

First Date is a short story that is also the first chapter of the fictional novel *Inside Out*. In this short story we meet Todd and Karen. Todd is in a world of psychological and physical hurt. He feels very alone and at the deepest moment of his pain Karen comes and sits beside him. It is the start of friendship that grows into something much greater. Although the basic subject matter, child abuse, is a difficult matter with which to deal these two young people give us reason to hope and to reach out.

I hope you enjoy and find pain, joy, humor and hope within these humbly offered words.

First Date

The school was so new it smelled of fresh paint and glue. The iron bench near the administration building was hidden. With its cold, hard seat and straight back it sat amid a grotesque jumble of unplanted trees. It was a forest run amuck, made up of careening maples and alders with their roots bound in burlap. It was a place where Todd could hide his overwhelming pain and shame. The pain crept up his spine to invaded the back of his neck and penetrate his skull. He often felt close to passing out. Sometimes he did.

The psychological pain was greater.

Because of his parents' religion the obvious injury was not being treated. Some people had been very sympathetic. Even that hurt.

Some people had been cruel. It reminded him of the time in grade school when THEY found out he was a Christian Scientist - or at least was being raised that way.

When Todd had a bad cold the teacher decided to demonstrate the Christian Science religion to the class. The teacher, the lumbering, sweating ox of a man, hopped around Todd's desk grunting and chanting a nonsense song as he shook a pink baby's rattle over Todd's head. The teacher compared the religion to a primitive ritual where foul smelling weeds were burned and dried goat dung was sprinkled on ignorant savages.

That was third grade.

Todd never forgot the taunts of classmates or the gangs of boys who beat him up and asked where his god was. He never forgot how the school solved the problem by making him

stay after until all the 'normal' children were safe in their homes - and how he had to make his way home through ambush alley. He never forgot.

Never.

At the end of his sophomore year there had been an accident during the decathlon. The pole vault pit had been installed with the standards set too far into the pit. Todd was the first to vault at a significant height. Because everyone was yelling at them to keep things moving the vaulters had broken one of their own rules - they didn't personally check out the pit.

Todd remembered the vault vividly. He looked down the runway, raised his pole to about 15 degrees above horizontal and began the carefully paced approach run. Reaching full speed he planted the tip of the pole in the small concrete and steel box at the base of the pit. He took the customary step beyond the plant, kicked his legs up and began pulling with his arms, shoulders and chest. As he started to push up and away from the pole at the peak of the vault he looked down. He was well in front of the bar. Arching away from the offending bar he gave a tremendous push off the pole. He cleared the bar, sailed across the pit and landed with a deafening 'CRACK'. His neck lay across the one by twelve pine board that held the sawdust in the pit. The right side of his body felt numb, and then tingled like a foot that had fallen asleep. The coach and teammates stood over him. They spoke, but he couldn't hear them. After a few terrifying minutes he managed to get up and walk away.

The morning after his right ear was glued to his shoulder. He hurt. The demons of pain ripped through his body like a rain swollen river raging down a steep canyon.

All the aunts and uncles gathered and prayed. At least they said they prayed. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn't. Maybe they just accepted god's ill will toward Todd. After all he was not one of the truly faithful.

It was months later now. He was in the winter of his junior year.

He was two and one-half inches shorter. He didn't look like the hunchback of Notre Dame. If you looked at pictures taken before and after the accident you could see the differences in him - the shoulders pinched forward, the chin tucked down and his head cast

forward at a queer slant. His body was protecting itself, but to Todd his body seemed bent on self destruction.

It would be a long time before he would know the true nature of the injury.

The stinky, greasy ointment his parents told him to apply was no help. The constant, unpleasant odor only drew more unwanted attention. He knew he was hurt. He KNEW that EVERYONE knew.

All this ran through his mind as he hid within the grotesque forest.

His eyes were closed so tight he felt as if his face was on the edge of shattering. If he closed his eyes any tighter to shut out what he felt he knew he would crack into ten thousand pieces.

He couldn't shut it out. He couldn't block any of it out, not even last night.

His mind flashed back to three in the morning. He woke with the unseen monster tearing at his shoulder and neck. A second fiend tore at his lower back. His spine was trying to tie itself in a knot.

When he got out of bed he collapsed. Stunned, he lay on the floor.

Cold sweat swept over him, running into his eyes and dripping off his nose. Fear and nausea filled him.

He crawled to his bedroom door and looked down the long hall. He looked past the bathroom, past the guest room door to his parents' room. The hall seemed a thousand miles long - with a dark, forbidding door Hell's only exit.

Maybe they would help. Maybe Hell would freeze over. He had no acceptable options. He could lie there in terror of the unseen demons or he could appeal for help.

Digging his elbows in like a soldier he slowly pulled himself down the hall.

When he finally reached their door and called out their anger exploded, filling the night.

"You're pathetic!" his father yelled.

"Where did we go wrong? What is God punishing me for?" his mother whined. "Get up and go back to your room."

They never left their bed. They yelled as he crawled back down the hall.

He wished it were over, finished, done.

He couldn't get back into bed. He pulled down a blanket and lay on his back with his knees up. His back flattened against the floor so hard he could feel the wrinkles in the band of his shorts. His spine kept twisting. When it seemed as if he could take no more, when it seemed as though the spine would snap, it did. There was a crack he thought he could actually hear. Pain ripped through his pelvic area and screamed down his right leg.

He passed out.

He woke to pain. The pain was in the right side of his chest. It was connected to his father's shoe.

"Get up. You've missed the bus. Jesus Christ, you're pathetic." His father kicked him again: nothing brutal, but hard enough to leave bruises.

"This shit is all in your head. There's nothing wrong with you. There is no sickness, sin, pain or death. Entire Christian Science combat units made it through the war without a scratch and all you do is whine and cry. You're fucking pathetic."

To his surprise he was able to stand. The pain that normally screamed down his right leg was gone. He was shaking. He dressed, moving like a plastic robot. Emotionally he was numb. If he had any feelings he dare not show them.

His father left.

It didn't get any better. At the front of the school his father's closing words were, "I brought you into this world. I can fucking well take you out!"

Todd asked himself, "Why did the bastard have to scream?" The threat echoed after Todd. He felt lucky. Everyone else was in class. He was late and would need a pass to get into class. He went into the office and lied.

From a doorway in the adjacent building Mr. Palmer, the principal, and Todd's friend Karen Huston watched. Karen was stunned. Mr. Palmer was disgusted, but not surprised. Neither knew what to say. They watched Todd, and then went their separate ways.

Karen went to class where she watched out the window for Todd. She suspected that she now knew why he never talked about his family, why he was such a private person, why he seemed so driven to succeed, and why he shunned the limelight.

As Todd sat on the bench after school the image of last night's horror faded. His thoughts returned to the present.

Todd hadn't gone to soccer practice. He didn't want to explain the bruises.

He did cover his assignment for the paper and turned in his story. He hoped it was good. He thought the last thing you did should be good. There were too many things Todd didn't want to explain anymore. There were too many lies. He knew he was a useless piece of crap no one cared about.

He had a plan.

As soon as he could walk again he was going to the river. Oh, the mighty Los Angeles River, the great concrete-lined ditch they called a river. He was going to climb the fence, stand on the very edge of the river, lean forward, and fall the 30 or 40 feet to the concrete deck below.

There was absolutely nothing left, no hope of help. The school could not interfere with the religious rights of his parents. Since his life was not in immediate danger the courts would do nothing.

He was a freak, something to be pointed at, stared at, laughed at. For months he had looked in the mirror only to see the progressive deformity of his body. How long it would be before he was a twisted, gnarled, bent over gnome from which children turned away. The youthful spark had left his eyes to be replaced with the dull recognition of pain.

His shoulder and ear had separated. The initial muscle spasm, or whatever it was, had gone away after a few weeks. Maybe the stolen aspirin helped. Maybe the smelly shit helped.

He always hurt. Not like now, not like his head and shoulders were being ripped from his body by some unseen gargantuan tormentor. Sometimes it was random pain ripping through his body. He was incredibly aware of his neck and shoulders. Normally, like everyone else,

Todd was unaware of his body. When something is wrong the body talks to the person. Todd's was screaming the foulest curses.

He was shorter. He was losing weight. He had lost muscle tone. He wanted to vomit most of the time.

He thought he no longer looked like a thin athlete. This was important to him. His grades were slipping. He feared being kicked out of the honors program. They might kick him off the team or off the school newspaper or, worse yet, take away his press pass from the Herald Express. Everything was going down the tubes.

He tired easily.

He was constantly surrounded by people, but there was no one there for him. There was no one to confide in. His family found an obscene, barbaric religion more important than him. They watched his pain. They said it was god's will. He doubted it was god's will. He doubted there was a god. When this pain passed he was going to the river.

The pain finally climaxed. For a moment it seemed his face had shattered. Tears emerged. A convulsive series of sobs overwhelmed him. They were silent except for the gasp at the end.

It must have been the gasp she heard. Karen was also a junior. She was small, petite, five feet, one half inch tall to be exact. Karen was nearly seventeen. She had hazel eyes. Like Todd she was an honor student. She was thin, in that day considered to have no figure at all. It was the beginning of the 60's, the decade of the cow. Because she had brown hair, was slender and wore very little make-up the boys described her as 'mousy'. They also described her with the most damning of terms: smart. She was a "brain" and automatically considered cold and prudish. Todd found Karen's figure quite attractive. Everything seemed just about the right size and in its proper place. Todd liked the fact that she was smart. Given the chance, Todd liked to make-out, but you had to come up for air sometime and it would be nice to have someone to talk to.

From the walkway her eyes cautiously scanned the jumbled jungle.

She saw his face; eyes pressed closed, tears washing across his cheeks and dropping onto the books in his lap.

She had known Todd for two years. They were on the school newspaper together and shared several classes. They were good friends who talked often, were chemistry lab partners and they hung out with the same group.

Karen had tried more than once to attract Todd's eye. Every time it seemed he might work up the nerve to ask her out, he backed away. She knew something seemed horribly wrong. Like everyone else she didn't know what.

Karen was fascinated by his private nature, especially when she saw him shy away from the male bragging sessions in the journalism room. Todd's stand, against much harassment, that gentlemen didn't discuss what happened on a date pleased her.

Karen thought about how some of the boys called him a 'kiss-up'. She also remembered how he led the now famous 'First Period PE Revolt'.

Karen remembered that day. It was cold and wet, the type of day when you couldn't tell if it was fog or rain. The boys 'dressed down' for gym, then stood in the cold for twenty minutes while their PE teacher sat in the warm office drinking hot coffee.

Todd broke ranks. He convinced his class to run, in tight formation, around the track to stay warm. Then he led them off the track, past the gym office and through the halls to Principal's Palmer's office. He also led them in a marching chant. "We are wet, we are cold, honey, honey. They are warm and they are comfy, babe, babe. We catch colds while they rest, this is getting mighty old. Honey oh baby mine. Go to your left, your right your left, go to your left, your right, your left."

She pictured Mr. Palmer coming out of his office to face sixty shivering students. Mr. Palmer quickly inspected the group and asked why they were wet and cold. At first he directed Todd to quick march his "company" directly to the showers. Then Principal Palmer shed his coat and led the boys to the showers. He also led them in his own marching song: "Cavaliers are lean and mean, a mighty victory machine, baby oh baby mine." The principal and a pack of wet gym rats thus gave birth to the school's unofficial fight song.

By the end of that week Todd transferred to sixth period sports and the gym teacher was transferred to another school.

Karen also remembered Todd's battle with Mr. Coxswhittle, the math teacher. Mr. Coxswhittle had given Todd a D on the first test because Todd's handwriting was difficult to read. The paper was perfect. Todd fought for his grade. Todd threatened to contact the school board. That argument never got that far. During Mr. Coxswhittle's free period Todd walked into Coxswhittle's room to find Coxswhittle forcing himself on Barbara Jo Smyth. Coxswhittle told Todd to leave. Todd responded, "Get your hands off her, get your hands off her **NOW!**" His '**NOW!**' reverberated through the building like a fire klaxon and brought Mr. Delcourt and Mrs. Gregory so quickly that Todd was only halfway across the room when they burst through the door. Barbara Jo was struggling in Coxswhittle's grip. Everybody knew why Mr. Coxswhittle transferred to a school across town.

Karen's thoughts returned to the present as she silently watched her friend.

Todd remained unaware of Karen's presence. In his mind he pictured himself falling off the edge of the Los Angeles River, his head hitting the concrete and scattering like a watermelon that had bounced off a speeding truck. He imagined blackness, a total lack of pain, a lack of embarrassment, a lack of feeling less than worthless. A sense of being free invaded his mind's eye. There he would lie upon the concrete alter to someone else's god until the cleansing rains came and washed all the trash to the sea.

She quietly came over and sat down on the bench. She moved with grace, unaware of the bravery of her act. For several moments not an eyelash moved. She looked at her friend. She thought about how she had tried to get him to open up - how she had tried to get Bob and Steve, his closest friends, to tell her what was happening.

She felt anger: anger at herself for not penetrating her friend's shell, anger at Todd for not letting her. She wondered what lay behind the tears. Would he open up or would he withdraw? She had tried to talk to him earlier in the day, but he had vanished. She wanted to scream at him, "I'm your friend. Damn it, talk to me!" But she let the anger pass. She couldn't leave. It wasn't in her to desert a friend. She set her books on the bench and waited.

He still didn't know she was there.

As the pain lessened he began to regain his composure. He sensed someone. If he was lucky it was a custodian, or maybe Mr. Palmer.

He opened his eyes. He was embarrassed. Real men don't cry. He had nothing to say.

She had something to say. Todd anticipated the usual stupid first question - "Is anything wrong?" In his mind a reply formed, "Of course nothing is wrong. I am sitting here in the quietest corner of campus I can find - crying because nothing is wrong," That would have been his sarcastic response.

She just said, "Can I help?"

His throat and the skin about his eyes tightened, then relaxed. It was the first time he heard those words. Everyone he dared talk to told him what he should do, what society should do, what they wished the school could do. Or they totally ignored him. She was the first one to ask if there was anything she could do.

"Can I help?" she repeated.

He forced his eyes open and looked into her eyes. She looked almost as helpless as he felt. This wisp of a girl who offered her help, not knowing what she could do, looked back.

Her eyes were hazel, green in this light. They were soft. They were certainly inviting.

At first he said, "No, there doesn't seem to be anything anybody can do."

She countered, "I can listen."

Could she? Other people said, "I CAN LISTEN." Then before Todd could finish a sentence they had finished five or six. They never listened. They never let him put down his burden.

But he knew Karen. They had talked many times, but never about this - never about pain, never about his family, never about him. She had asked, but he always changed the subject. He assumed she didn't need to hear the garbage. Maybe someone should know.

She was special.

Todd looked into her eyes as he continued his one man debate. There were so many people he couldn't talk to. They would tell his parents. Maybe he could talk to her. Maybe she could listen. Maybe she could keep his secrets.

He felt like he was being swept into a giant whirlpool. Suddenly overhanging the raging river there was a mere wisp of a girl. All he had to do was reach out. Death would still be there tomorrow. Maybe she wouldn't. The Latin phrase 'Capio diem' ran through his mind. He could hear Mr. Delcourt, his off-the-wall chemistry teacher, saying "Capio diem - seize the day lad, seize the day." Of course Mr. Delcourt would sometimes slip into his best Groucho Marx and add, "And if that doesn't work, seize the girl." A smile flowed through Todd's mind. This was certainly a girl he wanted to seize, hold, kiss, love...

She interrupted his thoughts, "Where does it hurt?"

He told her.

She stood and walked around behind him. "My Dad often needs a back rub after work. He gets really tense."

As she moved Todd stiffened up. One part of him wanted to pull away. Another part desperately longed to be touched.

She sensed his tension, but persisted. Her hands were strong and gentle. She rubbed his shoulders and found a muscle knot the size of a green walnut. She worked on it. It was painful, but it was getting better. It wouldn't have mattered if the pain was worse; his need to be touched was much stronger than his strange, undefined repulsion.

No one had touched him since the accident. Everyone KNEW something was wrong. They had good intentions. He felt it. It was appreciated. It still hurt. Good intentions weren't solving the problem.

She touched him. She spent ten minutes, maybe an eternity, maybe only a few seconds - who knows? Todd didn't care. She actually touched him and a warmth flowed through him. For a few moments the pain disappeared and he floated in a tranquil pool.

When she moved to his neck he told her about the spot on top of a vertebra. The spot was smaller than a dime, but if any pressure was put on it he could pass out - instantly. Even wearing a tie was difficult.

She very gently rubbed the muscles on the side of his neck. Finally she brought her delicate hands and fingers up to his head and massaged his temples. For a minute he thought that he would fall into a deep sleep.

"It's late. Would you mind walking me home?" It was late. They both had stayed after school for activities. Besides, there had been some problems with two men in a white Ford harassing girls as they walked home.

He lived on the opposite side of the school. His parents were gone for the weekend, so there was no problem with being late.

"No, I don't mind," he replied.

It was a long walk. When she stayed late she usually called her mom. That day she decided to walk. She hadn't given up on Todd. Now she was haunted by what she had witnessed that morning. So as they walked down the walnut tree lined streets towards her house she asked what had happened.

Then she listened as Todd spoke.

Feeling drained, he just answered her questions as though he were speaking of someone else, as though he were reporting someone else's story.

There were many times when he was alone and the pain overwhelmed him. He broke down and cried. He slammed his fist into a wall, then slid down the wall and slumped on the floor in a state of disintegration. The sobs would retch through his body. Totally spent, he would finally rest. Then, no matter how bad things had been, he would get up and lean into the wind again.

What would it be like without the wind, without the garbage? As nice as it would be not to have the injury, the religious crap, the parental shit - he wondered if he would know how to act without it. Was he so warped now that he would always look for trouble, even when there was none? He didn't share those thoughts with Karen.

She asked good questions. She was also a journalism student. She thought it was terrible that his parents wouldn't take him to a doctor. She was sympathetic and supportive rather than reactionary. She listened and gave him a chance to talk - to finish what he had to say, to lay down some of his burden.

Near her house Karen suddenly took Todd's hand, and looked into his eyes. Todd was uncomfortable - he knew she had been reading his thoughts. "Don't give up. I wouldn't want to lose you," as she spoke she gently squeezed his hand. He raised his head and their eyes met for a few moments. Then he bowed his head again and drew back into himself.

"Todd," Her voice pleaded.

"I'm OK."

It was near dinnertime when they arrived. Mrs. Huston came to the door. "Karen you should have called. I could have picked up you and your friend. I was starting to worry."

"Sorry Mom. It wasn't late, so we just walked home."

"Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Karen ducked her chin in recognition of her social blunder. "Mom this is Todd. Todd, this is my mother."

Todd said, "Hi". He knew it was probably obvious that he had been crying. It was. Mrs. Huston looked at his reddened eyes. Even though he had tried to wipe his shame away, she could still make out the tear streaks.

"Can Todd stay for dinner?" Mrs. Huston recognized Todd's name and looked to Karen for a reaction.

"No thank you. I shouldn't impose at the last minute. I should get home," He was very formal for such a young person.

"Nonsense. It isn't an imposition. We are just barbecuing dogs and burgers. There is room and food enough for more. Besides, I could use a boy to show my girls how to appreciate a good meal."

"I really shouldn't," He was painfully embarrassed by how he looked.

Unexpectedly, Karen grabbed his arm and said, "Come on. I'll show you where the bathroom is. You can wash up." She paused for a moment. "You said your folks were gone for the weekend." Then she paused again, her head came up and she said, "I'm sorry. You probably have a date to get ready for," she feigned looking embarrassed as she spoke.

She did not want him to go home to an empty house.

"No. I don't have anything planned."

"Then it's settled - dogs and burgers with the Huston tribe. That is if you can take being surrounded by five beautiful women. Please stay. I'm sure Bob would appreciate some male company and we like to meet Karen's friends." Mrs. Huston went back into the house.

"I would like you to stay for dinner. Mom is a little over friendly at times, but her potato salad is to die for," Karen smiled, a warm, inviting smile.

"OK, maybe I can talk you into another shoulder rub?" Although his first instinct had been to pull away, the massage felt good.

"Only if you're good, tell Mom her potato salad is to die for and help my little sister Sarah with Algebra. The word is that you are a real brain with math," Karen teased.

He smiled and nodded as they approached the house. The Huston's house was in one of the older sections where the lots and the trees seemed too big for the houses. The house was different, not the usual ranch or bungalow style. The exterior was brick, stucco and wood. There were rooms above the garage and there were dormer windows over the rest of the house. Todd studied the exterior for a moment. "What do you call this style of architecture?"

"Tudor. It's English. Mom's family is English and she loves this old house. Dad had it gutted and the interior re-built. Everything is new and modern, except the outside. It's neat inside, not big like Grandmother Huston's house, no billiard room and all that rot, but nice. We don't use the upstairs. Except for the bathrooms, it's like one huge room. It's great for slumber parties."

Todd thought about what she said. True, it wasn't BIG like the houses bordering the country club or the ones up on the crest of the hills that separated the Valley from Los Angeles and the beach, but it wasn't small and the yard was very nicely kept.

Once inside, she showed him a bathroom and brought him a guest towel. "I brought you an extra wash cloth, I thought you might want to wet it with cold water and lay it on your eyes for a few minutes."

"Are they that red?"

"No, I just thought they might feel better."

Karen joined her mom in the kitchen. Her mother was mixing meat for the burgers and putting finishing touches on that famous potato salad. "Is everything OK? You looked like you wanted me to ask him to stay," Mrs. Huston lowered her voice and very softly added, "His eyes are red. Has he been crying?"

"He was really hurting from a track injury."

"Should we try to contact his parents?" Mrs. Huston paused and then added, "It's not track season now is it?"

"It's complicated Mom. His parents do not believe in doctors, so there is nothing anybody can do. He just takes aspirin and tries to ignore the pain." She paused and then added, "He was in so much pain, I think he was near the end of his rope."

"He could go to family court and request to see a doctor," Mrs. Huston advised.

"No he can't. His parent's religion is the problem. Unless his life is in immediate danger the family court won't help him. He went downtown to Legal Aid and asked what he could do. There's nothing he can do."

Mrs. Huston looked at Karen as if she had just brought home a stray puppy. But something in Karen's eyes told her Todd was no stray puppy. She smiled at her daughter and went back to finishing up the potato salad. They discontinued the conversation as Todd came into the kitchen and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

"As a matter of fact there is. You and Karen could start the barbecue. I hate lighting that thing and Bob is picking up Karen's sisters."

Karen and Todd went out to the patio. They got the barbecue ready to light, but Karen couldn't find the extension cord for the electric coil they used to light the beast.

In a few minutes Mr. Huston and the girls appeared. He dug out the extension cord and started the fire. The sisters clustered around Mrs. Huston, asking who the boy was.

Mr. Huston was more direct. He introduced himself, asked what classes Karen and Todd had together and made small talk for a few minutes as the fire warmed up.

Once Mr. Huston began fussing with the fire Karen and Todd moved to the edge of the yard.

Todd shifted uncomfortably. "This is stupid. I wish I had a car. Then I could ask you to go to the basketball game and dance. I know it isn't proper to ask so late, but then I can't really ask anyway." Todd felt like a total idiot for saying anything, but the phrase 'Cappio diem' kept running through his mind. Mr. Delcourt seemed to be standing just behind him, whispering, pushing, grinning like the sly fox he was.

"Well, if I had a real invitation I could ask Dad about using his car?" She flirted with her soft hazel eyes.

"Would you like to go to the game and dance with me?"

"Yes, but I'll have to see about borrowing the car," Karen excused herself.

When she returned she had a question, "What do you want first, the good news or the bad news?"

"The bad news."

"The family, minus Bobbie and me, is going to a movie so we can't use the wagon. The good news is Dad said I could use his bug, the Volkswagen. I love to drive the bug. It's so small I can even parallel park. It's fun. The wagon is so big it's like driving my uncle's cabin cruiser. It's a late dance because of the game, so I can stay out until one. That is, if you want to keep me out that late," Karen flashed her eyes at Todd, then lowered her chin.

"Go for the record Todd," it was Bobbie, Karen's older sister. Bobbie was a very popular senior and a little stuck on herself.

"We tease each other a lot. Don't take Bobbie too seriously." She was not happy with her sister's jab, but let it roll off.

Dinner was fun. The potato salad was great and Todd made sure Mrs. Huston knew he liked it, both by his words and by how much he ate.

The family teased each other a lot. There was an easy banter to the conversation and at first Todd's tendency to formality threw things off pace. At Todd's home dinner was something to get through.

Mr. Huston searched for common ground and when he found it he quickly engaged Todd. Their common ground was soccer and track, especially soccer. Todd played goalie, as had Mr. Huston. Todd was quick and could be absolutely fearless in goal. As Mr. Huston and Todd shared stories about difficult saves, Todd relaxed.

Mrs. Huston teased, saying that all goalies had a mental defect. To everyone's horror Todd and Mr. Huston agreed, then took a perverse pride in their particular brand of insanity.

After dinner Todd talked with Mr. Huston as they cleaned up the patio while the girls got ready and Mrs. Huston put the leftovers away. Mr. Huston was very different from most adults Todd knew. He actually carried on a conversation.

When Karen returned she noticed Todd was rubbing his right shoulder. "Need a quick rub on that shoulder?"

He nodded and sat down on the bench at the edge of the patio. She began to massage his shoulder.

Mr. Huston finished putting things away and came over. "Janet said you had an injury from track." Looking at Karen he added, "OK if I see what is up?"

Todd stiffened, but Karen's relaxed voice put him at ease. "Be careful here Dad. It's super sensitive." She pointed to the spot on Todd's neck. Karen's assurance wasn't enough. As soon as Mr. Huston touched him Todd went rigid.

Karen and Mr. Huston exchanged puzzled glances. Mr. Huston decided to change his approach. "You can usually get rid of this type of knot by stretching out the entire muscle. It's a painful process, but it works. What you do is take your thumb and start at the base of the muscle. Press hard and hold it for the count of 20. Then move up the muscle just a little less than one thumb width and repeat the process. Keep doing this until you reach the top of the

muscle. Todd, you can reach around with your left hand and do a decent job yourself. It isn't as effective as having someone else do it, but in a pinch it will help." Mr. Huston paused and then asked, "Would it be OK if I showed Karen how to deal with this type of muscle spasm?"

Todd reluctantly nodded. Mr. Huston was right about the process being painful. The muscle screamed its objection. Todd felt like screaming himself, but Karen's presence inhibited his urge to cry out.

"Tell me if it's too painful."

Todd was about to respond when Mr. Huston let up for the first time. Todd could feel the difference instantly.

"Do you want me to stop? Should Karen take over? Or you could give it a shot with your left hand?" Mr. Huston waited for a response.

Todd couldn't get comfortable with Mr. Huston working on his shoulder. It wasn't anything he could verbalize. It was a strange, ill defined fear. Todd finally responded, "I would like Karen to give it a shot."

As he guided Karen through the process, Mr. Huston talked about learning the martial arts in Japan after World War II.

It wasn't nearly as painful with Karen. The results were remarkable. The pain was gone and the shoulder wasn't even whispering to Todd.

After Mr. Huston left Karen asked Todd if everything was OK.

"Feels good. I may stop by my locker and take some aspirin just to make sure it doesn't come back."

"You sure you want to go to the game and dance?" She had second thoughts about guiding him into the invitation.

"Yes," Todd responded.

As his mind raced ahead to the possibility of having someone in his life, he found himself fighting for control. He felt like a drowning man, grasping, clawing for something to hang on to.

He didn't want to scare Karen away.

He had certainly noticed Karen. He remembered their big debate with Mr. Cantrel in social studies. Cantrel challenged the class to come up with real, physical differences between ethnic groups. Todd responded saying that certain groups had a different body odor. Mr. Cantrel tried to cut Todd off. When Todd pressed the point by saying that the difference was due to spices in their diet, Karen pointed out how the Japanese found Americans' body odor offensive because of the amount of red meat and strong spices in their diet.

Karen didn't accept all the nonsense handed out by the school and she stood her ground. Todd admired that.

It was of no small importance to Todd that she was pretty. There was something about her eyes and face, and the way she moved that caught Todd's eye. While the other boys saw a mouse and were intimidated by her intelligence, Todd found beauty and was attracted. It was a rude remark by one of the socialites that led to their first direct eye contact. The soc had called Karen "the flat chested Snow Queen". Todd immediately responded saying he thought Karen was pretty and obviously had good taste since she had turned down a date with the soc.

Todd also thought that she was a little rich for his blood. She was from the other side of the school and his parents were big on not getting into a situation where they felt like they had to "keep up". His dad had a good management job. They had a nice home and two nearly new cars. His mother drove a T-Bird. They had a ski boat that they took out every weekend. Todd couldn't understand their concern.

None of that mattered because he had decided not to date because no one would want to go out with the class freak. He thought that would be especially true of someone as special as Karen.

You couldn't get turned down if you didn't ask. But he liked being with Karen and her family, and no one seemed to notice his gross deformity. For a moment he remained frozen in his thoughts. Then her voice brought him back.

"Would you like some aspirin?"

"That might be a good idea."

"How many?"

"Six or seven usually does the job."

Karen's eyes went wide. Her mouth dropped open. "Six! Todd you can't take six aspirin. That could kill you. Aspirin will chew up your stomach," Karen's voice reflected alarm. Then she remembered Todd was not knowledgeable about such things. For a long, awkward moment she was not sure what to say.

Todd felt cornered. Everything seemed to be going down the tubes again. He always felt stupid when medical things were brought up. Aspirin toxicity wasn't something that came up on the nightly news - no news stories about seventy people dying of aspirin toxicity in Cleveland.

He knew he couldn't defend his stupidity anymore than he could defend stealing the aspirin. Resisting a powerful urge to flee, he lamely offered his apology.

"I'm sorry. How many should I take? I know it was wrong, but I stole a bottle from the nurse's office. I had to do something. All the bottle says is "Aspirin." His head was down. He looked at his hands. "You don't have to go to the game with me if you don't want to. I'm no dooper. I haven't taken anything else."

Todd's stomach turned. Because of ignorance, he certainly was abusing an over-the-counter drug. No matter how bad the pain got he was determined not to give in to narcotics. Hard drugs, and the favors of three cheap girls, were available in a little green clapboard house across from the track field. Some of the best runners used Canadian aspirin or prescription aspirin with cocaine. Todd had made at least one decision: drugs were not going to be a part of his life, not even alcohol. He told himself that he wasn't that much of a coward.

She reached over and putting her hand gently on his cheek she turned his face toward hers. She looked into his eyes, maybe searching for a glimpse of his soul.

"I know you're no dooper," Karen didn't know that, but she was a good judge of people and Todd didn't set off any alarm bells. "Let me get a couple of aspirin and a glass of water. Then we can go to your house so you can change for the dance. We can talk on the way."

She quickly returned with the aspirin and water, then left again to finish dressing.

Several minutes later Bobbie and Karen came down the hall.

Bobbie wore a tight black skirt, high heels and a white blouse. The blouse had lace frills across the bust line, thus enhancing and drawing attention to Bobbie's figure. Bobbie was no cow. She was built and she like to show it off.

Bobbie's makeup was dramatic, just a little less dramatic than the school Prude Patrol would object to. She looked more like she was the honored guest at a movie premier, rather than a girl going to a high school basketball game and dance.

Karen wore medium heels, a black pleated skirt that was form fitting for the first six or seven inches below the waist and a white blouse with lace trim on the collar and cuffs. She wore a small, gold locket and small gold stud earrings. Karen's subtle makeup drew attention to her eyes and her high cheekbones. Her pleated skirt complimented her slender figure.

Both were certainly attractive.

Karen drove. Todd didn't mind. It was the first time Todd had been in a bug and the sensation was something like free-wheeling down a steep hill in a radio flyer red wagon. Karen wasn't breaking any speed limits. It just felt that way. People made fun of bugs saying that if you ran over a dime you could tell whether it was laying heads or tails up. Todd thought you could probably tell what year the dime was minted. Karen was right - the bug was fun.

Todd admired the way she ran through the gears like a veteran race driver. Her joy in driving was obvious. He thought about how she too might love flying a small plane. Once he got use to the feel of the car, he relaxed and let go of the edge of the seat.

Karen apologized, "I'm sorry I jumped on you at the house. It isn't safe to take that much aspirin at once. It's probably what's upsetting your stomach. Dad had to back off of taking a lot of aspirin. The doctor said that the tension of his job and the aspirin might give him a bleeding ulcer. You should take only one or two every four hours, with a maximum of eight per day. That's what the label says. Why didn't you just buy a bottle?"

"If my parents found out I was taking aspirin there would be hell to pay. I didn't want them to find out about it from some neighbor or store clerk. I'm sorry. It was just easier that way and the school has aspirin for students - I just took my share all at once. I know it's not right, but..."

"I'll buy some and then you will have the directions. I'm sure anyone can understand why you swiped aspirin."

"Thanks. I still have to be careful because if anyone sees the bottle they might turn me in for having 'drugs' at school."

"I don't think anybody will say anything. If they can't get the students to rat on the drug pushers, no one should say anything about a bottle of aspirin. This whole mess makes you a little paranoid?" There was a questioning tone to her statement.

"Don't tell your parents or anyone else. My parents will press charges against anyone that gives me medication. I'll understand if you don't want to get the aspirin."

"I wouldn't," Karen responded.

"I know I seem paranoid."

"What would your parents charge anyone with anyway?"

"Custodial interference. It can cover a mess of things, from something like this to child stealing."

"Weird."

At Todd's house Karen thought it best if she waited in the car. Todd ran into the house, passed the razor over his face, took a 93 second shower, quickly dressed, combed his hair and returned to the car. He set a personal best for the pre-date dash.

The house was empty. His mother's car was in the garage. He couldn't use it. He might scratch it. Besides, he didn't want to go through the washing, waxing, polishing, cleaning the inside, filling the gas tank before and after the date, plus the begging, pleading, and the after the fact white glove inspection it required to use the damn thing.

"Where are your folks?" Karen asked as he slid into the car seat.

"They went water skiing. As long as the weather is nice they'll go every weekend. Water skiing and bouncing around in the boat really makes things hurt. I make sure I always have some homework that has to be done at the library. I could do it during the week, but I save it for the weekend. If I go and don't ski the weekend becomes one long bitch-out session."

"The old bat across the street spies on me for Mother. If I want to go out I leave the lights on and use the back gate. That way I don't have to give a detailed account of the entire weekend. Its good that you stayed in the car - the old bat would have felt compelled to issue a written report if you had come in."

Todd laughed at the neighborhood spy. She was a great annoyance, but Todd had figured out how to get around her. Sometimes he had gone out, returned early and then snuck out the back way. The people in the back were his friends. They were old, went to bed early, and there was a gate between the two yards. Todd oiled the hinges often. The people didn't like Todd's parents. He often went through the gate, walked under their grape arbor to the sidewalk and made his escape.

When they arrived at the school Karen parked further out in the parking lot than they needed to. Todd wondered why. She didn't want to embarrass Todd by making it obvious she was driving.

The game went well for the school. It wasn't a total blow-out, but they won easily and all the players got into the game for at least a few minutes. The cheering section was loud, with the students spending most of the game on their feet.

After the game everyone except the dance committee had to leave the gym. Karen was on the committee so Todd and Karen stayed in to set up for the dance.

In the gym the staff politics were obvious. In the Northeast sector was the Prude Patrol, led by Mrs. Cachet, the Girl's Vice Principal. Cachet was a French name and the 't' at the end was silent, but the students took great joy in pronouncing her name as Catch-it. The Patrol was armed with their little flashlights and little rulers. During the dance they would use both to make sure that the students were not dancing too closely together. Students were supposed to dance at least eight inches apart. It was in the student handbook. There was nothing quite like having a teacher jam a sawed off wooden ruler between you and your date. There were any number of rude jokes about how long a boy's arms had to be to dance with girls like Bobbie. It was the Prude Patrol that appointed themselves the guardians of everyone else's virginity. These were

the inspectors of all library books, the ones dedicated to seeing that young minds were not contaminated with the likes of Mark Twain.

In the Southwest Territory was another group. This group didn't have an "official" name yet, but typically they were younger, more freshly out of college and described with the dreaded 'L' word - liberal. They were active with and protective of their students. While the Prude Patrol sought to ban books from the library, Mrs. Johnson, the honors English teacher, used part of her meager salary to buy paperback, unabridged editions of books on the students' reading list. She had the nerve to think that students should experience great literature as it was written.

The leaders of this group were Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Delcourt, the chemistry teacher. They had a very different outlook on life. They thought you should vote for the person. They favored such dangerously liberal programs as sex education, drug awareness education, free school lunches for the needy, integration, and special English classes for the Hispanic students. They would be among the first to take up the cry for Camelot, and they would weep the hardest when the shots rang out in Texas.

In the center of the gym stood Mr. Palmer, the principal. This poor man split his time between managing the school, refereeing the warring faculty factions, and being a substitute father to students like Todd. He obviously favored the Camelot crowd.

Alongside Mr. Palmer stood the head custodian, a Welsh gentleman with a melodic voice and a very easy going temperament. He also sided with the Camelot crowd.

With a nod from Mr. Palmer, the custodian left, went to the control room, opened the lighting panel, dimmed the light to an appropriate level, placed his personal padlock on the panel door and went home.

The Prude Patrol sprang into action, formed up for a fast march to the control room and arrived there ready to face the enemy. Mrs. Catch-it pulled out her massive ring of keys and attempted to open the control panel. Of course none of the official keys would work. So they congratulated themselves on thinking of the flashlights, formed up the battle lines and marched back into the gym.

While the Prude Patrol was in the control room the dust mops were passed out. Todd and Karen grabbed the choice assignment of sweeping under the bleachers. They quickly swept the area, then retreated to a darkened corner.

The Prude Patrol returned to find their flashlights and rulers gone. At first the Patrol glared at the group bound for Camelot. Then they glared at a group of students clustered around the dust mops at the far end of the gym.

Todd and Karen watched from their corner as the Patrol struck out to challenge the students. Mr. Palmer cut them off three paces into their attack. In his best 'challenge me and die' voice he confronted the Patrol. "I took the flashlights and rulers. We won't be using them anymore. There will be no more snagged ties or torn blouses."

"The rules must be enforced. This dance isn't going to turn into a passion pit - not while I'm Girl's Vice Principal!" Mrs. Catch-it wasn't going to give up easily. The Patrol members were not happy campers and began to protest en masse. Mr. Palmer herded the group into the small gymnastics room and closed the door.

Karen and Todd looked at each other, quickly put down the mops and rushed over to the wall adjacent to the gymnastics room.

"Can you hear anything?" Karen pressed her ear to the wall, as did Todd. Their faces were just inches apart.

"No, I wish I were a mouse in the corner," Todd responded.

"Me too."

Todd looked across the gym and spotted the plastic punch glasses. He raced to the end of the bleachers, fast walked to the punch table, grabbed two and hurried back. He handed Karen one and they pressed the glasses to the wall.

They only caught Mr. Farmer's closing words. "We start by treating the students with the same dignity we expect from each other." He paused, then added, "That will be all." There was a mummer and in a much firmer voice he repeated, "That will be all."

Todd and Karen hid the glasses and rushed to where they had left the dust mops.

Karen said, "I wish we could write about that in the paper." Todd agreed with Karen, but they both knew they couldn't write about it.

When Mr. Palmer and the Prude Patrol returned it looked like the beginning of a prize fight. Mr. Palmer nodded. The groups went to their appointed corners. Mr. Palmer let the students in.

The dance committee had hired a local rock and roll DJ. He brought his own music - a true blessing. The school records, which contained classic polkas and fox-trots, were carefully placed under the table.

It was the third or fourth dance before Karen's and Todd's friends noticed them. Bob and Mary cut directly across the dance floor. Steve and Sue arrived only a few seconds later. Then Pat and Diane made a bee line for the group forming around Todd and Karen.

"You together?" Steve queried with all the delicacy of a storm trooper.

Todd and Karen looked at each other, then looked about the gym. "Are we together?" Todd asked Karen.

"Must be, we arrived together, have been dancing together, and we plan to leave together. Thus, we must be officially together," Karen responded with a not-too-subtle hint of sarcasm.

"Why the big secret?" Pat asked.

"When did he ask you?" Sue continued the inquisition. After all, 'when' was a very important question. It was highly improper to ask at such a late date. Todd started to say Friday, hoping they would think last Friday, but Karen beat him to the punch.

"You people just have to watch the bulletin boards for the important announcements. Get with the program!" Karen shot back.

"Why didn't you let us know?" Sue continued.

"There just wasn't time to call everyone." Karen smiled, offered Todd her hand and they moved into the dance area. She was a private person too. They laughed at all the fuss about them being 'together'. Their friends looked very puzzled.

Since it wasn't a couple's only dance Todd was cut-in on a number of times: not as often as would have been flattering to Karen, but often enough to be an annoyance to Todd. Bobbie on the other hand was constantly being cut in on. She liked to show off, especially when it came to fast dancing. When the DJ played "Shake, Rattle and Roll" it was show time and a space on the dance floor cleared for Bobbie and her date. Bobbie's style of fast dancing was exotic, sensual. She bent her knees slightly and arched her lower back to extend and draw attention to her well-formed backside - then she gyrated.

The show also drew the Prude Patrol.

About half way through the song Mrs. Catch-it escorted Bobbie and her date off the floor, gave them a severe talking to, threatened to call their parents and throw them out of the dance if there were any more exhibitions, and finally handed out four days of detention.

Bobbie played Miss Innocent to a "t". She just didn't know what all the fuss was about, but if it was that upsetting to Mrs. Catch-it she just wouldn't fast dance for the rest of the evening.

Bobbie and her date were heroes.

"Bobbie's a little on the wild side - she loves to push old Catch-it as far as she can." Karen was slightly embarrassed by her sister, but was always the first to defend her. "I agree with her about how stupid all the objection to our music is. It's the adults who are so totally obsessed with sex."

"She puts on quite a show." Todd regretted the honesty of his remark. "I don't know, it seems like all adults care about is appearances. And you're right about sex. They twist everything around to include some hidden meaning. They make something that is beautiful into something ugly and evil."

It was time to change the subject. "I wish we could write about our music in the paper," Todd talked softly as they danced.

"We're the only two who won't write editorials. Why do you refuse?" Karen asked.

"Because they will only let me write half of what I want to. Any independent thought would be censored out. We should be able to write about how Mrs. Crow changes test grades

when she gets mad at a student. We should be able to editorialize about how stupid it is that the school board dictates all boys take metal and wood shop and how 'academic' students aren't allowed to take auto shop," Todd responded.

"I wanted to write an editorial about the school not letting me take drafting because I'm a girl. No, I had to take Jell-O Molding 101 when Mom had already taught me how to prepare seventeen different meals. I won't write editorials unless they let me write about things that matter. Why can't I say that the boys should take cooking and the girls should take auto shop?"

Todd responded, "There's a revolutionary educational concept: wipe out ignorance, breakdown sexual stereotypes, teach something useful." Todd knew that Mrs. Johnson was the only one who supported their protest. The protest wasn't meaningless or academic to Todd. He had drawn a line in the sand and was willing to bear the consequences of his decision.

They enjoyed the slow dances, starting the evening with the approved style. As the evening wore on, and the Prude Patrol wore down, they, like nearly everyone else, adopted the "stand and sway" style of dancing.

Near the end of the evening Karen and Todd retired to the west wall bleachers. They sat and talked for a few minutes. When they stood to go back to the dance floor Karen stood behind Todd for a moment. She took the forefinger on each hand and traced the line from his shoulders to his waste. He was thin, even thinner now, but he was a pole-vaulter and did a little shot putting.

Todd turned half around. "What are you doing?"

She said she was admiring the natural V of his back. Maybe it was all those years of training in the art of being a woman. However, she wasn't playing a game. She said what she was thinking. She hugged Todd from behind.

Todd was embarrassed by the compliment. He turned and looked at her. Embarrassed or not, she made him feel good. She was pretty and he was about to say so when the Prude Patrol struck.

Mrs. Catch-it and her corporal of the guard, Mr. Fielding, the nerdy corrective PE teacher, came marching up, quick step with the weight of the free world weighing on their

mission. It was Karen and Todd's turn for a tongue lashing. Stern Mrs. Catch-it stood there much like the hell fire and brimstone preacher from a turn of the century novel. Karen and Todd found it difficult to keep from laughing.

Mrs. Catch-it was such a cartoon. A real live five foot four inch, 117 pound, living, breathing cartoon. There she was in her old lady black shoes, nylons that looked like support hose, her stove pipe straight black dress, her white blouse with the lace collar that ran up to her ear lobes, and that ugly brass and ivory broach that she always wore. She never walked. She marched. She never spoke. She growled. She never watched. She stood in judgment. If Todd could draw her for the paper he would draw her as an odd old maid who wanted to deny everyone else what she had never had. Or at least that is how he would be tempted to draw her. Who knew what she was really like? Maybe she had a full, rich sex life; but Todd thought that if this woman had a sex life it probably included whips, chains and batteries.

"That will be enough of that. The school will not tolerate any demonstrative shows of affection at these dances." Mrs. Catch-it continued the lecture for several minutes. Then looking at Karen, she added, "Well, at least you're not as bad as your sister." She handed each of them a detention slip. "You'll have separate days of course. We can't have that sort of thing in detention."

Karen was angry about the crack concerning Bobbie.

Todd found the word 'demonstrative' both funny and insulting. Doing his best Frankenstein he hunched his back, lowered his left shoulder, raised his right shoulder and drug his right foot as he approached Karen. "Well my dear, how is this 'de - monster - ative' affection? Is it inferior or superior? Does it leave an aftertaste? Or is it like Chinese food - leave you wanting more an hour later?" Straightening up, he added "Well at least she had the deformed monster part right."

"You're no deformed monster - maybe a frog." Mischief sparkled in Karen's eyes. She quickly looked around; then looked at Todd with a tight, impish smile; stood on her toes and gently kissed him on the lips. "There, now you're my Enchanted Prince."

She smiled. Actually she glowed. Their eyes met and locked.

A warmth filled Todd. He couldn't think of what to say. To call her a mere princess would have been an insult: she held a spirit he could only envy. No mere royal decoration this girl. He accepted her enchantment with a tight little smile of his own...

A few moments latter he worried about the detention. "I hope your parents aren't too upset about the detention." Silently Todd worried much more about his own parents. If Karen's parents called to make a fuss the shit would hit the fan.

Karen laughed, "They probably won't notice my one day of detention compared to the week Bobbie usually gets for fast dancing. Dad might even congratulate me." They laughed. Karen wasn't sure what to do with the detention slip. She faked putting it down the front of her blouse, but then gave it to Todd for safekeeping.

As they returned to the dance floor Todd stopped and turned Karen so that she faced him. "I was about to say how pretty you are."

She didn't blush or do any of the usual female things. She hadn't been trained that well. "Bobbie is pretty."

"Bobbie is built. You're beautiful." Todd looked her straight in the eyes and held her hands in his. "You're both attractive, but I find you much prettier." He had learned well also. Like Karen he meant what he said. "I've thought so for some time. You're smart and funny and feisty - and it's great being with you."

She lowered her eyes, smiled and accepted the compliment.

They danced until 11 when the dance was officially over. At 11 Mr. Palmer amazingly found the key to the light panel, turned up the lights and supervised the clean up.

The Prude Patrol immediately perked up and tried to enforce a speed limit on the dust mops.

When the Patrol became oppressive the gang bound for Camelot took over from the students and staged the First Ever Dust Mop Derby. The "horses" were all named and the jockey's selected. The DJ played background music while Mrs. Johnson gave a spirited description of each heat of the competition. A popular young math instructor won, with a dust mop named Midnight.

Mr. Palmer laughed at his staff's antics. These warring factions delighted in annoying each other. It was like watching two rival gangs of small children. However, the stakes were much, much higher. They were battling over the minds, hearts and very souls of the students.

After it was over Mr. Palmer escorted the cleanup crew to their cars, saving Todd and Karen for last. It looked like the changing of the guard at the palace as Mr. Palmer led his small, ever shrinking squad from car to car.

At Karen's bug he asked them for their detention slips. "You can do the detention in my office on Wednesday. OK?" They both agreed. It was a good deal. Mr. Palmer would have them do some office things or just talk with him. It beat the heck out of sitting and counting ceiling tiles for several hours.

It was midnight when Mr. Palmer left them. It was too late to go anywhere, so they sat in the car. They intended to sit there just for a few minutes, but they talked for nearly half an hour before Todd reached over and gently pulled Karen to him.

The first kiss was tentative, short and soft. The second lasted longer. After the third kiss Todd pulled Karen to him and hugged her very tightly.

Almost instantly Todd's sense of panic returned. "I'm sorry," Todd's voice was low, almost a whisper.

"I'm not." She brought her hand up to his chin and gently raised his head until their eyes met. "What are you sorry about? What are you afraid of?"

It was nearing one o'clock. The answers would have to wait. She drove to his place where he made her promise to call him when she got home. She thought it was silly, but he persisted saying it was his responsibility that she got home safely. He insisted his only alternative was to walk home from her place.

Todd went into the house, turned on the light in the kitchen, grabbed a soda and sat on the floor by the telephone. He laughed at himself, sitting there on the floor waiting for the phone to ring.

Karen sat in the hall closet. It was the girls' private phone booth. Mr. Huston had even installed a light and a small fan in the large closet. The family was accustomed to the girls using

the booth. They only laughed when they returned from the double feature to see the telephone cord snaking under the door.

Karen and Todd talked until almost three. They talked about the dance, their friends and nothing in particular. Todd asked Karen to go to the game and dance the following week. She accepted and asked him to go to a club dance on Saturday. They arranged to meet in the library the next afternoon.

When Karen emerged from the closet her Dad met her at her bedroom door.

"Everything OK?"

"Everything is fine Dad. You amaze me. Do you ever sleep? Todd invited me to the game and dance next Friday and I invited him to the club dance on Saturday."

"Good, I like him. Just wanted to be sure everything was OK. Its not like you to use the booth so long. It's too bad about the neck. Maybe you should talk to your Uncle Dave about that."

She kissed her Dad goodnight and went into her room.

After Todd hung up he sat on the floor. He thought about the river, about how close he came to missing tonight, about all the ugliness in his life, but most of all he smiled and thought about a girl named Karen.

Sunday afternoon when his parents returned everything would be the same and everything would be very different. Not a lot had changed, but at the same time absolutely everything had changed.