

Peas & Q's

by Randy A. Paris

That twig I'd kicked look like a toothpick. Ten feet, maybe twelve feet below me. But it sure seemed like a lot more when you were looking down than looking up.

When the yelling from the kitchen started, it wasn't anything new those days, but it broke the spell of the twig ; My mom and sister going at it again. Any minute my sister would burst through the kitchen screen door. We had a front door but we never used it. We all went through the kitchen door, even when we were escaping. I'd blasted through it just the night before.

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I was sure my mom was going to tell him about my day the minute he got in, probably not even letting him get his first Rainier out of the fridge. She'd been that mad. But no one yelled for me or came out after me. It was going to be one of those other "wait til your dad gets home" situations.

He'd pulled into his gravelly parking spot off the alley right under my hiding perch and went into the house with his usual white paper wrapped package of left over meat just like every other work day. He was a butcher at the IGA over in Everett. And then nothing.

Mom was usually in charge of bawling out and whipping. If you were in for a spanking, it would happen on the spot, unless you were in public. But she'd passed this one to my dad. "Wait 'til your dad gets home" meant he could do just about anything at any time, from punch you in the leg to make you trim the yard with scissors. Sometimes it would be as soon as he got home. But when it wasn't there was no telling when it was coming; he could wait days to let you stew before telling you to go stand in the rain with a bucket until it was full. Unless it was my big sister. She was way older than the other three of us and too big for spanking. But she was still always catching some kind of hell from them. And more and more by then she would just storm out after daring them to hit her.

I'd stayed up there in my tree 'til mom yelled 'dinner' through the screen door, meaning whoever wasn't in the house better get in pronto, potential execution waiting or not.

My big brother came in from the alley somewhere. My little sister had probably just been in her room sucking the face of her raggedy old doll. My big sister was 'out'. It wasn't unusual for her to be somewhere else at dinner, probably at her friend Tamara's.

We might've been sitting down to dinner, but that didn't mean something couldn't happen. Just a couple of weeks before, my brother got his face smashed into his mashed potatoes and gravy.

It wasn't hard, just quick. Just enough to stucco his face. My old man reached out like he was going for the salt, but suddenly changed direction and pushed Andy's face right down into his plate, right into his pork chop gravy and smashed spuds. Even though you knew stuff could happen out of the blue, it could still surprise you. My little sister was trying to feed her doll. It was so quick all she saw of it was Andy peeling his face off his plate. She laughed and pointed, showing him to the empty face of her doll. She'd sucked the eyes off it ages ago. My mom raised her eyebrows at him like he should've expected it.

To his credit, my brother didn't say a word. He just squeegeed the mashed potatoes off his face with his fingers and ate them as if that's how he always took them. Then my dad really did reach for the salt. It was the way Andy was leaning down to his plate to shovel peas into his mouth that'd earned him the face plant, but it could've just as easily been something from weeks before. Whatever it was, sentence had been carried out and we kept eating.

When he ran away once, a cop found him by a highway somewhere. When the cop asked him his name he said "Pudintane. Ask me again I'll tell you the same". When he finally gave it up, Pudintane got the bucket in the rain.

But now it was my turn and the clock was ticking to an unknown fate. So I kept my head up all through dinner after stupidly waffling about getting out of my tree. I tried to show I knew how to use my fork and knife with precision, scooped my creamed corn against my

Peas & Q's

thumb just like my dad, and listened to every word, even the usual complaint coming from the mashed potato kid about not being allowed to print with his left hand at school. At the mention of school, I held my breath, thinking this was it. But again, nothing.

When dinner was over it was over; my brother and sister went to the front room, my dad went to sit in the bathroom and fill it with smoke. A couple of of sawdust coated hamburger clumps fell out of his khaki pants cuffs on the way. I picked them up and then helped my mom clear the table and get it ready for poker night. My dad and some of his buddies played cards in our kitchen sometimes. If there was any chance she hadn't told him yet, so as not to ruin his mood for the game, I thought I might still earn a reprieve through my helpfulness.

"Aren't we minding our P's and Q's tonight," she said as I reached for the big ashtray on the shelf. I was on a step stool on tip toes and couldn't turn to see if she was giving me some kind of wink or hint. When I got down she'd turned to wiping down the fridge. I didn't dare ask her about it.

There was always a lot of laughing and glass clinking and smoke in the kitchen on poker night. By the time it got going, I was trying to be out of sight and out of mind, not seen and not heard, sitting like a piece of furniture on the front room floor by the radio. I tried to forget about my mom's potential hint by getting lost in one of those suspense programs. The guy who did most of the talking 'knew many things, for he walked by night'. After a while the noises of poker night coming from the kitchen started to sound like part of the background noise coming with the program. The guy with the dark voice was talking like he was inside the head of a vivacious, buxom young woman in a bar, reading her thoughts and urging her to decide how to deal with some tight jam she was in with a gangster, trying to get her to take care of it once and for all. And then someone yelled, like a fight was going to break out in the background of the bar. The guy was still urging the girl, but the yell covered what he was saying, "Hawkeye!". That was me. The nick-name only my dad used. "Hawkeye, get yer butt in here."

This was it. It was going to be a public execution.

It was still warm enough in early September that they were all in their undershirts by the time I was called to my reckoning. My old man and his friends were jammed around our little kitchen table, sitting in a haze of cigarette smoke. The table's grey stringy pattern, an aimless wandering strand under our dinner plates now looked like a spider's web under the bottles, glasses, cards, stacks of poker chips and the big green ashtray I'd set out, now full of cigarette butts.

"There he is", my dad's friend Cody declared when I got to the doorway, like I was being introduced to an audience. "The man of the hour". They were elbow to elbow, Higs, next to Cody, raking in chips. My dad's back was to me, he turned sideways to signal me in from where I'd stopped. His buddies grinned like I was about to perform a song or magic trick for them. My mom had her back to the scene, busy in the alcove where the wringer washer lived doing something I couldn't see.

It was one of those moments where you wonder why the guy who's going to get shot by a firing squad would willingly walk up to his wall and stand tall, or the hangee would obligingly step up on the stool that he knows is going to be kicked out from under him and then lower his head to make it easier for the hangman to slip on the noose. There was no getting out of it, so if they went along, it might go smoothly and quickly and not hurt as much.

So I played my part. When I got to him, my dad reached around my waist tilting his head to one side so the smoke from his cigarette wouldn't get in his eyes. I focused on the letters printed inside the gold circle trade mark of his cigarette. They were all capitals, one word above the other; LUCKY STRIKE .

In my mind I heard: *Ready.*

As my dad said: "You had a big day today, you should celebrate".

Aim.

"Here," he said, handing me a glass of something that looked like brown water, but not murky.

Peas & Q's

By my 'big day' he meant my 1st day of school. The day I'd been trying to pretend didn't happen when I was playing in the ditch in front of our house, that I'd left on the ground when I climbed my tree, and that I thought I'd almost escaped by getting lost inside that radio show.

We lived in Marysville then. It was the only place I'd been consciously aware of living, even though I was told I was born in Seattle. Up until my 'big day', as long as I stayed out of the street and electric sockets, I'd pretty much been on a self-guided introductory tour of life in a place as far removed from the metropolis of Seattle's big P-I globe as Smallville was from the Daily Planet's.

When weather allowed, I took my toys into the yard or climbed trees or explored the neighbors' gardens and garages. When it rained, I put on my yellow rubber rain coat and hat, pulled on my black rubber boots with the flashy red trim and kept going, adding mud puddles into the mix.

Marysville was the kind of place you would've probably called bucolic in those days, as if someone's great grandmother pioneer named Mary had founded it so they put her name on the water tower in the town square.

Mary's village had a creek to catch frogs and go skinny dipping. It had an empty field for the high school baseball and football teams and where a traveling carnival set up for a few days during the strawberry festival. We had big grass-filled ditches instead of sidewalks between our gravelly side streets and front yards. Our alleys were Oregon trail-like wheel ruts between our back yards. Some people had tarpaper-roofed garages for their cars and some just had old dried up or falling down wood planked shacks, some with old dried up cars stuck in them. Others, like us, just had a graveled bare spot under a tree.

We'd supposedly moved to Marysville a few years before my 'big day'. But I didn't remember that; as far as I knew I'd always lived in Marysville. And I spent most of that time - climbing around in those garages, in the ditch in front of our house, up the tree in our back yard, or stomping through puddles. I could hang from tree limbs, fight skirmishes with plastic soldiers, or excavate a popsicle stick bridge across our front yard ditch with my all metal Tonka road grader for the better part of any day.

Until that 'big day'. The day my P's and Q's weren't minded. The day that had come to this moment in the kitchen.

I took the glass with both hands. It wasn't cold and it wasn't hot. It could be tap water if it wasn't brown and smell kind've funny. I was totally stymied. I had no idea what was going on. My dad had his own ways. Anything could happen. What was it? Could it be the castor oil I kept seeing on the old black and white Little Rascals shows? Where their eyes would bulge and they'd screw up their faces and then run out of the room screaming from just a spoonful? Was castor oil brown? But this wasn't a spoon, it was a glass. Had my big day been that bad?

Mom had to drag me by my coat shoulder. I'd gone along grudgingly at first. I told myself I could do it. My brother had done it for two years already, and he was still left handed. My older sister had been doing it as long as I could remember and she hadn't shriveled up and died, she was even getting prettier, though she'd started getting into more trouble with my folks these days.

But the closer we got to the building the more anxious I started getting. And when we got to the actual door of my assigned room, I dug in my heels. Despite what hadn't happened to my brother and sister, going through that door was still going to change everything for me. I was feral. I wasn't meant for rooms.. I could sit half a day in my tree, but I wasn't going to be able to sit through even ten minutes in a school room. I knew it in my bones. I tried to turn around, but at the first hint of the move, my mom clenched my coat shoulder like a vice-grip. She'd been waiting. Her look told me I'd have to rip the coat off my back to get away. If I escaped the first grade, I'd do it in rags and maybe even without an arm.

She pulled me though the door behind her. We were late. They were all already distributed around the room. Every one of them my exact same size, except one. And they all turned to look at us at the same time. At me.

Peas & Q's

The big one, the one much older than my mom, got up from sitting at one of the clumps of other kids. I only recognized a few of them from kid places like the swing rope over Allen's Creek. Where had all the rest come from?

She smiled and crossed to us. My mom clamped down even harder, nearly cutting the circulation off in my arm.

"This must be Randy," she said, smiling down at me. I turned my attention to the red and yellow squares of the floor. How did she know my name?

"He's shy", my mom said. "Maybe you should leave him in his coat for awhile. Until he gets settled."

"Certainly," she held her hand out to me, putting it between my line of sight and the floor. "Shall we go sit down, Randy?"

My mom leaned down to me. It might've looked like she was giving me a kiss on my cheek, as if parting with me for the first time. But really she was whispering in a deadly serious tone, "Go with her... and mind your P's and Q's".

She straightened herself and then pushed my shoulder toward the old lady, like she was offering the handle she'd made in my coat. But she loosened her grip when the lady kept offering her hand to me. "Go," my mom commanded.

I took the old lady's hand. It was bony and cold. She led me across the shiny harlequin linoleum back to the clot she'd been sitting with.

"Thank you, mom." she said settling herself back into her big wooden chair, putting me in a little red one right next to her. All the eyes in the room were on me. A room full of kids, quiet as a desert. It was unnatural. My mom clearly didn't like being dismissed. I hoped for a second she would march across the room to take me back. But she didn't. She left. She'd put on nylons and a dress just to hand me over and leave.

It wasn't long after she'd gone that I stopped minding my P's and Q's and started throwing them, along with every other letter in the alphabet. And I kicked or punched anybody who dared try to disarm me, including the old lady. I swore every swear word I'd heard at home and threw the number blocks, too, most of them more than once. When I ran out of ammunition I ran for the door so many times the old lady had to lock it. Eventually my mom was called back to take me home, putting a permanent handle in my coat shoulder.

That was my big day. My first day of school when I'd launched my P's & Q's instead of minding them. The day we'd been waiting until my dad got home to punish me for.

When the poker party started, my dad seemed to be in a good mood. He was usually in a good mood before he was in a bad one when he started drinking. And by then he was usually yelling at my mom or big sister. So when I got called into the poker game I was still harboring a little hope that I might've beat the rap through lucky timing or not being my sister. He was smiling. His buddies were smiling. And then he handed me that glass. He had his arm around me, so I wasn't going anywhere. I looked at each face around the table.

Cody, the guy who announced me, had hair like Clark Gable and was really stocky on top from having to walk with crutches. They were the short aluminum kind with the clips that hooked on his forearms, like the kids in the polio posters. They were leaning up against his chair. His smile said, go ahead, it'll be fun. Higs, the guy to his right, who was raking in his winnings when I got to the doorway, whose real name was Everett, like the bigger town across the slew from Marysville where my dad's IGA was, had a butch haircut like my brother. His smile was a kind of dare. The guy on the other side of Cody was Chuck. He was big and took up almost the whole side of the table. Whenever I saw Chuck I always heard the ditty my dad would sometimes chant. - Anxious as I was, it still started up -

'How much wood would a wood chuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood.'

He had a ruddy, puffy face and thin stringy hair combed straight across the top of his head. His grin made his woodchuck cheeks even puffier.

My mom turned around when the sound of chips and poker talking stopped.

Her eyes didn't have anticipation or encouragement or much of anything in them. They were more like whatever was going to happen had already happened and she was wondering when I'd realize it.

Peas & Q's

When the liquid hit my tonsils, it was like fire riding on sandpaper. My face and eyes must've signaled my reaction before the rest of me caught up, because the buddies at the table had already started hooting like banshees before I dropped the glass. I clutched my throat and tried to cough and spit out the fire. Chuck slapped the table so hard some of his chips bounced off. Grown men with hair poking from the armpits and neck holes of their old style undershirts, were screaming like opera singers. Even the big green ashtray started bouncing, spilling cigarette butts and ashes. My brother joined in from the doorway. My little sister screamed from the front room. My mom's face seemed to float in the alcove like it might have been the face of the wringer-washer monster disturbed enough to take a look.

Before I could escape for the nearest fire hose, my dad scooped me up and grumbled at me, "mumble, mumble, garble" like he was delivering the verbal half of my lesson. He was talking out of the side of his mouth, like a gangster, but my ears were filled with the same flames as my throat by then. The smoke from the cigarette still between his lips stung his eyes so he had to put me down before he wanted to.

I was out the kitchen's back door the second my feet touched down, whatever he was saying just wooly noise behind me. The yard hose started off warm before getting cold enough to give any relief from the bourbon. I must've stayed out there an hour just letting it wash my throat before I even dared to swallow. I cried in my tree 'til long after the poker party ended.

My mom opened the kitchen door and called me in with "that's enough moping, you've got school tomorrow".

I climbed down and sulked passed her, not getting the usual tap I'd get on the back of my head going through a door she was holding. There was no sympathy from my bedmate brother either, curled with his butt toward me. My little sister sucked on her doll's face on the other side of our room. Everything was normal, except my throat had been scorched and my entire world had changed.

This next morning, I was already up my tree by the time my dad got up for work. I didn't want to look at him across the kitchen/poker/breakfast table.

I knew that tree better than the local squirrels. I'd been on or hung from almost every limb below the high one I was on now. Sometimes it was like I had a compulsion to scramble up it and then just climb down and go about whatever else occurred to me. Other times I would sit in it and wonder if I could catch a wind and fly out of it like Superman. -

I tried to sense if I had some special organ for defying gravity. Maybe like the flying squirrels they'd had on the Disneyland TV show. If anything could happen, why not that? And if any morning was going to be a good one for flying, maybe even flying away, why not this one? When I reached the high limb, I looked down. I looked at the twig. It seemed really far away. That's when Deanna exploded out the kitchen's back door. She must've come home last night after I went to bed, even though I didn't hear any yelling.

Whether I came from Krypton or not, or had squirrel blood in me, she definitely came at the world from an entirely different angle than I did.

I'd been dragged to my first day of compulsory socialization with feet kicking and alphabet blocks flying, but she had embraced the whole thing with hugs and kisses... literally. Puberty had landed on her like an anvil on a cartoon coyote. Her developing womanhood was pointed straight at their targets thanks to the bra and sweater styles back then. And the rock n roll craze was pouring more gas on her fire ever day.

She was born before the war started. My mom raised her in rented rooms and temporary stays with extended barely relatives while my dad was a Marine off in the Pacific. They'd started off in California near his training place and somehow ended up in Marysville when it was all over. When my dad talked about being in the war, he usually tried to make it sound like he'd been on a tropical beer blast with machine guns thrown in for fun. But my mom only said that she was on trains with my sister a lot. Her stories were always about hard work surrounded by hungry, dirty men and animals back on the North Dakota farm she'd grown up on.

My dad could blow his top at anything, including how my brother ate his peas, but he really exploded over the boys my sister dated. They were usually older than her. He didn't like

Peas & Q's

their long greasy hair and he knew 'what they wanted'. When my mom yelled at her it was for the trouble she could get in. Her life was going to be a nightmare if she kept going out with those kind of boys. Even at my age I understood she was dangerously pretty, but I thought the danger was for the boys that buzzed around her.

For a while when my folks yelled at her she would just take it, but lately, especially when they ganged up on her -, she'd started giving it right back. She'd learned the art from their own mouths, so there were never any clear winners when that happened; they'd end in stalemate by fatigue with at least one door slamming.

The post war three of us other kids had quickly learned to put all the yelling in the background. Door slams were a sort of 'all clear' signal for us to try to relax the barrier around whatever activity or sleep we'd erected when we ducked into our personal bomb shelters. Sometimes it was my sister's bedroom door slamming. Sometimes it was my parents'. Sometimes it was the back door out of the kitchen. Pre-dinner kitchen door slams usually meant we wouldn't see Deanna until the next day after she'd spent most of the night at her friend Tamara's down the street-. If she'd been intercepted heading out for a date with one of the always unacceptable boys, whether she came home between the date and the night at Tamara's before going to school depended on whether her books and Pee-Chees had been within reach when she escaped. Each screen door slam seemed like a test launch for the day when Deanna and her ballistic breasts would be shot into the world for good.

That morning it happened while I was wondering if I could fly. I was so absorbed by the thought and the twig that I was surprised by the burst of yelling and the whack and rebound of the screen door. She was in new red pedal pushers and a fuzzy fake cashmere short sleeve sweater top, with her arms full of her books and Pee-Chees. She stopped right under me and just stood for a long moment before turning to face the back door again.

"You could've stopped him if you really wanted to! He's only six, for god sakes!" And then she stormed into the alley.

Along with her artillery shell breasts, I think her teenaged hormones might have been giving her some kind of minimal maternal instincts. Maybe I was just the right age or size or gender for them to land on me instead of my little sister or big brother. But whatever caused it, she'd given me a pet name and pretended that we were a special sub-unit of our clan and would sometimes include me in her activities. It was like I was a sort of occasionally remembered doll from her traveling childhood, her live version of the faceless thing my little sister would bring to dinner to eat with us.

It was as unpredictable, momentary and sporadic as all the other things that could happen at any time in my house, and no match for her drive to rub on boys. But it seemed real when it appeared and I enjoyed receiving it whenever and for however long it occurred, even if it could turn on a dime. With four kids, a wringer washer nemesis and a hot tempered husband, my mom just didn't seem to have much of that kind of energy left.

She'd even taken me to the carnival during the annual strawberry festival that year - strawberry farms surrounded Marysville then and it was a rite of passage for local teenagers to pick strawberries for spending money. The festival had a parade and a strawberry queen, so it only made perfect sense that there'd be a carnival too.

Deanna and a couple of her girlfriends had strawberry money burning holes in their pockets and purses and were going to the carnival one night. At the last moment, Deanna insisted I be allowed to come with them. I'd been watching the carnival workers putting up the rides and games and show tents all day and I was pestering everybody with my reports.

At first I was just tagging along behind them, but I couldn't keep the pace so I ended up getting hoisted up to ride on her friend Tamara's shoulders. Tamara was big enough to play on the high school football team.

The moment I got up there the full force of the carnival lights came alive. It was like all the Christmas tree lights in the world had been strung in one dusty ball field onto all kinds of hopping, spinning, whirling, and flipping things. The air above the field glowed like some hazy dome and strange musical tones drifted in and out with the light breeze. Between the comfortable warmth of the night, the smell of shampoo from Tamara's head, the looming lights,

Peas & Q's

the hubbub of machinery noises, gongs, whizzes and whirs from the carnival, and the bouncing rhythm of my ride, and probably all the anticipation I'd built up watching each contraption and tent being assembled in the day, I was transported into a kind of altered state. The closer we came the louder it got and the more its otherworldly nature was revealed.. There was some kind of organ puffing raspy, happy notes into a soundscape full of shrieks, bells, gongs, amplified drones and barks, and a mixture of smells that defied separation.

I saw people throwing softballs at stacked milk bottles that clanked but didn't break or all fall down. People pitching coins toward an island crowded with shallow colorful ceramic and glass dishes and ashtrays only to watch them bounce out and slide into a collection tarp stretched underneath, and others were throwing darts at balloons that seemed to slip out of the way of the points headed directly at them, and there were columns and columns of stuffed animal prizes ranging from palm size to adult dimensions. Whirling, flashing rides took their voluntary victims' screams away and brought them back again in an unending cycle of doppler shifts.

Then I was dropped back to earth, plucked from my panoramic view on Tamara's shoulders and deposited on the straw that'd been scattered over the ball field. My chaperones were going off in search of boys and their own excitement. Deanna gave me \$3 of her strawberry money, which was about a half day's worth of picking, so it was definitely worth it to her for me to detach at that point. But it was okay. I'd got the lay of the land and was ready to go.

- My only problem was that I was too small to participate in most of the fun I'd witnessed. I couldn't get on the rides and no one would trust me with darts or baseballs or BB guns.

And that was the glory of it for the hawker when I managed to land a dime in the middle of a big green ashtray while the slippery silver coins of Elvis lookalikes, loggers and buzz-cut recruits back from basic training bounced out of their targets into the tarp under the toss game. When my dime slid into the middle of the ashtray, he hoisted me up by my armpits and announced "we have a winnah!" making a big show of depositing me on the ledge I'd barely been able to reach over with my toss. With the flourish of a son of Barnum he plucked the giant ashtray from deep in the mix of impossible landing zones and presented it to me as if I'd won the Kentucky Derby.

"Well done little man, you are a winnah! Now what's he got that you ain't got?" As abruptly as I was coronated, I was once again back in the straw, but this time clutching my big green ashtray like a holy relic. The hawker shaming his testosterone fueled audience into a squall of new dime throws.

Undaunted, a winner among the kneecaps of losers, I took my giant ashtray and headed for the sideshow to see the bearded lady and, with any luck, a headless man. But I was between 'teases' and all the action was apparently going on inside the tent behind the stage. The images on the canvas backdrop of the tease stage promised - viewings of women with more than beards to show off, like tattoos that promised to go all the way down their backs, ducking under loose robes draped on big round hips. A man in a suit and hat stood with folded arms at the entry slit of the tent and his look made it clear there would be no getting around him even if I had the price of a ticket, a rare trophy from the game alley and an impish smile.

Eventually I ended up back at the dime toss where I was allowed to throw away the rest of my payoff strawberry money, dime by dime, without even a nod of recognition from the barker who'd declared me a 'winnah' with such fanfare.

Deanna ended up going out with one of the carneys, as she called him. I think she said his job involved that sideshow somehow. This had gotten her into her biggest blow up with my parents yet, so leaving me alone on the midway and my coming back with a big green ashtray prize became the asterisk moment of that night. My trophy was put up with all the other glass dishes on the kitchen shelf as if it were somehow just being returned to its usual place.

When I launched myself from the high limb, I thought she'd gone to school. But either she heard me hit or had been coming back with another yell for the kitchen door when I dropped out of the tree. I guess we were both lucky I hit the ground.

Peas & Q's

When I came to, gasping for air, Deanna was hovering over me like an apparition from a Sears catalog; a teen model with a white kerchief twisted around her neck that I hadn't noticed from above. When I recognized her I wondered why there were clouds behind her, but then I remembered it was the second day of school, the morning after my big gulp, and she had just come out the back door in her new school clothes, and had yelled at the house and stormed off. And now she was above me with her head framed by clouds.

Despite my outstretched arms and almost desperate desire, I hadn't soared into a new existence, but simply belly flopped as Newton would have predicted, -so that my whole body landed flat at the same time - fingertips to toes. If there was any oxygen left in me after I pancaked, it was only in my blood stream. My lungs felt completely emptied. When I opened my mouth it was for one reason only - not to scream or cry - but to suck in as much air as I could. But I couldn't. It was like I was trying to suck air from an empty thermos bottle. I started reverse panting. Somehow I'd rolled over onto my back. I was a cartoon goldfish spilled onto a linoleum floor. None of my gasping was enough. The angel-model in the form of my sister was trying to tell me to relax, but that was the last thing I wanted. I added flailing to my gasping.

It all seemed to be strangely slow and clear, though. It looked like she was screaming toward the kitchen back door, but I couldn't hear it. My mom and brother ran out in slo-motion. My little sister appeared as a still photo behind the screen door clutching her threadbare empty-faced doll. My brother and mom's heads appeared behind the angel-model, hovering over her shoulders along with the clouds.

After an eternity that was more likely a minute, I heard my mom pronounce me "all right" with "just the wind knocked out" of me. It started in a fog and became more clear as she said it. I'd just fallen out of my tree. She'd seen it dozens of times before in her childhood on the farm, she said. She'd had 8 or 15 brothers and they'd all had the wind knocked out of them at one time or another one way or another. One was even kicked by a horse. As long as I was gasping and flailing, trying to breathe with all my might, I would be ok.

That was all my brother needed to know. I wasn't dying and I wasn't bleeding from anywhere that could be seen, so there was nothing really going on to stay for. My mom stood up and headed back to the house, without acknowledging Deanna in any way, as if she hadn't just stormed out and cursed at her. My brother had waited at the screen door for her, just in case, and followed her back through it. Kneeling next to me, Deanna didn't budge.

She stayed with me until I was done with everything but my whimpers. She didn't say anything. She just sat with me. When she got up, there were grass stains on her knees. She tried to brush them away, but they stayed. She realized she'd have to go back in the house to change.

After she gathered her books and folders, before going back into the house, she said, "You have to go to school, Poncho. Just like me and Andy do. That's how it is now. You're growing up."

At the door, she looked back before going in. It looked like she was going to say something, but she didn't. The screen door bounced shut behind her and I waited for the yelling to start again. But that didn't happen either. Things seemed suspended.

I laid there in the cool patchy grass, flat under my backyard tree for a while longer, just breathing and staring up at the clouds.

I was going to wait until my mom yelled out the back door. Just a few more minutes of the way it used to be.