

In a lifting dawn the brothers huddle on the end platform of the pier, toy silhouettes to the known world. Hand over hand the taller of the two hauls up the cage, the rope pleasantly rough against his palm and then wet and slick with algae, while the shorter crowds in, bucket of tools at the ready. He takes a knee aside his brother and then reconsiders, pushes the bucket away and drops to his stomach, with an arm dangling over the edge, as if for the chance to grasp the meshwork first. “Cut it out,” the taller says, hoisting, and his words are swallowed whole by the sounds of the sibilant bay.

More rope. He drops it in loose circles by his feet, wetting the dock in crescents and rings. Light pushes in from the horizon. Yet dark as it is now they cannot see past the bay's granite surface – the instant the first corner of the trap bursts through the water comes as a minor surprise. Eyes widen. From that void rises the meshwork contraption the boys are checking. Algae clings to its metal like bunting. The chicken carcass they've used as bait has bloated to an amorphous stinking mass, almost gelatin, exactly as neighbor John Paul had said it would, if they were lucky. “The grosser the better,” he told them, an edict their mother declared they've been following their whole young lives. And John Paul's words, now, held true. Lucky. One gross stinking slab of chicken in the bait box, and surrounding, like starving acolytes, more than half a dozen Maryland blue crabs. They brandish their pinchers to the sky, cantankerous to the end. Each boy makes a hushed pronouncement of awe. The younger, reaching so, hooks his stretching fingers through the cage.

They haul it onto the pier, dripping, next to the bucket and tongs. On level ground the crabs scatter, claws up, in livid ignorance of the finality of their predicament. A lesson in the law of gross tonnage. The older clacks the tongs while his brother lifts the top of the cage. Neither speaks. The sun is shining fully on them now, gilding their world. Though amateurs themselves they've seen the act done and in no time their furious catch is relocated, trap to tong to bucket, nine in all. A triumph

of self-reliance. The morning stands as a moment of camaraderie, in a family where such moments are sometimes hard to come by.

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Later that day. The two have been shooed by their mother—"I have a work call in fifteen minutes," she threatened, when the look she shot them would've been enough—to the great outdoors. Presently they are at the basketball court by the out-of-session middle school, engaged in a game of one on one. The older, Tommy, fourteen, is winning, but not by as much as he would've liked, not by as much as he would've been, say, six months ago. The scrappy younger ever improving.

Tommy holds the ball at the top of the key, needing two to win. Mitch, only twelve years old but the doctors say he's tall for his age, gets into his stance, knees twitchy, weight on the balls of his feet, just like his coaches told him. He waits for his brother's move, but rather than making one Tommy stands out of his stance to his full height and tucks the ball under his arm. Mitch stays poised, crouched, wary of tricks. "Quit it," Tommy tells him, pretending to look at something across the street. Mitch doesn't waver. He's been here before—as soon as he stands Tommy will blow by him for a cheap layup, and Mitch's righteous protestations will fall on deaf ears. Fairness being of little import, they know, in the real world.

But Tommy persists in the charade. He snaps, "Get up," in a volume curiously close to whisper, but only when he steps forward with the ball slightly raised (read: throw imminent) does Mitch actually rise, and only in the interest of self-protection. But Tommy does not immediately blow by his skeptical brother. Instead he nods and says, "Look."

Mitch turns. Two kids about their age watch from across the street, with folded arms.

They're dressed in black. "You think they wanna play?" Mitch asks.

"I don't know." Tommy stares. He waves to them and calls hey. "I don't think so," he says. They wear jeans, not ideal for summer basketball. But the shorter says something to the taller and to Mitch and Tommy's surprise they do start off across the street. Mitch and Tommy stand side by side on the court like gracious hosts. When they step onto the pavement Tommy calls, "You guys wanna play?" and while the older finds this funny, the younger one says sure.

"I'll shoot for ball," Tommy tells them, standing at the three-point line. He bounces the ball a few times and shoots and sinks it, represses an instinct to gloat. The four take up positions, Mitch and Tommy on the outside, the newcomers inside, defending. But upon starting it's clear this is no contest. While each newcomer is taller than their respective assignments the older looks bored, offers no effort at guarding Tommy, and though the younger attempts to overcome this deficiency with an ample willingness to foul, the effective two on one shortly finishes. Tommy and Mitch tell them good game. "We can switch up the teams and play again," Mitch offers, eager to continue.

The older scoffs. Pointedly at his own brother he says, "I'm not wasting my day doing this, Q."

"Okay, well," Mitch says, hurt, "we'll be here if you change your mind." He bounces the ball once, hard.

But Tommy cuts in before the two can turn to leave. "What other stuff would you wanna be doing?" he asks.

Their new friend smirks, cracks his neck, looks shiftily around. "Just something more fun, is all. Lots to do around here, if you know where to look." He is emphatically nonchalant. "If we decide we wanna play with balls, though, we'll let you know."

“Okay, see you later then,” Mitch says flatly. Over him, Tommy says, “Hold on, what kind of fun? We don’t live around here. Back where we’re from I don’t waste my time playing much basketball either.”

“You guys don’t live around here?”

“We’re from New York,” Mitch tells him, when Tommy balks.

Another scoff. “New York,” he repeats to the air. “Why are you here if you’re from New York?” Beside him his brother stands mute, grinning.

Again Tommy has fallen quiet. It’s left to Mitch to say, “We have a house here. Over there,” pointing out the direction, “right on the bay.”

“That’s really cool,” their new friend replies, coolly. To his own brother he says, “You know what we should do?”

“What?”

“I think we should take them to the abandoned house.”

“An abandoned house,” Tommy says. “Cool.”

His brother doesn’t share his enthusiasm. “You guys can go,” Mitch says. “I’ll just stay here and shoot until you’re done.”

“Mitch, don’t be a loser. If you don’t come I can’t go.”

“Hold on,” their new friend cuts in, “why don’t *you* just come and let him stay here? If he’s not up for it.” He glances at Mitch.

Tommy shakes his head. “Oh, no. My mom would freak out.”

“About what?”

“That I left my brother by himself.”

“How would she know?”

Tommy looks at stoic Mitch, gets nothing. To delay he smacks his lips. "I guess she wouldn't," he finally says, with powerful adolescence firing away in his chest, in great inner conflict.

"Great," their new friend says. "I'm Ritchie, by the way. This is my brother Q." They bump fists.

"Cool, cool," Tommy says. "Tommy."

"Alright, Tommy," Ritchie says. He flashes a smile. "Let's go see an abandoned house." And off the three go.

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Later, as Mitch is still shooting hoops (he's working on his lefthanded finishing, having been assured most kids in his league don't), from the direction of the fabled abandoned house come running three postpubescent morons, a pounding desperation to their gait. Mitch picks up his ball; the visage reeks of retreat. "Mitch, run!" Tommy calls, as they wheel past. Mitch sprints after them, straight into guilt by association, as well as into the street and then down it, struggling to keep up. The group cuts hard left into a random backyard, Mitch joining as they clamber over the fence at the rear edge of the lot, Ritchie saying, "Hurry up, before Marsha sees," before dropping from sight. Mitch throws the ball over and pulls himself up, needing all his strength, using his feet, and at last swings down into a different backyard, at which point the two unknown elements, Ritchie and Q, are lying on their backs in the browning grass, suddenly roaring with laughter.

"Did you see his face?" Q says, and Ritchie thinks this a fullblown kneeslapper, he rolls over and pounds the earth just to show how damn funny it was. Tommy, sitting, observes the two until he slides into their revelry, and then the three enjoy this insular comedy while Mitch stands by, mute. When the laughter dies out Mitch asks what happened. This births another minor fit.

At length Tommy manages to tell him, "A cop came."

"Fatass Officer Steve," Q says. "He's always around." Ritchie lets loose a singular guffaw.

"A policeman?" Mitch asks. The idea of his brother running from the police punctures, irrevocably, his childhood idealism. And he realizes with a pang of guilt he has done it too.

Tommy, eager to tell the story, says, "Someone must've seen us go in, because we weren't there for five minutes before the cop came. Lights and everything. But he came in the front door, so—," but Ritchie cuts in and says to Tommy, "I don't know if we should be saying this. What if he tells your mom?"

"I won't tell my mom," Mitch tells him. Pressure builds behind his eyes.

"Tom said you tell her everything."

Tom? "No I don't," he insists. Tommy stares at a blade of grass in his fingers. "That was like three years ago I did that." He hates how young his words sound. "I wanna know."

"I'm just saying. Need to know basis." He shrugs, an impartial arbiter. To Tommy he says, "I wouldn't tell him."

Mitch's ears go hot. He looks at Tommy.

To Ritchie, Tommy says, "Yeah, good call."

Mitch stops listening. He stomps to where the ball rolled and picks it up. Without so much as a glance back he punts it. As the ball soars into the distance Mitch marches away, unsure of his bearings, ignoring Tommy's calls to come back until Tommy, with a knowing glance at his two new friends, has no choice but to follow.

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In a steaming mound on a platter in the middle of the set table, lifeless crabs await their undignified finale. Once standard Maryland blue crabs, they have been transmogrified, by way of seething water, into a brilliant red. Mrs. Penrose doles out mallets, crackers, and picks, to facilitate the crabs' destruction, and she beams.

All wear bibs. The evening has an air of deliberate conviviality, fostered dutifully by Mrs. Penrose, on account of her husband's long-sought promotion at the firm. "Moving up in the world," he tells his family with a wink, feeling fine. "Moving on up." He grips his mallet by his plate, upright, presiding judicially over their bounty.

"So boys, what did you get up to today?" their mother asks, and adds, "Dig in, dig in!" with a little go forth motion of the hands. Mr. Penrose lifts the tongs and gives them two quick clacks.

"Played some basketball with some guys," Tommy says. "Explored the island a bit." Hands reach across the table.

"You played with some locals?" Mr. Penrose asks. He drops a large crab onto the plate in front of him, and salivates.

"Yeah, just two other kids. About our age." His dad passes the tongs and Tommy helps himself.

"No," Mitch cuts in, "they were older."

"Oh?" their father says, leaning forward. "You two against them, or what? Who won?"

"Us against them," Tommy says, "and we won."

"Older and you still won! That's what I like to hear, boys," he says, flashing a jubilant smile to his wife. "That's how the Penrose men takes care of business." He rips open a claw, crab juice spews forth. "No mercy, boys, remember. Life is a contest."

"They weren't very good," Mitch says. "I don't think they play very much."

"And you guys showed em who's boss, huh. I like it, boys. Way to go."

“And then you explored the island?” their mother asks. “Were these other boys around for that, too?” The cracking of shells fills the air.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. He looks at Mitch when he answers.

“Well?” she asks expectantly. “What did you explore?”

“Just, down by the water. Near the bridge, I mean.”

“By the gas station?” Mr. Penrose asks.

“Sorta behind it, and then under the bridge a little too. There wasn't much cool though or anything.”

“I didn't realize you could go under the bridge here. JP's mom said it's so low boats aren't even allowed through. Have to go the long way around.”

“Well yeah,” Tommy says. Again he looks at Mitch. “There's a little ledge area you can go, is what I mean.”

“Sounds dangerous,” their mom says. “Mitch, was it dangerous?” She folds her hands over each other the way she always does, as three heads turn to the youngest.

“No,” he tells her, the table, “I didn't think so.”

Satisfied she addresses Tommy for her next inquiry. “So are these boys new friends of yours?”

“I dunno,” Tommy says. “I guess so.”

“Well good! Maybe we can go with their family to the carnival next weekend. It's time we met some folks down here. I don't want the whole neighborhood thinking of us as separate.”

“I can ask if they're gonna go.”

“Are you seeing them tomorrow?”

Tommy pauses. “Maybe.”

“I don't think they wanna play basketball,” Mitch says. His mother cocks her head at him.

“You can play basketball anywhere, Mitchell. You can't explore nature anywhere. It's less than two miles to the marshlands, guys. How about your bikes? You have your fishing poles too. That's the kind of stuff you should be doing down here.”

“Maybe we'll go to the marshes tomorrow,” Tommy says.

“Have your new friends show you,” Mrs. Penrose suggests, and on her fork dips a hunk of claw meat in golden liquid butter.

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As the sun rises the next morning the silhouettes return to the dock. They work silently, rapt with purpose. The previous night's feast, having lived up to expectations, begets greed. Alarms were set—they take the job seriously. The trap swings as Tommy hauls it up. Waves break against the riprap.

But the trap, now wetting the dock, holds no crabs. “Maybe it's the chicken,” Mitch says sourly. “Should we change it out?”

“John Paul said it'll be good for a few days.”

“I know.”

“It's only been two.”

“I *know*.”

Tommy looks at his brother. “Then why would we change it out?” The words drip with accusation, as if the bay's refusal to offer its gift may be traced, in certain lights, to Mitch's naivete. Mitch stares. “Don't be so impatient all the time, God,” Tommy adds, and lifts the trap and tosses it from the dock. It crashes into the stirring void below them and disappears, the noise an emphatic punctuation as Tommy retreats to the house.

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Both boys are adept bikers. Though at home in New York exploration of any sort, particularly that by bike, is frowned upon, in open country spaces such as down here a great reversal happens, whereby *shirking* exploration, particularly that by bike, becomes frowned upon. They have learned in elsewhere summertimes to balance and steer and brake, and in turn their parents have learned to trust these skills. They pluck their bikes from the garage and set them in the driveway, straddling. Mitch has told their mother, “We’re going to the marsh.”

She was keen on the idea—it would keep them away from the house. “Are you going to bring your friends?” she asked.

Mitch said he didn’t think so. “They’ve probably already seen everything,” by way of explanation. She patted his tiny helmet and sent him on his way.

They hop on their bikes and peddle, speeding along the rutted dirt driveway that leads to their house and then veering onto the main cross-island thoroughfare. Traffic as they know it does not exist here. Bikers are given incredible leeway, with trucks that ease into the other side of the road and back, unconcerned by that supposed chief of all dangers, oncoming vehicles. Life, the boys see, is no constant.

As they approach the school Tommy, leading, guides his bike across the road into a side lane. He stops there. Mitch pulls up next to him, annoyed. “I don’t want them to come,” he tells his brother. “Let’s just go the two of us.”

Tommy, unbuckling his helmet, frowns at his brother. “I told them yesterday we’d meet up today.”

“But why?” Mitch is cognizant of the whine in his voice.

“So you just want to be rude?”

“Why'd you have to tell them?”

Tommy sneers. “If I knew you were gonna bitch about it I wouldn't have.” Mitch has no response. He cannot recall being spoken to like this by his older brother. Tommy tosses his helmet to the ground and adds, “Take off your helmet.”

Mitch blinks.

“Just trust me, Mitch. Take it off. It'll be better.”

“But it's illegal.”

Tommy shakes his head, places his foot back on the pedal. “And you wonder why they don't like you,” he says, and takes off down the street to their house. At length Mitch does follow, dejected and helmetless, reluctance in motion.

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Tommy was right, if it could be called that—neither of the other two wear helmets. They peddle along in a straight line in the road, Ritchie in the front, charting their course, with the Penrose boys following and Q bringing up the rear. In the fifteen minutes they've been riding, what passes for civilization here has fallen to the wayside. Tall grasses sway on either side of the road. A mile back they passed what had been a church, now with its roof caving in. Gulls soar above the bay, screeching. The sun sits high and hot in the clouded sky, as Ritchie looks back and indicates to his left before swooping across the pavement onto a dirt path.

They take this path for five minutes, to a clearing littered with the telltale signs of a teenage haunt. Over the branches of a dying tree has been hung a tarpaulin, tied off at random with bits of colored string, to make a sort of cave. There is seating by way of beach chairs, and beer bottles and

cigarette butts and magazines litter the trampled earth. With a salesman's sweeping arm Ritchie tells his guests, "The Marsh."

"It's cool," Tommy informs him. Mitch says nothing, and Tommy follows his line of sight to a splayed magazine offering, to a sufficiently innocent viewer, a glimpse into adulthood. Ritchie lights two cigarettes, hands one to Q. He shakes the pack at Tommy, who says, "I'm okay."

"Can't have one in front of the fun police, huh?" Ritchie asks, gets a snicker from Q. "Sit down," he says to Tommy, "check this out." He pulls out a shoebox from under his seat and holds it reverently, on open palms facing up. Like this he passes the box to Tommy. "Check that out."

Tommy opens the lid, pulls out a sleek black handle. "Be careful," Ritchie says, "and push that little button there," pointing.

When he pushes the button a blade flips out. "Damn!" he marvels, rotating the blade. "Where'd you get it?"

"Cousin. Cost me a fair bit, too. But I figured, shit, rather have it than not. Haven't needed it yet but I'll tell you what, I have a feeling the day I do is coming fast."

"You think?"

"There's this prick," he begins, and when Q asks, "Michael?", Ritchie nods—"who's with my ex-girlfriend," inspecting his cigarette all the while, "and I don't care at all, she's a bitch and he can have her, but they've both been running their mouths and I just might have to show him what's up."

"What do you mean, *show him what's up?*" Mitch asks, staring at the knife all the while.

"How old are you?" Ritchie asks rhetorically. "I'll put this delicate so I don't offend your sensibilities," drawing laughter from Q. "What I mean is, I probably won't need to actually do anything," loftily above the concept meanwhile, smoke jetting from nostrils, "just, give him a glimpse of my friend there and let him figure the rest out for himself."

“Why not just let it go?”

“Look, man, I know you’re not from here,” Ritchie says, as if the question, in certain locales, might not have come across as stupid, the way it does here. “But when someone here is running their mouth, you don’t have much options.”

“But what if he doesn’t care? Maybe he has a knife too, I mean, or just catches you when you don’t have it, or has friends with him, or...,” working himself up the whole time because damnit, this is a *knife* we’re talking about, a *blade*, this is not some game and that is not a toy, he has this all on good authority.

“Jesus, Mitch,” Tommy says. “Ritchie can take care of himself.”

“For real, little man. You gotta take a chill pill sometimes. You want a cigarette? Could calm you down, loosen you up.”

“I’m alright,” Mitch says.

“You sure? It might help.”

“I don’t want one,” he says.

Ritchie leans back. “You Penrose boys are all the same,” with a grin at Tommy, “always doing the right thing. Probably shouldn’t be hanging with bad influences like us.”

To Mitch’s disbelief in the wake of this speech Tommy capitulates, reaching and saying, “Alright fine I’ll have one,” sharing Ritchie’s grin.

“Hooked already, huh?”

Mitch looks at his older brother crossly.

“What?” Tommy asks.

Mitch says nothing, just watches.

Tommy blinks at his kid brother for a moment and then snaps, "I'm smoking a cigarette, who cares? I had one yesterday too if you have to know. And you've got nothing to do with it so don't go running to Mom to tell on me like you're still seven years old."

Ritchie and Q, next to each other in the lounge chairs, watch the exchange with rapt glee.

"Cause you know she'd care," he says.

"Shut up Mitch, God."

"Dad would too." He counts them off on his fingers.

"They're never gonna know so what does it matter."

"Plus I care."

"Fuck you."

Mitch stares.

"Hit him, Mitch," Ritchie says, leaning forward. "He just said that and you're not gonna do anything? Hit him."

"He won't hit him," Q says.

"Hit him you pussy."

Through all Tommy stands stoically before his younger brother, a faint smile curling on his lips. His fists hang by his sides. He knows Mitch won't touch him because he knows Mitch knows what would happen if he did. Two losses, a quick one in the fight and then a long one when their parents ground the both of them. In other words a far bigger price what Tommy would pay, getting grounded but getting to kick the piss out of his tagalong little brother. Just do it, he's thinking, hit me so I can hit you, listen to Ritchie, he knows what it's like, you've gotta hit someone when you're disrespected otherwise what are you as a man and then as he's going through all this a flash cracks down and before he knows it he's on his ass looking up at the sky. Ritchie and Q leap to their feet, giddy and astounded by what they've just witnessed.

“Holy shit.”

“You actually just punched him in the face.”

“I can't believe you hit him.”

A laugh. “Outta nowhere!”

Tommy pushes himself up and flings himself at Mitch, tackles him to the ground. For an instant they are a tumble of elbows and fists and then Tommy gets the upper position, pins Mitch underneath him with his knees and starts slapping him about the face and head. “What now, Mitch?” he asks. “What now?” He hits him on the temple, “Sucker punch me when I'm not paying attention,” through gritted teeth, and hits Mitch in the side of the face with an open palm, spittle raining, while Mitch squirms and pleads, “You were, you were!” Tommy cocks back for the final blow, which rings out across the marshlands, before pushing off Mitch's body to stand. “You *are* a pussy,” he tells him.

As Tommy gets back up, Ritchie begins a slow clap. “Bravo, you two. Really, that was good. Don't you guys feel better? Tommy, don't you feel good?” Mitch lays on his back.

“Yeah,” he says, shaking.

“And Mitch. Young Mitch. Have you ever hit your brother in the mouth like that before?”

“No.”

“And how did it feel? Fantastic?”

Mitch surveys at the swamplands around him and knows if he looks in the right direction he's looking out over the bay but for the grasses and the flatness of the land he cannot see it. He looks at Tommy, breathing heavily, a swath of bright red near his mouth. Mitch's own face hurts, his body aches. Without facing Tommy or Ritchie or Q he troops to his bike and stands it and peddles off.

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His bike leans against the far side of the garage from the house as he roots around in search of a new basketball. He wishes he hadn't kicked his last one, wants it so badly tears nearly come. The closest he can find is a flat soccer ball, and pumping it full of air he recognizes the telltale thin whistle of a leak. He pumps harder, trying to outwork the leak, and at last gets it to a sufficient size and dribbles it once and to his utter dismay the ball pancakes on the ground. He sits down on the dusty garage floor next to the flattened ball and hugs his legs to his chest and he remains there a long time.

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The next morning. Tommy has neglected to join him but diligent Mitch stands on the end of the pier in the waning darkness, yanking the crab trap from the floor of the bay. As he works a tall silhouette sweeps up, joins him on the edge of the pier. Mitch sees him and says hey and continues to pull up the trap.

"Where's your brother?" the figure asks. Mitch shrugs with the rope in his hands.

"Didn't wanna wake up."

A pause as Mitch works. "You know you don't need to do this so early," the figure says.

"The crabs stay there. That's the whole point."

Mitch halts. The trap, suspended so above the surface of the bay, swings like a pendulum.

"But you said you get up first thing every morning to do it."

"Well yeah," John Paul says, "*I* do that. But that's so I can get up and fish. The crabs are still there. You guys can sleep in. Check it at noon if you want, it doesn't matter."

Mitch thinks and then resumes hoisting. Neither speaks for a moment, as Mitch brings the cage onto the dock. Once again it is empty.

"I don't get it," Mitch says. "We got like nine and then we haven't gotten any since."

JP shrugs. "That's the name of the game," he says. "Too much luck at first I guess. Just keep at it, you'll catch plenty."

"How about the chicken?"

"Looks fine. Just be patient."

They stand there silent in the dawn.

"Hey, you want to come fishing some time? Your mom said I should take you guys."

"We're grounded," Mitch informs him.

"Ah." JP grins. "What'd you do?"

"Fought."

The grin vanishes. "You and Tommy?"

"I hit him in the face," Mitch says, matter of fact.

"Well." He chews on this information. "Did he deserve it?"

"I think so," Mitch says.

Another pause before John Paul tells him, "Next time be sure." And while Mitch struggles to formulate an answer, JP leaves him on the edge of the pier.

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The debate occurs over phone. Mr. Penrose, tragically forced to work through the weekend and thus unable to fly down from the city, as planned, argues for a temporary lift of the boys' punishment. "It's the carnival, for God's sake," comes his prevailing refrain, as if this event holds a

magic that supersedes traditionally more immediate parental concerns. “They’re boys, they’re going to fight sometimes. It’s okay. It’s not like they killed each other.”

Mrs. Penrose humphs. She offers the counter-refrain, “What’s the point of the punishment, then?”

“So we can power trip,” he tells her, and laughs. The world is a joy and a joke and they’ll be fine when they’re older, why take anything seriously?

“I don’t want to take them by myself. If you met the parents you’d get it. They’re... I mean they were nice enough but trust me on this one. We are not going to be friends with them.”

“Weren’t you worried the kids were too sheltered? Send them by themselves, then. With a little cash. Say they get one day and then the punishment’s back on. I just don’t want them missing this over a little scrape. I mean, this is the sort of thing we bought the place for, right? Getting them out of New York. Some local flavor.”

“You think?” Mrs. Penrose asks. Morning light spills into her kitchen from the window overlooking the water. “It’s just a carnival.”

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The boys dismount their bikes and stash them behind a thicket as they approach the crowd. That there is a crowd is a surprise in itself—not since being down here have they seen a gathering of more than a handful, much less the hundreds that throng before them. All manner of festivities call out, booths shaded by mechanical relics, red and orange and gold, trumpeting their songs and strobing their lights and hinting at a transient world entirely beyond the boys’ fathoming.

They walk through the masses, entranced. Games and wares, games and wares, nothing isolated from the whole, it’s all one big pulsating reflection of the same thing.

"I'm gonna find Ritchie and Q," Tommy suddenly says. The past few days they speak, if at all, in fragments.

"Have fun," Mitch says, and with that his brother trundles off.

Suddenly alone, Mitch sees a booth where you can shoot basketballs to win toys and meanders to it, figuring he would leave soon. The toys, predominantly stuffed animals, do not interest him, save for a basketball he decides he wants. He steps up to the booth and asks the man running it what he needs to do to get the ball.

"It's ten shots for five dollars, and depending how many you make there are different prize tiers. The basketball you'd need seven." The man stinks, needs a shave.

"Can you make change for a fifty?" Mitch asks, and the guy grumbles as he takes the bill. Mitch practices his shooting stroke while he waits. As he mimics the motion he gets tapped on his shoulder, with a, "Hey." Q stands there, gives him a head nod.

"Hey," Mitch says, and he takes his change from the man and slips it into his pocket. "My brother was looking for you guys."

"Oh, really? I was just getting out of here. Ritchie just saw Justine with Michael and is losing his mind. Seriously pissed. I don't wanna be here when they get into it. His friends are egging him on."

Mitch stands behind the indicated line, picks up a ball. "You think they will?" He shoots, scores. The balls tumble towards him.

"Oh yeah. They already did once. Ritchie got his ass beat though, which is why he got the knife. But he wouldn't admit that. But I know that's why he got it."

"But he's just gonna let the guy know he has it, right?"

After a beat Q says, "Well I'm leaving either way."

Mitch finishes shooting. He's gone six for ten, one shy of getting the ball he needs. "I'll see you, then," he says, and goes to pay for another ten shots.

Q remains standing there. As Mitch reaches into his pocket for another five Q blurts, "You wanna come play basketball by the school?"

Mitch looks at him.

"I still have your ball from the other day. I've been trying to practice a little."

"You got my ball?"

"I figured you'd want it at some point," Q shrugs. "And I was thinking I've got the summer to get better to maybe try out for the school team this year. But who knows, I probably won't."

Mitch looks at the game he's playing and back to Q. "Yeah, alright," he says. He scans the crowd quickly, doesn't see Tommy or Ritchie or any faces he knows, doesn't see a reason to stay. He looks back at Q and tells him, "I can show you some moves, if you want."