

ONE LAST GAME

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Robert Reed's recent appearances in our pages include "Crooked Creek," "Season to Taste," and "Market Day." Somehow, we've gone almost three months without a new story from him, an error we're happy to rectify. "One Last Game" follows thematically from two of Mr. Reed's earlier stories for us, "Will Be" (Jan. 1999) and "The Gulf" (Oct. 2000). If you haven't read those stories already, we predict that you will... which might mean that you already did...

Saturday

PATIENCE WAS ONE OF MOM'S words.

Tolerance and cooperation were two more fat favorites.

Of course she didn't say those words by their lonesome. It was more like, "Be patient with people. Be tolerant of people. Cooperate, even when it hurts." Then after a big pause, she'd say, "No, you need to cooperate particularly when it hurts. Promise me that. Please, would you, Neil?"

He pretended not to be listening.

Then she looked back at him. She made certain that he saw her stern face, and for the trillionth time, she said, "I know you'll be the oldest one there. But that's just the way it is, and you're going to have to make the best of things."

The best of things -- that was pure, undiluted Mom.

Neil treated her to a little nod and shrugged as if his shoulders ached. Then just to shut her up, he said, "All right. I'll try."

"Do more than try," she countered.

Which was a pretty stupid way to talk, if you thought about it. What could any person do besides try? Yet Neil made himself nod as if agreeing, and that bought him another twenty minutes of being unpestered. He was sitting in the back of the van, alone with their luggage and groceries and the old croquet set, listening to his music while playing a few rounds of Nuke the Fools. It helped him concentrate, the game did. He barely noticed the ugly-ass country sliding past their shit-for-guts van. But then he stopped playing, giving his eyes a rest, and he found himself staring out over the flat fields of corn and things that weren't corn, and he was thinking about the lake again. Neil didn't quite believe in this lake. Maybe his folks believed that it existed. And maybe the Hawthornes honestly thought they owned a cabin beside the water. And sure, people had been talking about Okoboji since Neil could remember, telling stories about the boating and the swimming and shit like that. A few friends even came home with bad sun burns. But that didn't prove anything. This semifamous lake was just a little drop of blue in their Rand McNally, and it was so many words spoken by others, and Neil was fourteen years old--a huge and important and extremely wise age-- and he didn't believe in anything just because everyone said that it had to be true.

Dad was driving; Mom was using their Rand McNally to navigate. She seemed to be telling him where to turn next, and Dad said something, pointing at the dash, and Mom did a good job of looking out the

window, pretending not to notice. Their van was a genuine pile of crap. Red lights came on every time they took it out on the road. Usually the lights didn't mean anything, and they got home fine. But this was a long-haul trip, and Neil could taste the worry in the air. And the worry got worse when they pulled off the Interstate, nothing but little two-lane state highways between them and this mythical lake.

They stopped in some little-ass town. "For lunch," Dad claimed. But mostly it was to give the engine a chance to breathe.

They had burgers at Hardees, then while they were walking back to the crap-van, Mom said, "Why don't you sit in the middle seat? Would you do that for me?"

"Why?" Neil asked.

Mom didn't have a good excuse. So instead, she told the truth. Looking straight at him, she said, "It doesn't look right. Us up in front and you way in the back."

It looked just fine to Neil.

But he moved his gear to the middle seat and settled behind Dad as the old man wrestled with the van, trying to get it running again. Grind-grind-grind. Pause. Then another grind, followed by the sputtering roar of an overheated, under-oiled, and basically spent engine. Then Neil had his music going nice and loud, and he was nuking cities filled with nothing but fools...right up until Mom yanked off his headphones and covered the game screen with an angry hand, repeating what she's said only a million times before.

"Be patient with these kids. I know you'll be the oldest, so I expect you to take some responsibility with the others."

Neil looked out at the ugly-ass fields.

"What did I just say?" Mom asked.

"That I'm a child," he grumbled.

She could have said anything. But instead of talking, she decided to look sad and frustrated, throwing that sad look toward Dad. And maybe the old man felt her eyes. Whatever, he gave a half-glance over his shoulder, telling Neil, "Yeah, that's what you are. A child."

Then he looked forward again, eyes jumping from the temperature gauge to the oil-pressure gauge and back again. And talking to someone -Neil or Mom, or maybe to himself -- he said, "But you're not the oldest kid. Not in this bunch, you're not."

THE GAME GROUP were five couples. The Hawthornes. The Shepherds. The Millers. The Jensens. And Neil's folks. Most everyone had graduated together from the same high school, and if you listened to them, you'd think that it was the best time of their lives. Neil couldn't count how many times he'd heard those same stupid stories about the same long-ago people. It was as if everything had happened just yesterday. Not twenty years ago, or whatever it was. Mom openly claimed that she'd loved her school days, and she missed them. But Neil had noticed how all these happy schoolmates went to the same junior high too, yet nobody seemed to talk about those days-- a fact that proved what Neil could sense for himself. That junior high sucked, and nobody, even if they had the power, would ever make themselves fourteen again.

Dad wasn't like those other adults. He came from the far end of the state, from entirely different circumstances. He was a Marine for a couple stints, and he met Mom when he finally got to college. A few years later, they were married and living half a mile from the house where Mom grew up, and they

began hanging out with her old school buddies. That's how the game group got rolling. Once a month, everyone would show up at someone's house or apartment, and they'd pick a game that everybody could play together. Back then, only Neil's folks were married. A face or two changed during those earliest days. But eventually everybody settled down and got married, and those were the people that Neil knew today. Except for a few teachers, Neil knew them better than any other adults. Which wasn't to say he knew them all that well, or that he felt warm and gushy toward them.

Neil was the first kid born in the group, and for a little while, he was important. There were a bunch of old videos that his folks brought out whenever he needed to be embarrassed. They showed him as a toddler performing tricks for a room full of laughing, drunken adults. Walking was a trick back then, and he was the center of the universe. But then he suddenly got to be five years old, and the Hawthornes and Shepherds had their first babies on the same day. After that, everyone was having kids. Triplets, in the Jensens' case. Everyone had their own, and Neil was forgotten, and today there were eleven kids, counting Neil, with him being the only only-child in the bunch.

That wasn't the plan. He'd heard it a billion times from Mom, and maybe twice from Dad. Neil was an accident. "A nice accident," Mom would always add. "A lovely one." But definitely, he was a big surprise.

There was supposed to have been a baby sister or brother. That was the plan when they moved into their current house. Money had been saved, and Dad was doing well enough at work, and they were trying. "Trying." It was the word they'd offer to the game-group, halfway laughing but smiling in a serious way. Sometimes, Neil could hear them trying. Once, after the group had gone home, his folks were too drunk or just assumed that he was sleeping, leaving their bedroom door open and trying their damndest. But judging by the noises, someone was too drunk, and things weren't working as they should. Which made for a pretty strange set of sounds to be hearing when you're ten years old, lying in the dark and unable to sleep.

There was a bedroom next to his folks' room just waiting for the baby. But Mom was having troubles. That was one bit of news that Neil had to pick up without being told. Mom had gained weight when she had him, and that was a problem. Maybe. So she took up this brutal diet and started to exercise. Then her doctor told her to stop running, because that didn't help either. And then it wasn't a matter of what she weighed or how much she rode the stationary bike. It was something about Mom's plumbing, and that's when things got real serious. There were trips to special doctors and weird whispering about eggs and wriggly sperm and tricks done in someone's fancy kitchen. And there were the bills that came in thick white envelopes that Dad would open as if expecting to find bombs.

Finally, there came a day when nobody mentioned baby sisters and brothers. Something big and final had been decided. The next thing Neil knew, his father was punching out the wall of the nursery, joining it with the master bedroom. Dad was doing the work by himself because, as he put it with a grim satisfaction, "I don't know what I'm doing, so I can do it cheap."

Everything about their lives was cheap, these days. It was because of the doctor bills and because Dad got passed over at work, two or three times at last count, and because Mom had decided to quit her office job, thinking that she'd make more money and have more fun if she worked at a desk in their big damp basement.

Sometimes his folks were nothing but fools. They were a burden for Neil, and an embarrassment. It was bad enough they had trouble making house payments, but at the same time the rest of their gang had trouble spending all of their money. Every game night, someone had to boast about what they were buying or building or making in the stock market. Nobody was rich-rich. But some of those people could see real wealth from where they were standing, while Neil's parents were fighting just to keep their old

friends in sight.

After every party, there was the complaining.

There was the wishing.

There was Mom saying, "I'm glad Matt's doing well, but why does Becky have to keep bringing up his promotion."

Then Dad would say, "The Shepherds are going to France again. Did you hear?"

"And the Millers are heading for Tahiti," Mom would growl. "For two long weeks after Christmas, Sarah told me."

Which made Dad wince and feel sad about himself. He was a plain man with a narrow mouth and sorry eyes, and Mom was pretty but fat again, fatter than ever, and when she was feeling sad, her eyes got big and bright, and her wide mouth clamped down until there was nothing but an angry little line. They fed off each other, which couldn't be good. It was something that Neil was beginning to see for himself. And that was why he tried to butt in, just one time, clearing his throat in a big way and telling them with his best reasonable voice, "I know what you should do. Stop going to the damned game nights, if they're so awful."

It was a smart suggestion. It was smart when he said it, and it was still smart today.

But his folks hit him with hard, hurt looks, and Mom told him, "Don't be absurd. These are our friends."

More her friends than Dad's. But Neil didn't say the obvious.

"We just have to blow off steam every now and then," Mom told him. Or maybe she was talking to herself. "It's okay, in private," she added. In public, of course, everyone would have to be tolerant, and patient, and cooperate with the windbags.

Yeah, Neil knew the speech.

Mom looked at Dad, telling him something with her eyes.

Then Dad cleared his throat, agreeing with Mom. "We've invested a lot of years with this group, and they're our friends." Then after a little pause, he added, "And I'm not going to be the first one to drop out."

Which was a pretty stupid reason to do anything, Neil knew. But he didn't say it, or anything. Sometimes you can try all you want, but people just won't listen to the things that are true.

There was a real lake, as it turned out. Rolling corn fields gave way to a few wind-beaten trees and a busy little town filled with summer traffic, plus little prairie ponds set beside the highway, and coming up over the crest of a sudden hill, Neil caught a glimpse of bluish-green water surrounded by an army of cabins and houses. The Hawthornes had just built their cabin, and the group had been invited up for the weekend. That word -- "cabin" -- brought to mind things like outdoor johns and beaver pelts nailed to pine walls. But Neil remained skeptical, and it was smart of him. Following the directions on the printed invitation, Dad pulled into a long driveway of clean new concrete. A big swing set and sandpile were set in the newly sodded lawn. Two minivans and someone's fat-ass Expedition were parked where the driveway widened. There was a two-car garage, and sprouting off the back of the garage was a long building that would have looked like a house anywhere else in the world. And a big house, at that. Just how big wasn't apparent from the driveway. They had to climb out and take the long walk up a fancy

flagstone path to the first door. The doorbell sounded like real bells. One of the kids opened the door. Neil remembered the face but not the warpaint or the plastic sword.

"What's the password?" the kid barked.

"Hello, Collin," said Mom, her and Dad stepping past the kid.

"What's the password?" he asked Neil, poking him in the belly with the point of the sword.

"I'll let you live," Neil rumbled. "How's that?"

Collin swallowed those words and shrank down a little bit. But then he smiled and lifted his sword, an important voice saying, "You can pass."

The house went on and on. There was a hallway and stairs leading up and a kitchen and some kind of playroom on the ground floor, and after that, a dining room and living room that were visible from a distance. The living room was more windows than walls, and the early afternoon sun was making the air conditioning work. "If this was a cabin," Neil thought out loud, "then our house is a damned shack."

"Enough," barked Dad.

But the old man was thinking the same thing.

"Where's everyone?" asked Mom.

Collin was following them. "In the front yard," he reported.

Didn't they come from the front yard? Apparently not. The door leading outside had been left open, which had to piss the air conditioning off. Neil could hear the machine running. He was following his folks out across a narrow green lawn, climbing a last little rise before the world fell away. A smaller second building was perched on the steep slope, zigzagging stairs leading to it and then past, reaching a wooden dock that stretched out into the water. Kids were running on the dock and bobbing in the greenish water, and they were shouting. A girl's voice was shouting, "Help, I'm drowning. Help!"

Nobody seemed to notice. She was just making noise apparently. But even if it was noise, Neil wished that she'd shut up.

A pontoon boat was tied against the dock, and a little sailboat, and about a thousand inflated doughnuts and styrofoam kickboards were scattered across the dock and on the water and taking breathers on the muddy sand of the beach. A square platform was moored farther out on the lake. Two grown men were on top of it, wrestling. They looked silly in those long swimsuits. They were a little fat, and pink, and very slow. It was Mr. Hawthorne and Mr. Miller. A couple million bucks were pushing hard at each other, and after a moment, they collapsed from exhaustion, laughing and flopping down on their backs.

Most of the kids were in the water. They wore life jackets. Even Claudia Hawthorne wore a big orange jacket, splashing in the shallowest water, shouting, "Help me!" at the top of her lungs.

The adults were sitting at the end of the dock, waving hard at the newcomers. Mom and Dad practically broke into a run, needing to get to them. To say their hellos and show off their smiles. Everything was very social and very loud, and Neil wanted to be anywhere else. He was thinking about his games in the van, thinking that maybe he could take them and vanish inside that big house. But when he turned to look back up the stairs, he noticed Mrs. Miller swimming hard from somewhere up the beach. It was a long way to the next dock, but he had the impression that she had come that far. She did a mean freestyle, steady and strong and lifting her head high every now and then, checking on her position. When she

reached the dock, she stood on the lake bottom and wiped her face a couple times. Squinting, she said, "Neil?" with a friendly voice.

He said, "Hi."

Then she grabbed a little ladder and started to climb out, tired arms lifting her only so far before she had to pause, her feet feeling for the lowest rung. The warm green water was sliding off her swimsuit and off her body. It was a one-piece suit. Mostly, it was solid and thick, and nothing showed. Except that it wasn't meant for real swimming, and when she finished her climb, she happened to bend forward, the soaked fabric pulled down by its own weight, letting her tits halfway pour out into the sunshine. They were big and soft-looking and white as could be, and Neil couldn't do anything but stand there, staring hard, thinking that there was something dangerous in this. In this staring. But he could practically see Mrs. Miller's nipples, and there wasn't anything else in the world.

A few seconds later, he was asking Dad for the car keys.

"Leave your games alone," Mom growled at him.

But with a perfect honesty, Neil could tell her, "No, I'm going to get my suit and change. I want to go for a swim."

To his folks, that sounded like welcome news.

"If you can, bring in some of our luggage--" Dad started.

"Maybe," was the best that Neil could promise. Mrs. Miller was bending over again, toweling herself dry, and it was all that he could to keep his eyes in his skull.

IN THAT LITTLE while it took Neil to put on his suit and run back to the dock, everything had changed. Most of the adults had moved to the pontoon boat, and the outboard was growling, making the air stink. Still in street clothes, his folks were flanking Mrs. Miller, as if keeping her safe, and Mr. Hawthorne gave Neil a big wave, asking, "What do you want? A trip around the lake, or stay here and help kid-sit?"

Dad said something too soft to be heard.

"I'll come along," Neil volunteered.

Which gave the adults an excuse for a good little laugh.

After two minutes of chugging across the open water, Neil was wishing that he'd stayed behind. Everyone was talking, and the only subject was the cabins. Who owned what? Which were the prettiest? The fanciest? The best to buy? Neil ended up watching the water and the other boats, and he gave Mrs. Miller a good glance when he didn't think anyone would notice. But she was wearing a shirt now, and there was nothing to see but her strong smooth legs -- except once when she moved on the padded seat, a few curly dark hairs sneaking out through the elastic of her suit, hinting at everything that was hidden.

The lake was filled with fast boats pulling water skiers and flocks of roaring, graceful Jetskis. The big pontoon boat plodded its way through that delicious mayhem. People had to slow or steer wide of them, and it was embarrassing. Out of simple frustration, Neil asked Mrs. Hawthorne, "Why don't you have any Jetskis?"

"We'll get some toys like that," she replied. "When Claudia and Collin are your age, and ready."

Jetskis weren't toys; they were serious, important machines. But Neil didn't bother correcting the woman. Instead, he sat quietly and let his mind wander along with his eyes. Time grew slow and heavy as their boat made its circuit of the lake. There was a novelty with the sun on the water and the occasional tickle of spray against his upwind cheek, but the fun wore down after a while. In some ways, it was neat to sit among happy adults, listening to their quick patter, wondering at what point in his life he would find such a confident, almost brazen voice. But by mid-voyage, he was completely bored and more than a little uncomfortable. Mrs. Miller had thrown a towel over her legs, protecting them from the sun. Mr. Hawthorne was letting the other men take the wheel, but nobody thought to offer that responsibility to the boy. Neil moved back beside the rumbling motor, letting himself broil in the sun, ignoring his mother when she said, "You're going to burn." He wouldn't. Not this late in the summer, he wouldn't. Then with the adults huddling under the canopy, Neil was free to stare at the water and think about anything, including how much he wanted to be anywhere but here.

Finally Mr. Hawthorne took back the wheel and pulled up next to his dock. But Neil wasn't happy here, either. The triplets were screaming on the beach. Claudia was still shouting, "I'm drowning. Help me, help me." Collin and the two Shepherd boys were running on the hard planks, beating each other with Roman swords and styrofoam noodles. It would be a fun game, for about two seconds. Neil resisted the temptation. Mrs. Jensen was sitting nearby, pretending to be a lifeguard when she wasn't reading her fat novel. When Claudia yelled for help again, the woman looked up. But it was Neil that she was watching. "How was your trip?" she asked, showing a sly little smile.

Mrs. Jensen wasn't as pretty as Mrs. Miller. Or as built. But Neil had always halfway liked talking to the woman.

"Did you have fun?" she pressed.

He said, "Yes," because that seemed like the polite thing to say.

Mrs. Jensen's sunglasses had slipped down her whitened nose. She pushed them back up, and her smile changed, and shaking her head, she said, "Really?" She said, "I'd have a hard time buying that."

Despite his doubts, the rest of the afternoon had its fun. Neil began by swimming out to the floating platform and back again, then diving into the weedy depths with a leaky mask strapped to his face. When those adventures got old, there were chicken fights in the bathwarm shallows. Neil was too long and lanky to ride anyone. Not that he wanted to ride, of course. But he didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds, and some of these kids were real chunks. Fat or solid, they were hard to lift, and moving with them on his shoulders was about the toughest work he'd ever done. It was the little kids who made the best partners. Like the Jensen triplets. They were wiry and strong for five-year-olds. Barbie Jensen would wrap her legs around Neil's neck and shoulders, and an adult man carrying some beefy kid would charge and knock the girl backward. But she'd pop right up again. And if they got behind the man while he was fighting someone else, they could knock him off his feet, and that's how you sometimes won this very simple game.

Between rounds, Claudia swam up to him. She was turning ten in another month, and her parents had already bought her a pony as a birthday gift. She explained all of this in a breathless rush, floating high in the water because she was fat and because of her big orange life jacket. Then she said, "Let's be partners. Okay?"

She had to be as heavy as Neil. That's why he asked, "If I say yes, what'll you give me?"

Not missing a beat, Claudia said, "You can ride my pony."

"Oh, wow," he said sarcastically. "Gosh, jeez."

Claudia heard what she wanted to hear. She assumed they had a deal, and when Neil turned to leave, she grabbed hold of his head and flung her thick legs over his shoulders. Neil was trapped, at least for the moment. He sank into the warm water, letting the girl scramble into position above him. Then he rose up to where he was holding most of her weight and too much of his own. He sagged and moaned under the waves, then lifted his mouth high enough to take a pained gulp of air, moving them into deeper water to let himself stand taller, bracing for the first assault.

Neil's plan was to lose. Someone would give them a little shove, and he would pitch to one side as if shot, dive deep and slip free of the fat girl.

But their opponents were Hannah Miller riding high on her mother's strong shoulders. Mrs. Miller was in shallower water, her suit filling with water as she lifted her eight-year-old into the air, those big breasts threatening to spill free. Then she adjusted her straps and started her charge, laughing as she pushed her way through the lake. Neil watched how the water lifted and broke over the pale smooth flesh, and he stared as the breasts dove beneath the surface, bearing down on him. Then something obvious occurred to him, and he grunted to Claudia, "Hold on. Tight!"

It was a short, forever sort of battle. The four of them collided along with their foam and shouts, and the high arms were grasping while the lower arms held tight to the clinging legs. Neil and Claudia had momentum, and Mrs. Miller was laughing too hard to fight back. For an instant, it looked as if she might lose. Claudia gave Hannah a yank, and their opponents started to fall. But the fat girl didn't have a killer instinct. She let them recover, which was fine with Neil. Then everyone was close and pushing hard, and Neil felt a small strong hand against his ribs, then tugging at Claudia's foot. It was a woman's hand. It was touching him, pretty much. So Neil reached out and yanked at Hannah's foot, and his quick fingers brushed against one of Mrs. Miller's breasts -- her left breast--the wet fabric barely obscuring the living swell of flesh that seemed to Neil, for that wondrous instant, to be the genuine center of the universe.

Then Claudia confused him for her six-hundred-pound pony. She threw her weight to one side, their center of gravity suddenly outside Neil's body, and he was failing sideways, his bare feet dancing across the muddy sand of the lake floor. He wanted to remain standing. He desperately wanted a second chance to touch the breast. Another quick feel; that would be perfect. But the fat girl kept fighting him, twisting her legs and hips, and Neil was underwater and sinking fast when a pain attached itself to his badly twisted neck, causing him to scream and drop deeper, shoving at the girl's fat ass in order to free himself, at last.

Neil's neck had broken.

That was his first horrific impression. But then he realized that he could move his limbs and even swim, buoyed up by the water and a white-hot misery. He surfaced weakly and made no sound for a moment or two. Where was Mrs. Miller? Nowhere close, he realized. She and her daughter had wandered off, looking for fresh victims. Meanwhile Claudia splashed behind him, telling the world, "I'm drowning, help!" She screamed, "Neil! Look at me!" So he turned, his neck burning somewhere near its mangled base. Then she giggled and said, "Save me, Neil! Save me!"

It was easy to say those next words.

"You're as big as a fucking pony!" Neil snapped.

For the first time today, Claudia fell silent.

"You broke my neck, you goddamn horse --!"

His belongings were in the house, set in a heap in the room where his parents were planning to spend the

night. The unairconditioned boathouse was reserved for the children and whichever parents drew the long straw. But for now, Neil could use his parents' bed. He was under strict orders to sleep and also keep a big ice pack pressed against his aching neck, which was a ridiculous pair of assignments. Between the pain and the cold, sleep was impossible. So what Neil did instead was play a few rounds of Time's Arrow, pretending that he was Agent Nano searching through Roman times, trying to stop Count Kliss and his minions before they forever altered history.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

He froze the game and folded up the screen. Without moving his head, Neil told his mother, "The same."

The pack was more water than ice now. Mom took it from under him and sat on the edge of the bed, starting to rub his neck and then thinking better of it. She bit her lower lip for a moment, then said, "You know, she has a crush on you."

A sudden impossible hope pounced on him.

But Mom had to ruin everything, saying, "Claudia practically adores you."

"Oh," Neil whispered. "Her."

"She's awfully sorry for this. I don't think she's stopped crying yet." Mom was telling him this for a reason, but she wouldn't just come out and say it. She didn't know what Neil had said to the fat girl, or she was pretending not to know. Either way, she decided to change the subject, smiling when she said, "Dinner's almost ready. If you want, come down and eat with the rest of us."

His neck ached, but Neil was famished, too.

"Laura says it's just a muscle strain."

Laura Shepherd was a dermatologist, which made her opinions a little suspect.

"Are you coming?" Mom pressed.

Neil unfolded the screen again, but only to clear the game. He wasn't doing that well anyway. Obviously, what he needed was food.

DINNER WAS LOUD and busy and extraordinarily boring. Mr. Shepherd had cooked spaghetti in big pots, and it came out clumped together and halfway raw in the middle. Yet the adults had to tell each other how delicious everything was. Neil ate with them in the big living room. The kids and Dr. Shepherd used the dining room. Spills would be less of a problem there, and there were spills. The new carpet was stained at least twice before the kids were banished outside with popsicles. Plastic plates and empty bottles of wine were thrown into bulging trash sacks. More wine was opened, plus some tall cans of beer. Then the kids were brought back inside and stuffed into the playroom, along with maybe twenty million toys, six of which being interesting enough to be played with.

There were fights over those six good toys.

If Neil was healthy, he would have helped referee. But he wasn't well. He sat in the living room with his neck ridiculously straight, making a show of his misery. It was Dad, of all people, who vanished into that mayhem; and that left Neil in the equally unwelcome position of taking Dad's place in the evening's first game.

He had never played charades before and never would again. It was acting in public, which was

something that he wouldn't do. So Mom did double-duty, standing in front of their team and making a fool of herself. And Neil did try to contribute to his team's efforts, but the books and movies and songs were from a world that he barely knew. Sometimes he'd blurt out a wrong answer, but mostly he just stayed quiet. And when his team lost, he pretended that it didn't bother him. That it was just a stupid game, which it was. One of several stupid games that were played in rapid succession.

Neil watched the adults, listening to what they said when they weren't playing. Everyone looked tired and sounded happy and maybe they were a little drunk. Mrs. Miller was wearing summer clothes. Shorts and a light blouse and sandals. Neil kept remembering that her name was Sarah, and he would wonder how it would sound to say Sarah when he was alone again, in the dark. Her face was red from the sun and pretty in a grown-up way. He was watching her face when she noticed his gaze, and with a sudden little wink, she asked, "What should we play next?"

She was talking to the room, but the room was too busy to notice.

"My mother just turned seventy," Mom was shouting, apparently responding to some distant conversation. "And she doesn't even look sixty, which I'm taking to be a very good sign for my future."

In Neil's eyes, Grandma was nothing but a sputtering old seventy. Yet he decided to sit there, conspicuously saying nothing.

"And do you know her life-expectancy?" Mom continued. "I mean what those charts...the actuarial charts...do you know what they're predicting for her....?"

"Ninety-plus years," Mr. Jensen replied. "It's something like that, I would think."

Mom nodded. "Another twenty-three and a half years. Yes!"

Mr. Jensen was a lawyer and a genius. He was a small man, a little pudgy around the middle, and he looked like a genius should look, wearing thick glasses, his thick black hair going twenty ways at once. When the group played Trivial Pursuit, Mr. Jensen played alone. It was the group's special rule. He had no partner and no help, but more often than not, he'd still win their stupid game.

"If our parents reach old age," he explained, "then they've escaped the hazards of risky behavior and bad genetics. And if they have healthy habits after that, most of them are going to be around for a long time. One or two of them will make it to a hundred, easy."

The adults reacted to this news with a horrified cackle.

"God!" Dr. Shepherd called out. "I'm going to have to keep my house clean for another thirty years...just in case his mother shows for a snap inspection --!"

The laughter rose, then collapsed when it ran out of breath.

Mr. Hawthorne said, "Bullshit! Are you telling me that I've got to listen to my old man complain about politics until the middle of this century?"

"Maybe so," said Mr. Jensen. "Maybe so."

Mrs. Hawthorne grabbed her husband by the knee. "Maybe we should give our folks skydiving lessons. What do you think? For their anniversaries?"

Everyone howled with laughter.

Mrs. Miller said, "Or a float trip through the Grand Canyon, maybe?"

Which made Mom blurt, "Perfect! My mother can't swim a stroke!"

Neil couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sure, his parents liked to complain about their parents. But to say that you want them dead... to say it in public, even if it was just a joke...well, it made Neil uncomfortable and sad. Watching them bend over with laughter, he caught a glimpse of frustrations that were deep and private, and ancient...frustrations that he'd always assumed were peculiar to fourteen-year-old boys

Mr. Jensen cleared his throat. "Lifespans are growing," he told Mom, and everyone. "If a woman in our generation can reach seventy, then she'll almost certainly live well past the century mark."

Mom got a look. She halfway shuddered, then made herself laugh. And turning to Neil, she blurted, "Just think, honey. I'm going to be your mom for another hundred years!"

Neil didn't know what to make of that threat. The adults had to be drunk. Whatever this was, this was a disgusting and fascinating business, and Neil could only just sit on the brand new couch, sipping his fifth or sixth coke of the day, wondering where things would lead next.

"Imagine," said Mrs. Hawthorne. "We're only a third of the way there!"

"If we make it to old age," Mr. Jensen cautioned. "Which is less likely for men than for women."

"As it should be!" Mrs. Miller trumpeted.

Again, Mom looked at her son. But she was asking Mr. Jensen her question. "And how long will our children live? Can you guess?"

"I can always guess," he replied, laughing softly.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, laughing and bending close to hear whatever he might say next.

"One hundred and fifty years," Mr. Jensen offered.

"That much?" Mom cried out.

"Or a thousand years, maybe."

There was laughter, but it had a different color now. It was a bright, uncomfortable sound that evaporated into an abrupt and very nervous silence.

"Look at the last hundred years," Mr. Jensen continued. "Antibiotics. Transplants. Genetic engineering. Hell, how much of that was predicted?"

A genuine interest grabbed hold of Neil. "You really think so?" he sputtered.

"You'll live to walk on other worlds, my boy. I guarantee it."

Neil had always liked the man.

"Who knows what you might accomplish, given a thousand years?"

It was an idea that made Neil happy and warm, wiping away most of the pain in his poor neck. And

that's when the idea hit him. It came from an obvious source, but he didn't mention his computer game. "Maybe when I'm done traveling to the planets," he began. "I don't know, but maybe I could travel back in time "

"To where?" blurted Mrs. Miller. Then she added, "To when, I mean. And where also, I guess. Wouldn't it be?"

Neil thought of Rome and the Dark Ages and the other popular haunts of his computer self. But instead of those possibilities, he heard himself say, "Here. Maybe I'd come back to now, and here, just to tell you how things turn out and...I don't know...maybe let you know about the future, in little ways "

That brought giggles and winces and every other uncomfortable expression.

For a moment, Neil felt foolish. He hoped this topic would pass. Collapse, and vanish. But then Mr. Jensen found something worthy in the possibility. Even intriguing. He jumped to his feet, swayed for a moment, then said, "Let's get the kids in here. Right now."

Mom asked, "What for?"

"We've got another game. A new game." Then he promised everyone, "It won't take two minutes. Or it'll take forever, depending on how you look at things."

People exchanged big-eyed looks, then agreed to play along. Mrs. Hawthorne went to get Dad and the kids. At Mr. Jensen's insistence, three video cameras were set up and left running. The kids were herded back into the room and told to sit together, as if posing for a group picture, and when Mr. Jensen finished his glass of dark wine, he stood in front of his audience, saying in a big, half-drunken way, "Listen to me. This is the night! We want to ask you a favor. A huge favor. When you've learned how to travel in time...maybe a thousand years from now...we want you to come back here. If it's possible. Please. Will you promise us that? Will you?"

These were little kids. They looked fried from too much fighting and too much fun, and whatever Mr. Jensen was saying, it was too strange and large for them to understand. But he sensed their limits. He made a stabbing gesture at a camera, adding, "We're going to talk to you about tonight. That's our promise. For years and years, your parents are going to remind you about the big commitment that you're making to us now."

But they hadn't said anything. Mostly, the kids sat motionless, looking ready to fall over into exhausted heaps.

"Promise us," said Mrs. Miller, getting into the mood of the moment. "Hannah? Say that you promise."

Her oldest squirmed, then said, "Okay. I guess."

Then Mrs. Miller turned to Neil. "You should promise for all of them. Would you do that for us?"

If anyone else had asked. But it was Sarah Miller, and he whispered, "Sure," and gave the cameras a little glance.

"What are you sure about?" Mom pressed.

Without too much life in his voice, he told them, "We'll come back. If it's possible, we'll visit you."

There was a strange, long pause. The adults acted as if they were waiting for some flash of light and the miraculous appearance of travelers from the far future. But then it was obvious that nothing would

happen, and it was embarrassingly obvious that some people needed to stop drinking, at least for the time being. Over the next half-hour, most of the kids were successfully installed in the boathouse. The Hawthornes volunteered to stay with them, and that left the master bedroom free for Neil's parents, which left him with a real bed instead of a hard cot in the hot boathouse.

Being an invalid wasn't too awful, Neil decided. He undressed slowly and climbed under the new white sheets, and Mom came in to check on him and collect her belongings. She said, "Here," and produced a little white pill. "Sarah gave this to me. It's a pain pill, and it'll help you sleep."

Neil wasn't too old to stop his mother from feeding him medicine.

"Sleep," she said again, rising and making certain that the lights were off in her wake.

Then the party started up again. The adults had found their second wind, more beers were being opened, and there was a loud, gunshot-like bang as a cork flew. That's when the pill started to work on him. Suddenly Neil felt himself tumbling down a long dark hole, feeling warm and weak, and his eyes were pulled shut by their own considerable weight, and even his heart seemed to grow stiller as something that wasn't true sleep took hold of him.

His room was directly above the front door.

He halfway remembered that.

And when he heard the ringing of a bell, close and insistent, some dim, still-conscious part of him was able to think, "That's someone. Someone outdoors. Someone who really wants to come inside "

Sunday

THE DREAMLESS SLEEP ended with the abrupt closing of a door. Neil's eyes found themselves open again, revealing a strange room filled with a staggering light. Where was he? Then he remembered this room and his borrowed bed, and in his codeine-inspired confusion, he decided that Mom must have left a light burning after all. It felt as if only a minute had passed, at most. Someone had finally answered the doorbell. That's what he'd just heard, he decided. And that brilliant light was coming from...where...? From the bedroom window, apparently. How ridiculous was that? But after several deep breaths, what was obvious burrowed its way into his consciousness. Night was finished; somehow it had become morning. Entire hours had passed in what felt like a heartbeat. And once he accepted that improbability, Neil could let his eyes close again, trying to will himself back into that timeless place.

The air-conditioning was running. He heard the steady hum of chilled air shoved through a vent, and in the distance, the constant complaining efforts of a compressor. But then it was cool enough indoors, and the machinery shut itself off with a solid thank. He heard the thank, followed by an imperfect silence. Birds were singing. A man at the far end of the cabin spoke a few words, then a few more. Then Neil heard the sharp aching sound of a person crying, and his natural first thought was to assume that a kid was pissed or sad or just too tired to do anything but cry. Except it sounded like a woman crying. Like his mother, sort of. And that sound finally made him sit up, dressing slowly, taking frequent breaks to rub at the stiff center of his neck.

The crying came from the master bedroom; hadn't his folks spent the night there? Except when Neil looked in through the open door, he found Mrs. Hawthorne sitting on the edge of the giant bed, wearing last night's clothes, mopping at her face with a soggy Kleenex.

Neil was embarrassed, and he was fascinated.

The woman looked into the hallway, but nothing registered in her sad red eyes. She had a puffy old face, and the hair that she always kept just-so had become frazzled and dirty. Quietly, she took a deep breath. Then she dropped her head and sniffed hard once and unwadded the Kleenex before giving her nose a hard long blow.

Neil retreated, finding the stairs and the kitchen. But the other adults were missing. Probably sleeping off their night. Serves them right, he thought with an easy piety. He snagged a cold pop, then drifted into the living room. Mrs. Miller was stretched out on the longest sofa, a brown afghan covering everything but her face and the small bare feet, eyes closed tight and a stillness embracing her entire body, making it appear as if she wasn't really breathing.

Neil hovered, watching her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes and looked straight at him. She was awake, alert. In her pretty face were hints of something that wasn't quite surprise, and the eyes were huge and red, blinking to make themselves wet.

"I'm sorry," Neil sputtered. "I woke you --"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I wasn't. You didn't." He sipped his pop, trying to find something worth saying. Mrs. Miller began to sit up, then remembered something. With the afghan still covering her body, she reached behind herself and deftly refastened her bra. Then she straightened the shirt that she'd worn last night, and she let the afghan fall to the floor and blinked her eyes hard a few times, rubbed at them, and with her face pointed at her toes, she asked, "What did you hear?"

"When?"

"Never mind." She looked at Neil. She was genuinely staring at him, as if he was an object deserving her fascination. Or was it fear? Then she asked the question again, but with different words. "How did you sleep?"

"Hard," he admitted.

"Codeine does that," she allowed. And she smiled at him. Then she thought to ask, "And how's your neck today?"

"Better."

She started to say, "Good." But another thought intruded, and she sat up straight and nodded toward the door, saying, "They're outside. On the patio. Go on."

His folks, she meant. They were sitting on the iron furniture, watching the sun rise. Neil preferred to be here, talking to this woman about sleep and body parts. But she was urging him to go see them, and that's what he did. Neil closed the door behind him, thinking of the airconditioning. He could feel his folks' eyes cutting into him. Even before Neil looked at them, he knew they were staring. A feeling of deep shame took hold of him. Obviously, he had done something wrong. Something horrible. Then he remembered that ugliness with Claudia, and the shame made him shiver. Honestly, he deserved at least a few hard words. That's what he told himself. But when he looked up, they were smiling. They weren't his parents; his parents never smiled so much. At him. Grinning like idiots. At him.

Neil settled on the first iron chair, set his pop between his feet, and asked, "What?"

Dad said, "What?"

Mom just sighed and said, "Nothing. It's nothing."

"It got pretty wild last night," Dad offered. "Did we bother you?"

"Maybe," Neil began.

Both of them squared their shoulders and waited.

Then Neil said, "No," and gave a big shrug. "The last thing I heard...I'm pretty sure...was someone at the door "

Dad started to say something, then caught himself.

Mom made herself look up at the trees, and to nobody in particular, she said, "Listen to the birds."

These weren't his parents; they were sloppy imposters.

A nearby door flew open. Everyone gave a little jump. Then came the wild screams of a boy charging out of the boathouse, little feet slapping against the plank stairs. Neil saw one of the triplets pop into view, followed by his brother and Collin and the three Shepherd kids. A little race was being run. They were followed by the Miller girls, Hannah holding tight to her young sister's hand. Claudia was accompanied by her father, talking in a rapid, almost breathless voice about a dream involving her stupid-ass pony. And after them came the rest of the missing adults, the Jensens holding tight to their daughter who, grouchy from a lack of sleep, kept slapping at their clinging hands, screaming and squirming, complaining with a shrill and defiant little voice.

For no good reason, Neil's parents started to laugh now.

"Listen to her," Dad said, lacing his hand behind his head and leaning back in his chair. "Doesn't she sound good?"

"Great," Mom exclaimed.

Neil just had to stare at them. Did they have any idea how stupid they sounded? And how embarrassed they were making him feel?

An explanation drifted at the edge of sanity.

Clues and hints and the very odd expressions from these very odd parents could be pieced together, giving Neil an idea that made him snort and shake his head defiantly. No, he wouldn't believe that. No, no, no!

"What's the matter?" Mom asked, dropping a third piece of French toast onto his syrup-encrusted plate.

"Nothing's wrong," he told her.

"You're right," she sang out, giving her son a fond pat on the back.

Which made it all the harder to say nothing. Neil glanced at her, then realized that he was sneering. So he looked down the dining room table, pleased to see that he wasn't the only one noticing this bullshit. Hannah fidgeted as her dad insisted on giving her another big hug. Jake Shepherd told his mom to please stop staring at him, please. Only the Hawthorne kids seemed comfortable with this crazy mood. They asked the adults for more French toast and more milk, even though they hadn't finished their first helpings. Then Claudia saw her mother staggering downstairs, and with a bullying voice, she said, "Mommy, my syrup's cold. Can you warm it up for me?"

Makeup was plastered thick on the woman's face. Mrs. Hawthorne walked over to her daughter and yanked her plate away, never looking at her or saying a word.

"In an hour," Collin announced, "I'm going swimming." He was already wearing his swimsuit. "I'm going out to the float and back again. Twenty times."

The adults became quiet and watchful.

Hannah pointed out, "That's a lot of times."

Neil didn't feel hungry anymore. He was sorry for accepting more toast, because now it was destined for the disposal.

The microwave beeped. Then Mrs. Hawthorne returned, carrying Claudia's plate with a dishrag.

The girl took a bite, then said, "Ugh! It's too hot now."

Her mother stared at the plate. Only at the plate.

"This isn't what I wanted," Claudia complained. "I can't even put it in my mouth."

Her brother said, "Chicken fights. I want to chicken fight."

The Jensens finally stopped tickling their daughter. They glanced at the other parents, meaningful looks exchanged in rapid succession.

"And a boat ride," Collin proposed. "Dad? Dad? Can you pull an innertube with our boat? And can I ride it, maybe?"

For a flickering moment, that sounded like fun to Neil.

"Not today, son. No." Mr. Hawthorne had cooked their breakfast, and he'd just wandered into the dining room to measure the remaining hunger. He was wearing an apron and a hard face, keeping his emotions in control. He looked sad and angry, but he wouldn't show anyone why or at whom. Yet the anger was in his voice, every word stiff and slow as he told Collin, "We aren't doing anything like that today."

"Anything like what?" Neil muttered.

Mr. Hawthorne rubbed his hands in the apron. Then to everyone at the table, he said, "We aren't going into the water today. We can do anything but that."

Mrs. Miller said, "Anything," with emphasis. "Like, maybe we can go see a movie. Isn't there a theater down in -- ?"

"Absolutely," said Dr. Shepherd. "Or we can rent a stack of movies."

Neil was picturing himself straddling an innertube being towed by the pontoon boat. It wasn't a Jetski, but it could be fun. For a little while. Plus it would happen outdoors, and wasn't that why people came to places like this? To be out on the water?

"No swimming at all?" asked one of the Shepherd boys.

"Not for us," said Mrs. Jensen, ignoring the frowns building on her triplets' faces. "Not today, we won't. No, thank you."

"You've all had too much sun," Mr. Miller blurted.

Nobody was burned. Neil could see that for himself.

"But you can have anything else," Mr. Hawthorne repeated. "What do you kids want? Name it. Anything!"

"A horse," Claudia called out.

That brought a sudden, unnerved silence.

The girl didn't care. She stared at her mother, and with a gushing, hopeful voice, she said, "A real horse. A thoroughbred. Can we go get one? There's a stable just down --"

"No horses," her father warned her. "We've told you."

"But you just said, 'Anything...!'"

Neil's father stepped forward, waving his arms to get everyone's attention. Then he almost shouted, "Guys? We decided last night." His voice was a mixture of conviction and desperation. "For today," he told them, "and for a lot of good reasons, we're not going anywhere near the lake."

Someone had to ask the question.

"What reasons?" Neil pressed.

Dad seemed disappointed to hear those words. But before he could summon up a lame excuse, Claudia interrupted, her shrill and cutting voice saying, "I'm tired of my pony. I want a real horse!"

Her mother descended on her, pulling away the French toast and shouting, "No. We're not going to spoil you anymore. No!"

A perplexed and embarrassed look swept across the girl's face. Then anger flickered, found its heat, and she gathered herself, letting loose a rain of tears.

"And no more tantrums, young lady! Do you hear me?"

Which made Claudia even louder, the wail rising like a tornado siren before it finally collapsed into gut-born sobs.

Mr. Hawthorne stared at his wife, saying, "Darling, I don't know --"

"What? What?" Mrs. Hawthorne was crying and screaming, using the plate as a prop, flinging it back and forth as she asked everyone, "Am I being unreasonable here?" Then she dropped the plate in front of Claudia, buying the girl's silence with its crash. "Oh, things are changing now. Are you listening to me, young lady? I don't want a spoiled, self-centered daughter who can't say two nice words to her mother when she's an adult --!"

Incredibly, Dr. Shepherd told her children, "You didn't hear that."

Neil looked at his own parents; they struggled to avoid his gaze.

Claudia shrank down, sobbed lightly, then halfway fell out of her chair, doing a fat-girl sprint into the living room and dropping onto the sofa, letting everyone watch as she kicked and wept into the brown afghan.

Finally, Dad gave Neil a half-hearted glance.

"What happened last night?" Neil asked him. Asked everyone. Then before anyone could hammer together a lie, he added, "And don't tell me we came back through time to visit you! Because that's not possible. And even if it was possible...I wouldn't do it, not in trillion damned years...!"

The only sound was Claudia weeping, and even that had lost its vigor.

Then Mr. Jensen asked, "But what if, Neil? What if coming here was the decent, right thing to do?" He pulled a hand through his matted hair, then to underscore his question, he gave his daughter a little kiss on her embarrassed forehead, adding, "What if by doing that you were accomplishing one enormous and very good thing?"

Neil was angry in too many ways to count, and for reasons he couldn't even name. He sat on a toy bench inside the playroom, pretending to watch over the kids. But nobody seemed to be doing much of anything, even quarreling. Like Neil, the kids were keeping quiet, listening carefully, little snatches of their parents' conversations managing to find their way in from the living room.

"What did you think? First, I mean."

"Quiet."

"First," he said again. Mr. Miller asked the question. "When you saw them?"

"I didn't believe it," Dr. Shepherd muttered.

"I didn't believe them," said Mom, with conviction.

"They can't hear us," someone promised. Mrs. Miller?

Then Dad said, "What I guessed? It was you, Bill." Bill was Mr. Jensen. "I mean, since it was your game. You invented it. So I just assumed that you'd hired actors, probably weeks ago. Coached them and made them wait for a signal, and it was all just --"

"A practical joke," Mom interrupted.

"A setup," said a man. Which man?

Then Mrs. Jensen whispered a name, then started to ask, "When you heard about her, did you still think -- ?"

"Exactly," Mom blurted. "Not a joke, no."

Several voices chanted, "No," in the same moment.

Then a man said, "Keep it down," and the conversation evaporated into a hushed murmur.

Hannah left the kids to sit beside Neil and hear better. But there was nothing to be heard, and finally she whispered, "What do you think?" She stared at Neil, her legs crossed hard and both hands on her high knee, her body slumped forward as if she was trying to make herself tiny. "What?"

"It didn't happen," he told her.

"What didn't?" She was a smart girl. It showed in her face and particularly in her bright eyes, and she was older than eight in her voice. But she was still just a kid, and she hadn't put things together. "I don't

understand," she admitted, without shame. "Who came to see them last night?"

"Nobody did," Neil told her.

The other kids were sitting on the floor, toys scattered around them or held by indifferent hands, every eye focused squarely on Neil. "They got drunk," he growled. "They don't know what they saw." But his audience couldn't embrace that answer, either. They sighed and returned to their lazy playing, and Hannah moved closer to Neil, trying to listen again. They were sitting in the same twisted position, heads as close to the doorway as possible, both hearing Hannah's mother ask someone, "Now whose moon is that?" Dad said, "Saturn's."

But then Mr. Jensen said, "No. It's Neptune's." "Which one lives there?" asked a man. Mr. Shepherd, was it? Someone whispered an answer. But it was said so softly that Neil couldn't decipher the name, or if it was a name. Although didn't it sound a lot like his father's quietest voice? And maybe he hadn't said a name, but instead, he simply offered, "Mine."

Mr. Miller said, "Oh, I'd never live out there. I don't suffer the cold well."

The adults laughed for a moment, then fell silent.

Neil could hear Hannah breathing. He wished that she wasn't sitting this close, but he didn't say anything, and glancing at her, he noticed that she had her mother's face. In a kid sort-of way, she was pretty.

Someone mumbled a question.

And Dad repeated it. "Yeah. Why aren't they worried about changing the big stuff? Like history. Did anyone ask anyone?"

"I asked," Mr. Jensen volunteered.

"And?" someone prompted him.

"It has to do with quantum mechanics," the man replied. Hannah asked, "What's that? Want-um mechanics?"

Neil placed his finger to his lips, listening hard now. But he couldn't hear half of the words -- not near enough to make sense of things --which was why he stood and crept into the doorway, careful to keep just out of sight.

"Move through time," Mr. Jensen was explaining, "and you cause the universe to divide. To split. It's something that happens regardless of the direction you happen to be traveling. Whether it's backward in time, or like us, moving ahead at our snail's pace."

"What does all that mean?" Mrs. Miller asked with a tight, frustrated tone.

"I turn right, or I turn left," Mr. Jensen explained. "Or I walk straight ahead. These are the sorts of decisions that each of us makes every day. Easily, and effortlessly. But when I turn right, there's another version of me who turns left. And a third that keeps walking straight ahead, bumping into the wall. You see? The quantum universe is vast in ways we can't perceive. Everything that can happen, does. It's just that in our particular version of the universe, a single string of events is the story." That brought a puzzled, perfect silence.

Mr. Jensen continued. "The universe has an infinite number of Earths, each with its own unique history. And it's possible -- from what they said, it's even easy -- to move backward in time. So when you arrive

at some past Earth, what you're doing is causing that Earth to split again. I turn left. I turn right. I walk straight. Or -- I come to a halt because suddenly I've got a time traveler standing in my path "

"I still don't get it," Mrs. Hawthorne growled. She was still angry and sad, using the loudest voice of any adult. "You don't make much sense, Bill."

"It's hard to grasp," Mr. Jensen agreed. "And I'm pretty much exhausted, too."

There was more whispering, in the living room and behind Neil.

Then Mr. Jensen continued, saying, "What would have happened is still happening. But not in this universe. Not to us." Then after a brief pause, he said, "And not to my daughter, thankfully." A murmur of approval fell into silence.

Then Mom asked, "So why aren't these visitors everywhere? If traveling is so easy, and all -- ?"

"It's easy," Mr. Jensen agreed, "but it's also unlikely. I mean, well...what are the odds that one of us will visit a certain tropical beach during our lifetimes? Vanishingly small. And besides, when a traveler arrives somewhere -- somewhen -- he doesn't erase the old timeline. It's still there. He's just adding a new complication. One complication among trillions of complications."

"Complications," growled Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Anyway," said Dad.

Then the adults were talking at the same time, quietly and quickly, their words smeared together into a tired but excited tangle of sounds.

Neil started to step back, kicking Hannah in the shin.

She was directly behind him. And almost every other kid was crowded behind her, standing and kneeling, listening hard to words that couldn't make any sense. But isn't that how it was when you're a kid? Nothing makes sense, but you can't help yourself. You listen to the adults, waiting for anything that you can remember and use.

Neil looked at their faces, at the eyes staring up at him, and he wished they would just go away. But then a thought hit him. He took a little breath and smiled, and he whispered, "Okay. Tell me, guys. What do you want to do today?"

Claudia answered first. She was sitting alone in the middle of the playroom, dressing soldiers in doll clothes. Without looking up, she snapped, "I want to swim."

"Shush," Hannah told her.

Neil herded everyone far back into the room. "Is that what you want? To go down to the water?"

They nodded and said, "Yes," with loud, impatient whispers.

Then he said, "Okay," and looked at the bare white wall for a moment, deciding how it could be done. "Okay," he said again, louder this time. And he kneeled down low, making sure that everyone was listening when he said, "This is how we're going to do it."

THE ADULTS SAT limp in the chairs and sofas, looking sick and exhausted. But most were smiling like people whose faces were stuck in that position. The Hawthornes were the exception. They couldn't stop being angry about whatever had happened last night. Which had never happened, Neil reminded himself.

He still didn't believe any of this crap, and he wouldn't ever, and that thought helped him find a voice that was strong and certain, and believable.

"They want to go out front and play," Neil reported. "I'll watch them. If you want."

"Out front?" Mrs. Hawthorne snapped.

Then he remembered. "In the back yard, I mean." The front yard was beside the deep, dangerous lake. "They want to play on the swings and in the sandbox. If that's okay with you guys."

"It's all right with me," said Dad, laughing to himself.

Mom was half-asleep. Every adult seemed ready to drift away, except for Mr. Jensen and Mrs. Miller. He was probably still explaining time travel to her, and she was waiting eagerly for the boy to leave them alone again.

"Just keep them in the back yard," Mr. Hawthorne barked.

Neil looked at him, saying, "I will. Sir."

"If you get in trouble --" Dad began.

But Neil was already leaving, slipping back into the playroom and giving the kids a big nod and wink. "Like we talked about," he said. "Be quiet, and quick."

They went out the main door, out onto the hot new driveway, then slipped through the split-rail fence into the adjacent yards. Neil led the way while Hannah stayed at the back. A private sidewalk ran between the next two overgrown cabins. The kids kept a trespasser's silence as they slipped between the buildings. Then they used a narrow path running back along the high ground between the cabins and the big lake, everyone shrinking down low for the last little ways, reaching the boathouse stairs without being noticed.

Their swimsuits were still damp and sandy from yesterday's fun. They dressed in shifts, then ran down the last long stretch of stairs. The lake was vast and brilliant, stirred by a thousand fast boats. An infectious fun erased the last traces of guilt. It was easy to jump into the water and paddle where you wanted, forgetting about parents and their odd commands. But first Neil barked at the others, telling them to put on their life jackets. "Keep together, and stay in the shallows," he demanded. Then looking straight at Claudia, he added, "And unless you're dying, don't scream for help!"

Neil didn't bother with a life jacket. He plunged in feet-first, letting the warm water pull him under, and he popped up kicking and laughing, half a dozen hands grabbing him from behind, half a dozen kids trying to climb on his back at once.

"Chicken fights!" Collin called out.

But Neil was the only one big enough to carry anyone, and what was the point? No chicken fights for now, he argued. Which was how the grabbing became a game in its own right. Suddenly every kid was chasing him around the shallows, little hands clinging to his shoulders and elbows and around his waist. Sharp nails left him cut and bleeding. But nothing hurt too badly. It was fun, everyone laughing as he slowly, laboriously pulled them along. Then Neil would take a big gulp of air and dive, twisting to shake off his pursuers, and after a good long swim above the weedy bottoms, he would surface again, his lungs burning for the next few breaths, barely having enough time to recover before the kids again descended on him.

One time he came up too close to the others. The Jensen girl -- wiry little Barbie -- instantly threw her arms around his neck. The others grabbed her and held tight. Yesterday's pain returned, but Neil mostly ignored it, bending forward and pumping with his legs, towing five or six kids into deeper water. Then he dove, and Barbie almost let go. Almost. But she managed to put her second arm around his neck, squeezing and locking her hands together, forcing Neil back up to the surface, forcing him to take a quick breath before diving deeper than before, kicking and twisting and the girl still holding onto him, a frantic strength making her arms feel like bands of warm iron.

Neil finally used his hands. It was like cheating, taking hold of her little arms and giving them a jerk, then another. Then he twisted and tugged a third time, and Barbie was gone, and he swam another few yards underwater, coming up in water too deep to stand in, using the last of his strength to stay afloat while he breathed in quick, useless gasps.

Someone swam up to him, and he ducked instinctively.

Then the kid was past, and he came up to find several kids happily swimming toward the end of the dock, their little orange jackets keeping them high in the bright chopping water. Where were they going? Toward the floating platform, he realized. Everyone was breaking his first rule. "You're suppose to stay in the shallows!" he cried out. "Hey, guys! Guys! Listen to me!"

Nobody heard him over their own laughing and the whine of outboard motors. Or maybe they heard him fine and didn't care.

Either way, Neil was furious. He broke into a steady freestyle, trying to catch them before they got past the end of the dock. But he was tired, and he kept swimming crooked, and all of those idiot kids were at the float when he finally reached them. "Hey!" he barked. "Who said you could come out here?"

"I said so," Claudia reported. Then she made a show of climbing the little ladder and dropping onto the platform's green carpet. Neil was too tired to scream.

The other kids climbed the ladder or held onto the algae-painted sides, and desperate to rest, Neil used the ladder, almost staggering when his full weight was out of the water. There was no place to sit, much less lie down. So he stood in the middle of their little square island, and after a minute of panting, he thought to count heads. They were one short, he realized.

"Who's missing?" he asked, looking at Hannah first. But he already knew who wasn't here, and right away, he told the eight-year-old, "You were suppose to watch her!"

"Who?" the eight-year-old asked.

"Barbie. Where is she?"

The stubborn happiness refused to give way to serious thoughts. Instead, the kids giggled, and Collin pointed out, "She was riding you, when I saw her."

A chill took hold of Neil. Standing tall, he looked toward the shoreline, finally asking himself how that little girl had stayed with him underwater. She'd removed her life jacket or it had come loose. And that's when he remembered what the jacket looked like. It was an old-fashioned pillowy kind, orange but stained by years of hard use. And then he saw the jacket sitting against the beach, the wakes of the passing boats pushing it a little higher with each sloppy wave. "Stay here!" he roared. Some little turd happily said, "We will," and broke into a big laugh. Neil hit the water swimming. He was trying to remember where he was when he was wrestling with the girl, and when he was halfway certain that he was in the right place, he dove and started hunting for anything like limbs and a body. But he couldn't see

far in that green water. Not without a face mask, he couldn't. So after a couple useless dives, he surfaced and climbed up onto the dock, feeling exhausted and terrified and sad and miserable. Where were the goggles? In the pontoon boat, he decided. And he found them under a pile of wet towels, but it took forever, and suddenly he was thinking that maybe he should run up to the cabin now and tell them what had happened. He should find help. Which was the first thing that he should have done, he realized, taking the wooden steps two at a time.

Voices descended on him.

Someone muttered something harsh, and there was crying, and Neil stopped and looked up the long staircase, watching as his parents came down fast now, followed by the Jensens, and between them, sobbing hard, their little daughter.

Neil sagged against the railing, relieved.

Then Dad said, "Mister," to him. Which was what he always said when Neil was in the deepest shit. "Mister." What you usually call an adult who's worthy of your respect.

"You had no right," his folks told him. "None."

Probably not. But Neil had to clamp his mouth shut, putting on a brave face before muttering, "Everyone's fine."

"Not because of you," Mr. Hawthorne pointed out.

Dad said, "Matt," to Mr. Hawthorne. There was a warning in the name. Then he turned back to Neil, saying, "We gave you orders, and you disobeyed them."

Neil was standing at the end of the dock. The kids had been herded back out of the water, and now they were climbing the stairs with the best sluggish gait they could manage. Neil was the danger here. The sparkplug to the rebellion. That much had been decided, and before things got worse, the adults had to put a stop to his evil ways.

"Neil," said Mr. Jensen, his voice more forced than friendly. "This is the situation. I know I'm not suppose to tell you this, but you see, we had some very odd visitors last night, and they stayed the night, and they said...well, quite a bit. More than they intended to say, I'd guess."

Neil showed them a glowering face.

"My daughter would have drowned today," Mrs. Jensen blurted. "But these visitors came back to warn us --" "I didn't warn you," Neil growled.

Mom took him by an elbow, ready to tell him otherwise.

So he said, "I did not warn you," with a slow, precise voice. Could they understand what he was telling them? "I was asleep. In bed, and asleep."

"You're right," Mrs. Miller agreed, trying to smile at him. "It wasn't you. But it was you, and them, from a very distant future --" "No," he snapped.

Mom said, "Honey," and tried to take the elbow again.

But he shook her off, telling her, "Don't do that."

"You have a wondrous future," Mr. Jensen told him. "If you're careful and can live long enough,

Neil...well, there's just nothing that you can't achieve in your very long life ' "Think of it," Dad told him.

Why was this so awful? Neil was almost shaking because he felt so sick and nervous. So deeply and enormously scared of everything.

"You aren't suppose to know that much,' Mrs. Miller admitted. Then she touched him on the shoulder, and again, she made herself smile. "But you deserve to know. You're old enough." The smile seemed to grow warmer. Fonder, and genuine. "Ask us anything. If you promise to keep what you hear a secret, we'll tell you what they told us.'

"You deserve to know," Mom assured him.

"To understand," Dad added.

"Anything,' Mrs. Miller repeated, now pushing up beside him, giving the boy a rough little hug around the shoulders.

With an astonishing ease, Neil pushed her away.

Then he turned, and with the adults calling out his name, he dove off the end of the dock, hitting the lake with a good flat slap and breaking into a strong freestyle, his head down except when he breathed, arms working and his tired legs kicking, carrying him past the floating platform and out into the open lake itself.

He swam until he felt breathless, then after a few deep gasps, he swam out even farther. A chill reached up from the deep water. The air around him was being torn by the high, angry whine of motors. The knife-like prows and keels crossed in front of him and behind. A flock of Jetskis were somewhere nearby, hitting the high waves with a delicious wet thud. He couldn't see anyone chasing after him, nor did he bother to look. All that mattered was the swirling bright water, chaotic and vast. All that Neil wanted was to keep his limbs moving, keep himself swimming alone, working his way across this enormous lake that still, even now, he couldn't quite believe in.