really good job of keeping my sexual orientation a secret, but if I got involved with Casper, I might not be able to keep it up. What if I opened up to him and he told everyone? Or what if I forgot myself and did something to give myself away in front of others? I knew how everyone thought about homosexuals at my school, or at least I thought I knew. Being called a "fag" was about the worst put-down there was.

I had a lot to lose. I was popular. I was Captain of the football team. I'd worked my ass off to become captain and I finally did it, even though I was just a junior. If people found out about me, they might take that away from me. Hell, my team-mates might not even want me on the team, period. I could just imagine what they'd think of showering with me if they found out.

I wasn't ashamed of being gay, not at all. I was proud of it. It was part of me. I knew the hicks in my little Kentucky town wouldn't see it the same way at all. I also knew that I had enemies. I tried to be nice to everyone and treat them with respect, but I knew there were guys that didn't like me, just because I was a success. I'd heard the grumbling when I'd been made captain. I saw the looks some guys gave me when the girls stared as I walked past. They were jealous. Jealousy could lead to some bad things. I wasn't exactly perfect either. I was a pretty nice guy, but I could be a dick now and then. I was sure I'd made a few enemies.

The more I thought about it, the less sure I was that I wanted to get to know Casper better. It might be wiser to keep my distance. If I allowed myself to get close, I probably would fall for him. If I did so, I was a goner.

I changed into my PE uniform. A maroon shirt and gold shorts. It didn't look as bad as it sounds. In fact, a lot of the boys in my class looked damned hot in that uniform. I stole a look at Derek Allen as he pulled his gold shorts up over his jock. He was fine. He was a little like

Casper in a way, except taller and better built. He was blond though, and had blue eyes. That was a combination that always got to me.

I wondered if Derek ever thought about what we'd done. Derek was the first guy I'd experimented with. Okay, he was the only guy. It was just two years before, but it felt like it was ancient history. It was during summer break. Derek and I were pretty tight back then and I had a crush on him. It was the first time I realized that I was gay. I'd had some minor crushes on guys before, and I'd been attracted to a lot of guys, but up until Derek, I'd just thought I was going through a phase. I'd heard that a lot of boys had homosexual urges when they were young. When Derek and I began to pal around I knew that what I wanted with him wasn't just a phase. I knew I was gay.

That realization never bothered me. It just seemed natural that I be gay, so I never thought about it all that much. What I did think about was Derek. We spent a ton of time together that summer, when we were both fifteen, and it drove me crazy. I was totally head over heels in love with that boy. Just being around him made me happy. I was always trying to do nice things for him and made any excuse I could to be near him.

Derek seemed to really want to be around me too. I was already popular at school and had a reputation as a jock. A lot of guys wanted to be around me, but only because I was part of the "in" crowd. I felt like Derek wanted to spend time with me for other reasons. What I hoped was that he felt the same way about me as I did about him.

It was with Derek that I learned how to steal glances of other boys when they weren't looking. It was hot that summer and it seemed like neither of us ever wore a shirt. Derek had a slim, firm chest and was nicely muscled for a fifteen year old. Just looking at his bare chest was enough to get me breathing hard. A lot of nights he stayed over at my house and we thought nothing of sleeping together. Sometimes I'd lain there awake for hours as Derek slept beside me, both of us clad only in boxers. He was so beautiful he made my heart ache. A few times, I even worked up the courage to run my fingertips over his chest as he slept. Touching him like that made my cock strain against my boxers. I considered touching him elsewhere while he slept, but I never had the courage to do it.

And then came *the* day. My parents were gone and Derek and I had been out swimming and sunning. We went to my room where it was a little cooler, and sat on the edge of the bed. We talked about something, I don't remember what. All I could think about was Derek. I'd been hot for him for weeks and I was about to explode. The sight of him sitting there on my bed, wearing nothing with a bright blue swim-suit, was just more than I could take. I'd been stealing looks at his beautiful chest and cute little butt all day and my arousal was at a fever pitch. I couldn't believe I had the balls to do it, but I put my hand on his leg as we talked and started moving it up and down, real slow.

Derek didn't think anything about it at first; at least he gave no indication that he did. That didn't surprise me. We touched each other a lot. We were always wrestling around, punching each other, or even giving each other back rubs. All that made me hopeful that Derek wanted more.

I ran my hand to Derek's inner thigh. I was so nervous I was shaking. I'd never touched him so intimately before. Derek noticed what I was doing. I remember his voice faltered a little as I rubbed my hand back and forth across his inner thigh, coming ever so close to his swim-suit. Derek turned to me and our eyes locked. That's when I did it. That's when I touched him—there.

Derek closed his eyes for a moment and lightly moaned. He opened his eyes again and stared into mine. We sat there looking at each other as I continued to grope him. Derek reached over and began feeling me up. I moaned then too.

We both stood and pulled down our swim-suits. We grasped each other and stroked. It didn't last long. It probably wasn't more than two minutes before both of us lost control and made a sticky mess on the carpet. We pulled our swim-suits back up right after we were done. I remember that Derek looked kind of embarrassed, but I'd never been so happy in all my life.

That happiness didn't last long. I leaned over to kiss him, but he pushed me away.

"That's gay," he said.

I very nearly said "Yeah, so?", but there was something in his eyes that warned me not to do it. The next day I put my hand on his leg again and looked at him. He pushed my hand away.

"We can't do that again," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's queer. We shouldn't have even done it once."

"But it felt so good," I said. There was a lot more that I wanted to say, but he had that look in his eyes again. He just stared at me suspiciously.

"You're not a fag, are you, Brendan?" he asked, looking more than a little disgusted at the very idea.

My heart broke at that moment. I was in love with Derek, but it was quite clear that he didn't feel the same way about me at all. What had happened between us was a one time thing for him. Something he felt guilty about. Something he wanted to forget. I thought it was the beginning of something wonderful. I thought that Derek would be my boyfriend, but there he was, asking me if I was a fag. The very words he chose warned me of his opinion of gay boys.

"No, of course not," I lied. I should have told him the truth. I should've told him that I was gay and that if he didn't want to do anything else with me that was fine, but I still wanted to be his friend. Instead, I lied and denied what I was. I felt like a traitor to myself. It was the beginning of more lies than I could even begin to count.

Nothing else ever happened between us. I knew better than to even try. Things were never quite the same between us either. We still spent time together and were still friends, but it just wasn't the same. When school started that fall we grew apart. We were still friendly, but no longer really friends. I wondered if Derek ever thought about that day when we touched each other. I know I did.

My experience with Derek made me think seriously about Casper. I was afraid it would be the same situation all over again. Hell, maybe I was even so taken by Casper because he reminded me of Derek. Maybe I was trying to recapture what I'd lost. I didn't know if I wanted to go through all that again. What happened with Derek had really hurt. I still hadn't gotten over it completely. I still bore a secret hope that he'd come to me and tell me he'd been thinking about us. I knew that wasn't going to happen, however.

I closed my locker and headed for the gym. We were playing basketball that week. I was glad. I needed to lose myself in some physical activity. I was doing way too much thinking. Try as I might, however, I couldn't quite get Casper out of my mind.