

Outfield Menace

The Blackford *Dispatch*— Wednesday, March 19, 1952

LOCAL TEEN STILL MISSING

A two-week search by local and county authorities has turned up no trace of 15-year-old Matt Taber, who disappeared the evening of Tuesday, March 4, on his way home from baseball practice.

Teammates were the last to see Matt on the evening he disappeared. “After practice, we usually hang out together,” said Angel Egler. “The day Matt disappeared was no different. A group of us was walking home, Matt turned off on Skye Street, and that’s the last any of us saw of him.”

Another teammate, Joshua Fehribach, provided the only lead to date. “There was a car following us, an old Ford four-door from the early-40s. It was all beat up. None of us thought anything about it until after Matt disappeared. It turned off on Skye Street when Matt left us to go home. I don’t know if it has anything to do with Matt’s disappearance, but the driver followed him down the street.”

Fehribach described the driver of the car as being in his late 30s or early 40s, with black hair, but admits he didn’t get a good look at him. Authorities have been unable to locate a car matching the description. The Indiana State Police are now searching for the vehicle, which is currently the only lead in the search for Taber.

Adam Voegerl, also a teammate, had this to say when interviewed: “Matt seemed kind of upset during and after practice the day he disappeared. He didn’t seem quite like himself the whole day, or even during the whole week before he disappeared. He didn’t laugh and joke around with us the way he used to. There was that car that followed us after practice, but I think Matt just ran away. I’d tried to talk to him earlier that day because something was obviously bothering him, but he wouldn’t talk.”

When asked if he had any ideas of what was troubling young Taber, Voegerl responded: “I think maybe he had trouble at home or somewhere. Probably not at home, because I don’t think anyone in

his family would hurt him, but something was bothering him. He wouldn't talk about it, but in the locker room I noticed some bruises on his back, chest and arms. That's why I think he ran away. He was trying to get away from something—or someone.”

According to the police investigators, the Taber family is well respected in Blackford. Matt's father is a member of the local Chamber of Commerce and his mother is well known for her involvement in the PTA and the Methodist Church Ladies Association. Noah Taber, Matt's 16-year-old brother, is an honor student and member of the basketball team at Blackford High School. The family was the very picture of domestic bliss until the youngest son turned up missing, neighbors and friends said.

“It's a terrible tragedy,” said Gertrude Whitney, family friend and owner of *Whitney's Antiques*. “The family is devastated. They are praying that Matt turns up safe and sound. We all are.”

When told the information provided by Voegerl, Whitney responded: “It just sickens me to think that someone could have been abusing that boy, but there is no way it was a member of his family. There isn't a family around that is as close as the Tabers. One look at them is all you need to see how distraught they are by the disappearance of Matt.”

The community apparently agrees. All those interviewed by the *Dispatch* have high praise for the Tabers and great sympathy for the trauma they're going through.

The Tabers aren't giving up hope, however, and neither is our community. All citizens are urged to be on the watch for the car sighted the evening of young Taber's disappearance and also for any sighting of Matt himself. Taber is 15-years-old, approximately 5'10", 155 pounds with an athletic build. He has brown eyes and brown hair, which he wears long in the back. He was last seen wearing blue jeans, a white t-shirt, a blue flannel shirt, and a light-weight dark-blue jacket.

“We're not giving up hope,” said Matt's father in a short interview. “We don't know what happened to Matt, but we're determined to get to the bottom of it. We'll never give up the search for our son.” Mr. Taber asked the *Dispatch* to print this message to Matt: “Please come home, Matt. We don't know why you left, but whatever is bothering you, we can work it out. We just want you to come home.” We here at the *Dispatch* can only echo the distraught father's words: Please come home, Matt.

Chapter 1—My Brother and the Angel of Baseball

March 20, 1952

I narrowed my focus. The scent of the freshly mowed grass, the bright sunshine, and the chattering of the pitcher and catcher all meant nothing. They were mere distractions. Nothing mattered but the ball. *Keep your eye on the ball, Kurt. Keep your eye on the ball.* Tanner nodded at his brother crouched behind me, wound up, and threw the ball at what seemed like a hundred miles an hour. I swung and missed.

“Keep your eye on the ball, Kurt!” yelled Coach Marley. I was already mouthing the words before they were out of his mouth. How many times had I heard them? A hundred? A thousand? A hundred thousand?

“You’ll get the next one!” yelled my best friend, Tommy. I glanced at him on first base and gave him a weak grin.

Tanner was winding up for another pitch. The ball shot toward me, I swung and missed.

It couldn’t have happened at a worse time. It was near the end of practice, and some of the varsity team had wandered over to watch.

“You stink, James!” yelled Travis Cremeens, one of the varsity players. His comment earned him a round of laughs from his buddies.

I tried to ignore him, but my cheeks turned red. I dropped the bat and headed back to the bench.

“Ignore him,” said Tyler Nudo, our catcher. “You’ll get it next time.”

“Yeah,” I said, without meaning it. I’d been in a slump for the last few days, and I wasn’t the greatest when I was playing my best. I didn’t have a snowball’s chance in you-know-where of making varsity, but I guess that wasn’t all bad, because those guys would’ve probably killed me.

I sat on the bench and watched Derek Spradley take his turn at bat. Tanner pitched one of his 80-mile-per-hour fastballs, and Derek belted it right over the fence. What I wouldn’t have given to be able to do that, even just once.

I leaned my head back against the concrete-block wall behind me and closed my eyes. I drew in the scent of grass, mowed for the first time since the snows of winter. Ah, Spring!

It might be a very short season if my game didn’t improve. I’d never been a strong player, but I seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Most of my teammates seemed to be naturally athletic, while I was not. It would have been easier to understand if I was a little shrimp, but I wasn’t that physically different from my teammates. I wasn’t a big muscular jock like the varsity guys, but I looked about the same as my JV teammates. Maybe I just lacked athletic talent.

A shadow crossed the field, and I looked out to see clouds beginning to roll in. It was as if my mood had summoned them. It suddenly seemed much later than it had moments before. I peered into the sky. Yes, it looked like a storm might be brewing. I sniffed. I could smell rain on the wind.

“Okay, men, laps!” yelled Coach.

The team obediently began to run around the field. Coach was big on laps. He said it built stamina. I didn’t mind the running; at least *that* I was good at. I could keep up with most of the guys running, even if I couldn’t hit the ball half the time. One thing I had to say about my team was that the guys were supportive. They kept telling me I’d get better with practice. I didn’t know if they were right, but I sure hoped so, and it was a lot better than having someone tell me I stunk.

I finished my laps and made my way to the locker room, eager to get out of my sweat-soaked uniform and into the showers. I stripped off my uniform and stuffed it in my locker. I grabbed my shampoo and soap and joined the small knot of my teammates heading for the steaming communal-shower area. I only half listened to the guy talk around me as I stepped under a shower head and

turned it on. I often thought of it as my own private rain shower. I liked to stand and just let the water fall down upon me, like little massaging fingers.

I lathered my dark curls as Derek Spradley once again expressed his fond wish of getting a look in the girls' showers. It must have been the deepest desire of his heart. He mentioned it at least once every single day, usually in the showers, but sometimes in the locker room. Steam rose off the floor as Derek daydreamed out loud for all to hear.

"Can you imagine it," said Derek, to anyone who would listen. "All those girls...wet and naked..."

Derek had a fairly attentive audience, which was probably part of the reason he liked to regale us with his unfulfilled fantasies.

"Spradley, are you going on about naked girls again?" asked Adam Voegerl, smirking as he entered. "Hell, if I gave you a girl, you wouldn't know what to do with her. You don't have much to do anything with, either," he said, looking down between Derek's legs.

His last comment wasn't quite true. Derek got a little...uh...excited when he talked about naked girls. A lot of the guys got excited when he described his fantasies. Anyway, he seemed adequately endowed to me—not that I cared.

Derek ducked his head and pretended to be invisible. Adam was sixteen, a whole year older than most of us. Not only that, he was physically mature for his age—a man among boys. He was taller and stronger than just about anyone else and even had some hair on his chest and lots more...well, you know where. He was tough, and no one messed with him. Most everyone on the JV team lived in fear of Adam fixing us with his eyes and demeaning us with his sharp tongue—or worse, pounding us with his fists. He sure shut Derek up fast, and that was quite a trick.

Adam was only the first of the guys from the varsity team who filtered in. It began to get crowded. Soon it was wall-to-wall naked boys. Ours was a small school, with a small locker room and shower area, and it was a tight fit when everyone began crowding in at once. The varsity guys were the oldest and the rest of us kind of got out of their way. Not only were they older, they were generally taller and stronger. They had bulging muscles, while we JV guys were slimmer. The varsity baseball jocks reigned supreme. Much of the JV squad yearned to become varsity, but that didn't make us pals with the varsity team. We were treated like second-rate citizens, at best.

I finished soaping up and rinsed off. My team was dispersing, and I didn't want to be left without allies in the showers. It was better to be one target among many than the only target. All of us JV guys were extremely careful to avoid being alone with the varsity guys in the showers or locker room. We lived in fear of what they might do if they caught any of us by ourselves. The varsity guys were a whole lot like a gang, and everyone feared them.

I rinsed the last of the soap bubbles away and surrendered my shower head to Angel Egler, the only boy in school with a ponytail, which ran all the way down his back. I didn't quite meet his eyes as I stepped away. Looking him in the eyes might've been taken as a challenge, like looking in the eyes of a stray dog, and I had no desire to challenge any of the big guys. I was no coward, but I wasn't stupid either. Why go looking for a fight? I looked around for Tommy and saw him rinsing off in a rush. His eyes locked onto mine, and we walked out together. We hurried from the showers, water streaming off our bodies.

"Must be cold in there," said Allen, the towel boy, looking down at my stuff.

"Ha, ha! Funny," I said. "Now gimme a towel."

Allen always said pretty much the same thing, or endless variations on the same theme. He wouldn't have recognized a new joke if it bit him in his big butt.

Derek, safe for the moment from Adam, braved the topic of girls again in the locker room. I quickly dried off and dressed, avoiding as much of the guy talk as possible. It left me feeling a bit like an outsider. That's the one thing I didn't like about the locker room and showers: all the talk about girls. I just wasn't that interested. Most of my teammates were, or at least sure acted like it. Girls were okay, but everything about kissing and seeing them naked kind of went over my head. I didn't like it because it made me feel like a little kid. Some of my friends had even gone out with girls, and they went on and on about it like it was the best thing ever. I felt like a freak because I was more interested in baseball, collecting coins, and reading.

I'd found a few books in the local library that covered puberty. I hurriedly thumbed through them, afraid someone would catch me with them, like my brother got caught with that dirty magazine. Dad tanned his hide good for that. Sam couldn't sit down for a week. He'd been grounded for weeks, too. Anyway, the books didn't tell me much, except that some boys went through puberty later than others. The thing was, I'd gone through it already. My voice had lowered, and I had hair in my arm pits and some around my stuff, but still I wasn't going crazy over girls. The guy talk was kind of scary and, like I said, made me feel like a little kid. I felt as if all my friends were leaving me behind, going onto something bigger and better while I was stuck on the JV squad of life.

The windows were darker when I stepped out into the gym again. I crossed the polished wooden floor, my sneakers squeaking every few paces. I pushed open one of the heavy glass doors to find Tommy sheltering himself from the light rain that had already darkened the stone steps with moisture. I hoped the rain didn't pick up or I'd be soaked by the time I got home. A not-so-distant rumble of thunder threatened just that.

Tommy fell into step beside me as I walked down the worn stone steps of the old brick gym. Our school probably wouldn't have had a gym at all except that some guy who once lived in town, Jacob Miller, according to the bronze plaque on the wall by the doors, invented a potato peeler or corn husker or some such thing and made a ton of money and donated some of it for a gym. That was back in the 1910s I think—ancient history. Anyway, I was sure thankful to old Jacob 'cause without him there would've been no gym and maybe no baseball team and therefore no life for me. Well, I guess we could've had a baseball team without a gym, but still, you know what I mean.

"Don't look so glum, Kurt," said Tommy. "You're just in a slump, that's all."

"Yeah, one that's lasted a bit over fifteen years."

"That's almost funny," said Tommy. "But seriously, I know you haven't been doing so well lately..."

"I stink just like Travis said."

"No, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, you haven't done so well lately, but you know you're a good player."

"Thanks, Tommy, but we both know I'm only a mediocre player when I'm in top form."

"You're better than mediocre, and you're definitely stronger than I am." Tommy made a muscle and not much happened.

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Why not?"

"Well, if I'm stronger than you, I should be better than you at baseball, but I'm not, so all that means is that I'm truly pathetic."

"Oh, shut up, you are not pathetic. Stop saying you are or I'm gonna have to try to kick your butt. You've got more muscles, so that means you'll beat me up. Do you really wanna hurt your

best friend, Kurt?”

“You have the weirdest logic of anyone I’ve ever met,” I said.

Tommy laughed, and I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

“Okay, Tommy, I’ll shut up about it to save you. I wouldn’t want to see you get beat up.”

“My hero!”

“You are just odd, Tommy.”

He laughed again.

We grew quiet for a couple of minutes. I thought about what Tommy had said; I was stronger than he was, although I was just 5’8” and only weighed about 125. I was still growing, thankfully, but I had a long way to go if I was going to look like some of the varsity guys. I didn’t know if I’d ever make it. That didn’t trouble me so much as the thought that getting bigger might not make any difference. After all, I was already bigger than Tommy, and he was way better at baseball than I was.

I guess size didn’t always matter, or maybe I really was just pathetic. The thing was, there were moments when I was *really* good at baseball, and during those brief spans of time I felt like I could walk on air. I envied the boys who were that good all the time. I’d have given about anything for that kind of talent. One thing was for sure, I wasn’t giving up baseball. I loved it too much to walk away from it. And besides, someday I was gonna be really good at it—maybe.

The rain pelted down harder and harder as the sky darkened enough to make it look almost like night. It was difficult to see far ahead. It was like looking through a curtain of water. I didn’t usually stop at Tommy’s after school, but I was likely to drown if I didn’t. We bolted for his front porch.

Like most people in Blackford, Tommy’s family lived in a neat white house with a well manicured yard, surrounded by a white picket fence. There were variations, of course, but no one deviated too far from the norm. Even our house, which was just outside of town and past the *A&W* drive-in, had a picket fence surrounding it. Sam and I took turns mowing the lawn, and Dad was always there to remind us if we didn’t get to it fast enough, or do it just right. He rarely said anything to me because I never let the grass grow too high and did a good job mowing. Sam, on the other hand, was a bit lazier and often sloppy. Sometimes he even paid our sister to mow for him. While we took care of the yard, Mom tended the flower beds, filling them with zinnias, petunias, and marigolds. She also watched over the red roses that grew up the trellis leading to the room I shared with my brother.

Tommy and I shook ourselves like wet dogs, slinging water from our hair. Tommy’s was red and not as long as mine, but he sure sent the water flying. We sat on the porch swing and swung back and forth while we watched the rain pour down. It felt all cozy on the porch, but not quite comfy since I was wet and just a bit chilled. I wrapped my arms around myself as we watched the downfall.

We sat there for several minutes without talking until a red and white Chevy convertible, a ’51 if I wasn’t mistaken, drove slowly by.

“Adam thinks he’s such hot stuff with his new car.”

“It’s not new,” I pointed out.

“Well, new enough. I didn’t think he could get more conceited, but he’s managed it. I’d love to give him a piece of my mind.”

“That would be suicide.”

“I said I wanted to, not that I was going to do it. There’s a huge difference.”

“I can’t argue with that. Can you imagine what he’d do if you did tell him just what you

thought about him?”

“It hurts just to think about it,” said Tommy. “I can almost feel the bruises forming.”

I laughed.

“Hey, the rain’s slacking up. I’d better make for home,” I said.

“Okay, see ya, Kurt.”

“See ya.”

I stepped out into the rain, catching the scent of warm, wet concrete and then of warm, wet asphalt as I neared the street. I closed the gate behind me, threw Tommy a wave just before he stepped inside, and headed for home.

My short time with Tommy had put things in perspective. Nothing had changed really, but I could look at the situation in a slightly different way. Like, I was thinking of Matt Taber as I walked home and how he just up and disappeared. I didn’t know him well, but my problems were sure nowhere near as bad as his. Even if he’d just run away, he was out there somewhere, probably hungry, with no home and no friends. Maybe it was a good deal worse, too. Maybe that guy they said was following him kidnapped him or something. Maybe he was in the trunk of his car, dead or wishing he was dead. I didn’t even want to think about the possibilities. When I thought of Matt Taber, it seemed like I didn’t have problems at all.

A frosty mug of *A&W* root beer beckoned to me as I passed the drive-in, but I avoided the temptation, mainly because I didn’t have enough money. My allowance was on the low side, and the money I got from mowing lawns and doing odd jobs now and then didn’t last. If I wasn’t stingy with it on stuff like root beer, I couldn’t buy any coins for my collection. Just the week before I’d purchased a 1903 Indian Head penny in extra- fine condition. I had it sitting on my dresser in a little case so I could admire it. I looked it over every morning before I left for school and every afternoon when I returned.

I passed the town limits. To the left was the *A&W*, and down the road to the right, just barely visible, was *Eckert’s Farm & Feed* and beyond that *Clark’s Auto Sales*, where they made a big deal every fall about the new models coming in for the coming year. We bought a new car just last fall, a ‘52 Nash Ambassador, two toned, maroon and beige. By we, I mean my parents. It was kind of funny that our Nash was a ‘52 when it was still 1951 when we purchased it. I guess the car makers in Detroit do that to make them seem newer or something.

Mom greeted me from the kitchen as I closed the front door. I wiped my feet on the rug before stepping onto the hardwood floor. We’d all been carefully trained to wipe our feet, because Mom said she spent enough time sweeping without all of us tracking in dirt. She probably wouldn’t appreciate me dripping on the floor, either, but that couldn’t be helped.

“Go upstairs and change out of those wet clothes,” said Mom as she came out of the kitchen for a moment.

I headed straight to my room. I was soaked right down to my boxers, and I didn’t enjoy the sensation at all. I stripped, towed off with one of Sam’s shirts I found lying on the floor and then put on clean, dry clothes. I hurried back downstairs, my stomach rumbling.

I sat down at the kitchen table for our after-school ritual. Mom set a glass of cold milk and a plate with a couple of chewy chocolate-chip cookies down in front of me. I looked up, and she kissed my cheek and mussed my hair. I was her little angel, or so she’d told me. My brother teased me about it when we were alone. My sister, Ida, didn’t give me any grief. She was a year older than I was, the middle child, and often protected me from my older brother. I was the baby of the family at fifteen.

The cookies were delicious and still warm from the oven. The smell wafted from the open oven door as did the delicious heat. Getting soaked had chilled me, and the warm, fragrant air made me feel like I was wrapped in a fuzzy blanket. I scooted my chair back a bit farther to let the heat warm my back.

Mom really knew how to bake. I was lucky that I could eat pretty much what I wanted without gaining weight. I had almost no fat on me. I could even trace my abdominal muscles with my fingers, because there was nothing but skin covering them up.

“Sam! Put on some clothes. I don’t want you running around the house half naked. What if someone stopped by?”

“Mom!”

“Don’t ‘Mom’ me!”

My brother had come into the kitchen not wearing a shirt. He did that sometimes because he thought he was hot stuff with his muscles. He didn’t have any fat on him, either, but he was both thicker and broader than I was. Sam was seventeen and on the basketball team. I was Mom’s little angel and he was Dad’s little jock, although he wasn’t so little at almost six feet two. He grabbed a cookie from the waxed paper on the counter.

“Now get upstairs and put on some clothes!” said Mom, shooing him out the door.

I stuck my tongue out at him as he left. He couldn’t return the gesture, because he was facing Mom. It was a small victory, but I was willing to take it. It’s the little things in life that are important.

“Is Ida babysitting?” I asked after Sam departed.

“Yes, for the Schroeders again.”

My sister did a lot of babysitting. She was so busy with it that she wasn’t around much. Both my brother and sister had fairly regular jobs. I was the oddball. All I had were a few yards to mow and some odd jobs, like cleaning out garages or shoveling snow in the winter.

I stared at the sheaf of golden wheat that made up the pattern at the bottom of my plate and ran my finger along the rim of real gold. Dad had bought Mom an entire set of new dishes for Christmas; at least I think they were new—new to us anyway. Mom kept them displayed in a built-in cabinet with glass doors along one wall of the kitchen. I liked them better than the old Petalware set, which was see-through white and way too thin and fragile. I was afraid I’d break a piece every time I helped wash the dishes. Plenty of them had been smashed over the years, which was why we needed a new set.

“Honestly,” said Mom, still thinking about Sam no doubt. He ran a bit wild, which made me look good by comparison. It almost made putting up with him worthwhile—almost. I thanked Mom for the cookies and milk and gave her a hug as I left the kitchen, mostly because I just felt like it, but also to make my brother look bad. You’ve got to take your fun where you can find it.

When I entered our bedroom, Sam was sprawled on his bed, still shirtless, his arms behind his head.

“I thought Mom told you to put on a shirt.”

“I thought I told you to shut up. Oh wait, I didn’t, until now: Shut up!”

Sam really wasn’t too bad of a brother. He didn’t beat me up or anything, although sometimes he did twist my arm or hold me in a headlock until I submitted to whatever he wanted me to do or stop doing. He did hog the record player, the middle drawer of the dresser, which he claimed by right of age, and the top of the dresser, where he kept a picture of his girlfriend and other miscellaneous junk. He also called me stuff like “Squirt” and a few worse names that he only used

when he was sure Mom and Dad weren't around. But, on the whole, I could've done worse.

The desk was my territory. Technically, we shared it, but Sam wasn't big on homework, reports and such, so it was mine by default. I think Sam had a fear of books, although that was about the only thing he feared. I sat down in the desk chair and started in on my essay for English. We were supposed to write about a hobby, so I was writing a piece on baseball.

Sam gazed at me now and then, but he'd long ago given up taunting me for doing my homework first thing. Sam was stronger than I was, but I could more than hold my own in a battle of wits. Whenever he gave me grief because I studied, I told him that someday I'd be a doctor or something and he'd still be pumping gas at the *Marathon*. That was his after-school, weekend and summer job—working at the local gas station. It supplied him with the money to buy an old '39 Chevy coupe and keep it running. That car was his lifeblood, and, of course, I was rarely allowed to ride in it. Often, Sam couldn't ride in it either, as his keys were usually the first thing to go when he got in trouble, which was as often as not.

"You still hanging out with that Tommy kid?" asked Sam. He must've been really bored, since he was talking to me.

"Of course," I said distractedly, "that's what best friends do." *Dumbass.*

"I think he's queer."

I stiffened. I never liked it when my brother said stuff like that, although I wasn't sure why.

"He's okay."

"The twins sure aren't. They're homos if anyone is."

He was talking about the Tyler and Tanner Nudo, the identical twins on my baseball team. They were inseparable, and it was rumored they had an incestuous relationship going on. Of course, the rumors were always flying at school, and most of them were crap, like the one about Mrs. Kendall, my English teacher, having an affair with Mr. Douglas, the varsity baseball coach.

"Maybe."

"Maybe, my ass. I'd bet fifty bucks they're butt buddies."

"Well, go ask them," I said, annoyed. I wanted Sam to shut up so I could work on my essay, but I couldn't resist adding, "Maybe you can join in."

That was too much for Sam. He jumped up, got me in a headlock and gave me a nuggy.

"Cut it out, Sam!"

"Say you're sorry."

"But I'm not."

"You will be if you don't say it."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Ouch!"

"Loser," said Sam, tossing me away.

I sat there for a moment, but couldn't concentrate on my essay.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"What are butt buddies?"

A devious grin formed on my brother's face. My eyes grew wide as he explained the term.

"You mean one guy really sticks his...thing...*there*? That would have to hurt, right?"

"Well don't ask me. I'm not a homo."

"Is that all homos do?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I'm just curious. I don't know anything about this stuff, okay?"

“They give blow jobs, just like girls.”

I'd heard about blow jobs in the locker room. It had taken me a while, but I'd finally figured it out. I pictured two guys doing that together for a moment, but then I quickly stopped. I didn't like the way it made me feel. I didn't ask Sam any more questions after that.

I tried to return to my essay, but some disturbing thoughts were forcing their way into my mind. Sometimes, when I looked at the other boys in the showers, particularly the older ones...I got this...feeling...in my private parts. I was feeling that same sensation again. It started when Sam told me that homos give each other blow jobs. I'd heard the varsity guys talking and they said a blow job felt real good. I wondered what it felt like for the guy...I mean the girl, giving it.

I was thinking too about Sam's girlie magazines. He had a secret stash, which I thought very bold, or perhaps just foolish, after he got in such trouble after being caught with one. I'd sneaked a peak at them a few times, but...well, I just didn't understand what all the excitement was about. Naked girls were kind of gross really.

I forced myself to think of my essay. I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and I felt like Sam was watching me, even though he wasn't. Thankfully, I wasn't bothered by the presence of my brother for long, because he had to get to work. He often started in right after school, but some days, like today, he didn't start until later, and occasionally he had time off. I was glad our room wasn't graced with his presence too often. A little Sam went a long way.

I ignored Sam as he finally slipped on a shirt and got ready for his exciting career of pumping gas. He disappeared sometime before I finished my assignments. I'm not sure when, as I wasn't paying attention. I didn't much care, as long as he was gone.

When I pushed away my books at last, I just sat there looking at our room. There was a shelf above Sam's bed that displayed his trophies, mostly for basketball, but some for track, too. Sam was most definitely a jock, but he didn't run with Adam's gang. Anyone who hung around Adam was also a varsity baseball player. The other jocks didn't have much to do with the varsity baseball players because of their bad reputation.

I sometimes wished I had a room of my own, but then again it was comforting to wake up in the night and hear Sam softly breathing just across the room. On one of the rare occasions I had nightmares, I was doubly glad he was there. He wouldn't get mad if I woke him up to sit by my bed until I could sleep again. Sometimes, I climbed into bed with him until the terror of whatever I'd dreamed had passed. Usually I fell asleep and awakened next to Sam in the morning. I felt safe with him there. All in all, he was there when I needed him, and I returned the favor by covering for him now and then.

I had some time to spare before supper, so I decided to go for a run. Coach said we should run some to build up our stamina, and I needed it. I was about the best runner on the JV team, but I still had lots of room for improvement. If I ever did manage to hit the ball again, I wanted to make a home run—or, at least, extra bases.

I put on some jogging pants, because I knew it'd be getting chilly out. Luckily, the rain had stopped, but it had brought with it cooler air. I told Mom I was going for a run, promised to be back in time for supper, and headed toward town, passing the *A&W*, Tommy's house, and then, after a few blocks, the school. I warmed up plenty as I ran, and sweat beaded on my forehead.

As I pulled level with the entrance to the high school, I turned left onto Main Street and jogged past the *Marathon*, where Sam was pumping gas into an old Ford pickup. He saw me and flipped me off. I mouthed, “Bite me,” and ran on.

Just beyond the gas station was the *Black Heifer Diner*, the barber shop, and *Merton's Ice*

Cream Parlor. I checked for cars and then ran across the intersection of Main and Clark, and on past the post office, the antique store owned by old Mrs. Whitney where I sometimes looked for coins, and the drugstore. From there on, Main Street was all houses. I ran through a few blocks of old homes, most of them going back to the 19th century, and then back again.

On my return trip I ran up the other side of Main, passing the *Delphi Theatre*, the general store, Clark Street once more, and then the bank, *Icabod's Restaurant*, and *Willow's Hardware Store*. I slowed to a walk as I crossed over the street onto the school grounds. My breath was coming hard and fast and my shirt was damp with sweat despite the chill in the air. I'd put in enough time running for one day, and it was time to cool down. I wandered around behind the gym, dodging mud puddles, where some guys were playing baseball.

Angel Egler was up at bat, and Adam Voegerl was standing on deck. I watched through the fence, my fingers gripping the links above my head as Angel waited for the pitcher to warm up. Angel was a good two inches taller than I and was both thicker and broader. I'd seen him in the locker room and showers, of course, and knew he was muscular. It was kinda like we had the same body, only his was bigger and better, so I guess they weren't the same after all, but you know what I mean.

Angel whipped his head to the side as he gripped the bat, which had the effect of throwing his two-foot ponytail behind him. I thought his ponytail was cool, but I had to keep my hair short, because my parents wouldn't let me grow it long.

Angel swung and hit the ball way out beyond the farthest outfielder. He gracefully ran around the bases, his ponytail flying behind him, his buddies cheering him on. I yearned for that kind of athletic prowess, grace, and strength. I sighed. I knew I'd never be able to smack a ball as far as Angel could. I wondered what it was like to be that athletic and strong. Looking at Angel made my chest feel funny.

Angel stood behind the catcher after his home run. Adam stepped up to the plate, and they both looked in my direction, as if their eyes were magnetically drawn to me or something. Sometimes, I didn't think Adam liked me, but then most of the time he just ignored me. He did so now as he focused his attention on the pitcher. Angel looked over at me a few times and even smiled. I smiled back, but didn't approach. A smile wasn't an invitation, and I especially didn't want to get closer with Adam there. I didn't want to risk being on the receiving end of his sharp tongue, which could about make anyone look stupid in five seconds flat. His fists were more dangerous still. I wasn't sure about Angel's smile either. There were smiles, and there were smiles. At a distance, I couldn't tell if he was being friendly, or if it was more of a *yeah, you want to be like us* smirk or even a veiled threat. Angel had a reputation as a bad ass all his own. I'd heard more than one guy remark that his name should've been Devil.

The high chain-link fence gave me a slight sense of security from those two. Even if Adam and Angel and some of the other guys came running at me, I'd have a good chance of getting away before they could run to the gate and back to where I was standing. I hadn't chosen my observation point without thought. In Blackford, it was often survival of the fittest and the smartest. I wasn't the fittest, but I made up for some of my lack of size with intelligence. A good head start was just as good as long legs in the short run.

I know I'm making myself sound like a little shrimp, but I'm not. It's just that guys like Angel and Adam and my brother were bigger, so I was small by comparison.

I watched as Adam swung and missed. Adam gave the pitcher a disdainful look after the next ball went wide. I heard him swear as the next nearly hit him. I thought he was going to march out

and punch the pitcher for a moment, but he stayed in the box. Adam cracked the next ball, sending it past the third baseman. He made it to second and stopped.

I looked at my watch. It was getting close to time for supper, so I reluctantly turned and walked toward home. I could've stayed longer and run home, but I'd had enough running for the day. I gave the baseball players one last look. Angel's eyes met mine again, and I averted my gaze, fearful I was being threatened. Angel ran with a different crowd. No one messed with those guys, and it usually wasn't a good thing if one of them took notice of you. I felt a little shiver of fear run down my spine and had to resist the urge to run. Instead, I turned calmly and made my way home.

Sam was working late and Ida was babysitting, so it was just my parents and me for supper. My parents were very strict about us all eating together at the table whenever possible. Tommy's family ate on trays in front of the TV, but I knew better than to even suggest such a thing to Mom and Dad. We'd only had our TV for a few months, our first one ever, and Dad seemed to think we'd wear it out if we watched it too much.

Tonight was meatloaf, with peas, mashed potatoes, and Jell-O salad, all served on Mom's Golden Wheat china. Mom liked it when I ate a lot, which I usually did. Baseball took a lot of energy, and I was always starving after practice. I was especially hungry now after my run. Mom wanted to fatten me up some, but no matter how much I ate, I never had an ounce of fat on me. I think I just burned everything up.

Dad talked a little about work. He sold cars for *Clark's Auto Sales*. In fact, he was the only salesman, except for Mr. Clark himself. It was a real advantage when my parents bought the Nash. They got it for cost, and you wouldn't believe the markup on automobiles! Anyway, Dad was talking about how he'd sold a new pickup to Mr. Brier, who had a farm some three miles south of us.

"Mr. Brier actually bought a *new* truck?" I asked, incredulously.

"Yes, sir," my dad said, grinning.

"Wow, he's been driving that old antique of his forever." Mr. Brier drove a beat-up Model T truck that was as old as the hills and had a top speed of something like 25 miles an hour. It was little better than a horse and wagon, which, believe it or not, he still sometimes used on his farm. I'd helped him bale hay the summer before, and going to his farm was like stepping back in time.

"Well, he won't be driving it anymore when his new truck comes in. He ordered a beauty—loaded."

"Wow," I said.

Dad described Mr. Brier's new truck in detail. It was being built in the factory in Detroit and wouldn't arrive for a few weeks. I planned to drop in and have a look at it before Mr. Brier picked it up. Sometimes I liked to sit in the new vehicles and just smell that new-car smell. It was fun pretending to drive, too. I couldn't wait for my own car, but that was far in the future.

After supper, I went to my room and lost myself between the covers of a Jesse James biography. I enjoyed escaping from reality like that. It wasn't that my life was bad or anything. I just liked to imagine experiencing things I'd never get the chance to do in southern Indiana. I wished I could step right into the pages of books and really live out what was written in them—well, sometimes, anyway.

I was particularly interested in Jesse James, because I'd recently found out he was my ancestor—for real. I'm not kidding. Mom had taken an interest in genealogy and found out that my great-great grandfather, Jesse James, was the famous outlaw. Family legend had long held that we were descended from the train robber, but I'd never really believed it until Mom confirmed it. She'd

been working on the family tree for months and had uncovered a lot of things, although none as exciting as Jesse James.

I looked for books about him at the library, but the only one they had was for little kids. I read it, but it didn't say much. I was in *Whitney's Antiques* checking out the selection of coins when I spotted the James biography. I elected to fork over the fifty cents in my pocket for it instead of spending my money on coins. That was a couple of weeks ago. I'd been so busy I'd hardly had time to read it, but I was really getting into the biography. What little I'd read fit with family history. My family came from Missouri, near the Kansas border, and that's exactly where Jesse James grew up.

I admired Jesse because he was able to do what I couldn't. I had to follow rules and be a good boy. Great-great granddaddy didn't follow any rules; he was an outlaw. I didn't like the idea of him killing people or being a Confederate, but all that was a long time ago. I could admire his independence and courage, without forgetting that he did a lot of bad things. Dad always said that no one was all good or bad; Jesse just leaned more to the bad side. I was still excited that he was my great-great grandfather.

I yawned when Sam came in from work, smelling like gasoline and oil. It was getting close to ten. I put my book on the desk and slipped under the sheets as he undressed and prepared for bed. I was asleep in moments, my dreams filled with train robberies and wild chases on horseback.

I wanted to get to the shower before Sam and especially Ida did so I wouldn't have to rush to school. It usually wasn't difficult to beat Sam there. He wasn't a morning person. Mom usually had to shake him to get him up. Ida was another matter, but she was pretty good about letting me get in and out, since I was so much faster than she was.

I treasured the time before Sam and Ida awakened, because I had the bathroom all to myself. Once Sam got up he'd come barging in, heedless of what I might be doing in there. If I had to go to the bathroom, I did that first. Sam wasn't shy about peeing with me standing right there brushing my teeth or whatever, but I kind of liked privacy for that sort of thing. As far as he seeing me naked, or vice versa, I didn't care. I was around naked guys all the time in the showers and locker room, so it was no big deal. It was kind of odd though when you think about it. After practice, we all walked from our lockers to the showers naked without thinking a thing about it, but outside the locker room no one ever took their clothes off, unless we were skinny dipping. It was funny how something that was okay in one place wasn't in another. It was best that way, though. I didn't think I could concentrate if I had to sit through English or Math with my stuff exposed.

I didn't have to worry about Ida barging in. She had none of the rudeness of our brother. She was far from perfect, but she wasn't a pain in my backside, as Sam was.

I was completely finished before Sam arrived. I passed him in the hall as he stumbled his way to the bathroom.

"Good morning, Sam!" I said cheerfully, because I knew it would tick him off. Sam growled, and I grinned as I walked past him into our bedroom.