

T. M. McNALLY

Quick

1

If you looked, up through the dusk to the ledge of a small hill, you would see two boys. The boys are late for supper and collecting golf balls. Howie, the youngest, will turn eleven tomorrow night. "At midnight," he says. "October 15th."

Lucas points at a muddy ball half buried in the grass. "That's a dud," Lucas says, who is sixteen. "It's old."

Howie reaches for it, anyway, and drops it into his suitcase. His suitcase is chartreuse, which means it once belonged to their mother. Because Lucas has a bone disease, he is not allowed to carry heavy objects. He wears a mask with an elastic band to keep germs from going in his mouth. Also, he is not allowed to drink from anybody's glass. Tonight they will have supper in the hotel restaurant, and Howie will order Chicken Teriyaki with Pineapple Sauce and a Chocolate Milkshake. As long as he finishes his plate, he is allowed to order milkshakes. Last night, he had Strawberry, and Lucas couldn't finish his Taco Salad.

Mr. Bently works for the government. Because of the hospitals in Phoenix, the *family* decided he should take a new post. Here he is going to monitor a corporation which fills a number of almost top secret defense contracts.

Since Reagan became president, just a couple years ago, the corporation has stopped laying people off, which means *firing*. Mr. Bently was in the army and went to Korea, where he learned to fire howitzers. "What's good for the government," Mr. Bently says, usually at dinner, "is good for us."

Now, because of the hot weather, he can wear his ties and white shirts with *short* sleeves. Mrs. Bently says their father is conservative, meaning the way he dresses. Since Lucas became sick, Mrs. Bently says grace before they eat, even in restaurants, and soon they will be permitted to move into their new house. They were supposed to move in yesterday, but the moving van broke down in Oklahoma. Inside the moving van are Howie's new hockey uniform and sled, and Lucas's *Encyclopedia of America*, and all their parents' furniture.

But now the two boys are standing on the ledge of a small hill where it is still possible to see them both. The sun is setting all around them, and Lucas says, looking at the chartreuse suitcase, which once belonged to their mother, "How many we got?"

"Bout a thousand."

"We haven't got a thousand."

"Well, we've got a lot. Here," Howie says,

handing Lucas the suitcase. "Feel."

2

Neither knows very much about the sport of golf. While their parents have been kept busy settling matters for their new home, the boys have started lessons. Chip, who is tan and used to be a pro, likes to drink beer. He takes the boys to the practice range for thirty dollars an hour and says, "Golf is hard. Keep your eye on the ball."

Then he says, "Good swing."

They are staying at Golden Hills Country Club, because the hills are all golden. Actually, says Chip, the grass is badly watered, but in the distance you can see the Superstition Mountains. Even if it doesn't go anywhere, Howie likes to hit the ball, but Lucas is very serious. He wants to get the basics just right. Then, he says, he will move on to putting. Already Lucas has asked for his own set of clubs. Now Lucas wiggles his fingers and adjusts his grip, shifts his shoulders, greets the ball. He stops and turns to yell at Howie.

"Stop watching!" Lucas yells.

"I'm learning," Howie says. "Right Chip?"

"Keep your eye on the ball," Chip says.

"I can't concentrate," Lucas says.

"You have to keep your eye on the ball,"

Howie says.

Lucas can't swing very hard, but still he makes the ball sail.

Chip gives off a low whistle. "You hooked that one, Luke."

"Lucas," Lucas says. "Is that good?"

"I want to play hockey," Howie says. "I hate golf."

"You slice some and you hook some," Chip says, sadly. "You learn to compensate."

And then Lucas falls down. He falls down on the yellow grass and doesn't let go of his club. He is lying on the grass, breathing hard; he tears off his mask and wipes his eyes. Finally, he sits up, his thin arms shaking, because of the disease inside his body. He sits up and says to Howie, "Well, did you hit anything?"

Now Howie lifts up his club, like a hockey stick, and takes a shot. Then he takes another. Now he is swinging at the dirt. He is swinging at the dirt over and over until his rented club breaks right in half.

3

One night, now that he is eleven, Howie overhears his parents' conversation. His parents are sitting up late at the round table in the kitchen Mrs. Bently keeps her books on and all the bills. The kitchen is also full of boxes waiting to be unpacked. Howie hears his parents say the words *bone* and *marrow* and *transplant*.

Later, alone in bed, he understands precisely what they mean. Lucas needs a *narrow bone*. One to replace the one that has gone bad and

made him sick. Usually, Lucas is in the hospital bed, where the nurses talk to him a lot and give him apple juice. When you visit, you have to wear plastic gloves, and you aren't allowed to have a cold or a baby. In the hospital, Lucas's new golf clubs are standing by his night stand, along with cards from all his classmates back in Wisconsin. When Howie goes to school, he walks all by himself. Always before he had to ride a bus. Now he walks to school and has a green book bag his mother gave him for his birthday; blue is his favorite color, but they were out. His mother also gave him a cowboy hat and a golf shirt, which was supposed to be from Lucas. Then they spent a lot of time driving a borrowed golf cart.

The first day at school, Howie wore his golf shirt and cowboy hat. On his way there, two eighth graders stopped him on the corner of Cholla and 68th. The eighth graders took his hat and stepped on it and called him names. Then Howie went home and watched TV shows about doctors and presidents of corporations and women who owned boutiques; he ironed parts of his hat, to fix the creases, and then he used bleach to get the dirt out. The bleach made parts of the hat white and splotchy. He hung the hat up in his closet, to dry, and when Mrs. Bently came home, she asked him to put away the ironing board. Then she called the school to explain his absence.

Now at school, Mrs. Zuniga, his teacher,

gives him lots of books to read and sends him to the library during Reading; apparently, it is too late in the semester for Howie to join a group. The Bluebirds are the smartest, and all girls, but Mrs. Zuniga says he is too far ahead of his class, anyway. Actually, he should be in the next grade. She is going to have to have a talk with Mrs. Bently and the principal, and in the library, Howie sits next to a short girl with a crew cut. Sometimes, she punches him in the arm, and sometimes she ignores him.

"I'm new," she says to him one day. "What's your name?"

"Howie."

"Do you like to read?"

"It's okay."

"Do you like to play baseball?"

"Sure," Howie says. He looks up at the librarian, who is frowning. His mother is a librarian, too; he thinks this lady should be nice to him. He says, "I play lots of baseball."

Actually Lucas plays baseball; Howie, hockey. This way, they don't have to compete. But now they both just swing golf clubs, because Lucas is too tired to walk around all the holes, and there is no ice nearby to skate on. Howie says, feeling the muscle in his arm, "Actually, I like golf."

"Your brother has cancer, doesn't he?"

"He's okay. They're going to give him a narrow bone transplant."

The girl punches him in the arm again and says, "Does that hurt?"

"No."

"My name's Melanie," she says, rolling up her sleeve. Now she flexes her arm and says, "Go ahead. Punch me back."

After he punches her back, the librarian takes him by the neck. She lifts him up from his chair and says, "You. To the office."

Now, at night, with Lucas in his hospital bed in downtown Phoenix, Howie has his choice of two bunks. And sometimes Howie thinks Melanie could be his girlfriend, if he liked girls. Lucas likes girls. In Wisconsin, before he got sick, Lucas would talk to them on the phone for hours, especially Lynda Fritag. Lucas said Lynda Fritag wasn't *easy*. Sometimes, when Howie used to be difficult, Mr. Bently practiced on the rowing machine, and Mrs. Bently spent a lot of time explaining things. But Howie hasn't been difficult since they moved to Arizona, and when he punched Melanie in the arm, in the library, she didn't even flinch. He knew that she could punch him harder; her arm was hard and had a muscle. Then the Principal was too busy to see Howie, so Howie spoke with his secretary instead. She was a nice lady and asked him if he'd like to go to the nurse. The nurse gave him an empty bed to lie on so he could read all by himself. And at home, lying awake, switching from one bunk to the other, Howie tells himself someday he'll fall asleep. Sometimes he hears his mother, crying, and then he puts his hand on his wrist, or his thumb, and tries very hard to

hold his breath.

4

Mr. Bently spends a lot of time rowing in the backyard. Sometimes, he goes a couple miles. Once, before they moved, he and Howie had a conversation. A donor, Mr. Bently explained, is somebody who gives you something, but it's not enough merely to give. You also have to receive. Then Mr. Bently explained why they were going to move to Phoenix; he said it was going to be a new life. There were cactus, he said. And maybe they could have a swimming pool. He said, spreading out his arms, "The Wild West. We'll be cowboys!"

"Can we get a pony?"

Of course pets weren't allowed, at least not until Lucas could take his mask off. Then they'd have to start out small, maybe a new family hamster, or a very short dog. In the meantime, the doctors had to find Lucas someone who was *compatible*.

This weekend, Lucas is home to visit. He sits on the La-z-boy by all the boxes still unpacked. He is covered in a blanket, to keep the bones from showing. Mrs. Bently carried him into the house without even breathing hard. Howie carried in the golf clubs. Then Mrs. Bently asked Lucas if he'd like some ice cream. Maybe he wanted to watch some TV with Howie?

They sat for a while watching TV, but Lucas didn't like to have the sound on. It hurt his

head, he said. Sometimes he moaned, and sometimes he just started crying. He didn't have any hair anymore and wore a hat so people wouldn't notice. Sometimes, Howie helped Mrs. Bently fix Lucas Kool-Aid, grape or cherry, and Lucas would drink a little before he threw it all up in the pan beside the chair. He was supposed to brush his teeth, after, but all his teeth were falling out, so he didn't bother anymore. Sometimes Howie held the pan closer, so Lucas wouldn't have to reach, but it was hard not to breathe in the smell.

"This is the give part," Howie said.

"Shut up."

Later that night, after his parents are asleep, Howie can't sleep all by himself. He misses the noises his brother used to make, too. Now there is only the noise Howie makes breathing, and he can't hear that if he's breathing; sometimes he rolls in bed and rearranges all the covers. Now he climbs out of bed, trying not to hide, and steps into the living room. Lucas is sitting in the chair wide awake. You can see him by the light of the TV, which is on, and almost blue. He is staring at the stucco on the ceiling, and Howie says, tugging on his pajamas, "Lucas?"

"What."

"You awake?"

"No."

"Can I watch? I mean the dirty parts. I won't tell Mom."

Lucas slides over in his huge chair. He looks

at the arm and says, "Don't tell Mom."

"I said I wouldn't."

Later, Howie fixes popcorn in the microwave, and Lucas tries to eat the fluffy ones. Looking up on the screen, there is a woman with breasts bigger than their mother's. They are tan, too, because the woman lives in Florida or California. Howie says, looking up, "Look at those hooters."

"Tits," Lucas says, coughing. "You're supposed to call them tits."

"Boobs," Howie says. "I know."

"Honkers," says Lucas. "Jugs!"

"You're telling me," Howie says, nodding.

5

Tonight is bathtub night, and Howie's not allowed to lock the door. He sits in the tub, driving his Navy boats. His father went to Inchon and has a gun. Lucas found it in Wisconsin. At first, they were both afraid to touch it, and then when Lucas became sick their parents put the gun someplace else, in order to prevent *accidents*. When the moving van brought their things to their new house, the big furniture came in first. The movers were big and old and wore t-shirts that had been bleached a lot. When they sweated, they smelled like laundry. Mrs. Bently said they lived inside the *shelter* and not to give them any money. Inside the van was Mr. Bently's sports car, and the dressers, and all the shelves for Mrs.

Bently's books. One of the rails on Howie's sled had been crushed by the piano, and his father threw the sled into the trash.

"I'll fix it," Howie said. "With my tools."

"It's ruined, Howie. The wood is split."

Then Mr. Bently yelled at two men to be careful with Mrs. Bently's couch. He said, looking inside the enormous van, "We'll find you a new one."

In general, Howie knows that when wood splits, you can still use glue and clamps to fix it. Lucas is going to have surgery next week, and everybody is going to go visit. Even a couple friends of his from Milwaukee, just to say hello—a boy named Roger, who is tall and smokes a lot of pot, and also Lynda Fritag, who is very difficult. Sometimes, Howie uses an old baseball bat in the back yard to practice his golf swing. Mrs. Bently says he still has several lessons left. They are already paid for. Maybe he could find a friend?

Now she knocks at the door, to show *courtesy*, before stepping inside the bathroom. She says to Howie, "Did you wash your submarine?"

"Uh huh."

"Your ears?"

He thinks about saying *yes*, but decides he's not supposed to lie. "Not hard," he says, shrugging.

Mrs. Bently kneels by the tub and reaches for a washcloth. She scrubs behind Howie's ears

and says, "Howie?"

"Yes."

"Lucas is very sick."

"I know. He needs a donor."

"Your father, he loves you very much. Just because you're not sick doesn't mean that we don't love you."

"I know." Howie shakes the water from his hair. He sets his boats in the basket and says, "He can't receive anymore. Lucas. That's why he has to be transplanted."

When he stands, the water dripping into the bath, Mrs. Bently wraps him in the big blue towel. She lifts him from the water and sets him on his own two feet.

6

"You're starting to grow," his mother said.

Lucas and Howie also have secrets. Once, when Mr. and Mrs. Bently went out to dinner, Lucas taught himself to drive Mrs. Bently's station wagon in the backyard. In Wisconsin, they had a huge backyard, but you could still see all the tire marks the next day. Also, the bird feeder had been knocked down; the wood, Lucas said, had been split. They used a lot of glue to try and fix it. And Lucas knows that Howie broke the window in their father's den and that Howie steals money from their mother's purse. Before, Lucas would have already beat him to it, so there would be only nickels and dimes left behind. The quarters all

went to Lucas first. Lucas also explained to Howie the way sex works. Where you put it, for example. And what the girl's supposed to do next. And all about protection. Lucas said that's what he wants most from the Make-A-Wish Foundation, because Lynda Fritag is also *frigid*. Only now he says it's too late, anyway.

On Howie's birthday, right after he turned eleven, he and Lucas went out onto the golf course. They had about a thousand golf balls, and they had spent a lot of time cleaning them up inside the bathtub. At first they thought they might get a reward. The golf cart was powered by a battery, which meant it didn't use any gasoline, which meant Lucas could drive it if they didn't hit anything and nobody found out. They drove for hours until the battery finally wore out, in a sand trap, near the fifteenth hole. An old man in orange pants started yelling at them, and they had to run away. Lucas couldn't run very fast. He kept falling and they had to throw the suitcase into a pond, where it sank, and then Lucas fainted behind the club house. Howie took off his brother's mask. He hit Lucas on the chest, like a doctor, and eventually Lucas woke up coughing. That night at dinner, before Mr. Bently started taking pictures, Lucas told their parents he felt fine, and Howie knows that lying is what you are not supposed to do, even if you steal money from your mother's purse, or crash her car into the bird feeder. Except for once, Howie hasn't

done anything wrong since they've moved to Arizona, but still he often feels bad.

Today at school, during lunch, he is peeing in the Mens when he sees a group of eighth graders coming through the door. If Lucas were here, instead of dying in the hospital, the eighth graders wouldn't pay Howie any mind. Instead, Howie has recently learned, the eighth graders are wrestlers, which means nobody is allowed to get in their way. Otherwise, they give you swirlies.

Howie shakes, fast, and zips. The eighth graders are staring at him now, because he's screaming. He's holding himself with both hands, and bleeding, jumping all over the bathroom screaming.

"Hey," says one of the eighth graders. "Hey, Cowboy," and now the eighth grader is trying to be helpful, and Howie is screaming. He's screaming and bleeding because he's hit something big. Finally, he stops leaping. He stands very still, looking down; there at the shank, you can see where the teeth have deliberately caught the flesh. He grips the zipper with his thumb and several fingers, takes a sharp breath, and twists himself free.

"Jesus," says an eighth grader. "Jesus, Cowboy. You gotta go to the nurse."

Instead, Howie grabs a wad of paper towels and shoves them down inside his pants. The blood is hot and sticky, beginning to drip. He reaches for more towels and rushes out of the

bathroom for his class. In the classroom, he is in his seat before anybody else. A few minutes later, the nurse steps inside and nods briefly to his teacher, Mrs. Zuniga, who has been writing paragraphs on the blackboard. Howie is sitting in his seat, preparing to do his paragraphs, crying silently, when the nurse steps up behind his desk and rests her hand on his arm. Now, when he stands, the blood dripping into his socks, the room turns still as dust.

7

Mrs. Zuniga is about sixty-five years old. Maybe eighty. Howie thinks she must be a dud, and on the refrigerator is a photograph taken the day of Howie's birthday. He is standing in front of the Superstition Mountains with his brother, Lucas. Lucas is wearing his mask, and Howie has his new hat, which now hangs neatly inside the closet beside his brother's Christmas presents, which are already wrapped. The closet is huge and still has room for lots of things.

At school, people stop talking when he walks by. He walks with a slight limp, and he is not permitted to take PE for two more weeks. The stitches, all three, are going to take a while to heal, and it causes the most pain when Howie runs too fast, or is sitting still. On his way to school, he now has to walk three extra blocks, in order to avoid the wrestlers who saw the whole thing happen.

"Cut his little dick off," one said. "Jesus!"

But Howie knows he didn't cut it off. That's why it hurts so bad. Only Melanie at school talks to him. They sit together in the library and read books silently side by side. Sometimes, she punches him in the arm.

One day Howie says, "Do you like golf?"
"No."

He looks at his book, which has big print, for dumb readers. He reads a sentence. Then he reads it again. The book is all about Kit Carson and how he tamed the west and killed a lot of Indians, and Howie says, "Want to take a lesson with me?"

"Golf?"

"I have lots of friends," Howie says. "Only they don't like golf."

8

Mr. Bently says there are wild animals, and there are tame animals. Wild animals are the kind you keep outside and don't have to pay attention to. Tame animals, like hamsters, require responsible behavior and processed food. Otherwise they get lost and die. The secret to raising pets is *protection*, Mr. Bently says. If we get a hamster, we have to make sure we have a strong cage. Mr. Bently says, clearing his throat, "Howie, you will have to look after the family hamster all by yourself."

Nobody says a word now. Howie is squeezing his legs together, trying to figure out which part still hurts. He reaches for the apple

sauce.

"Is that acceptable to you, Howie?"

"Uh huh."

For supper, Mrs. Bently cooked frozen enchiladas in the microwave with corn niblets. The apple sauce was Mr. Bently's idea. Nobody has remembered to turn on the kitchen light, and the room is growing dark, even if the windows are wide open.

Mrs. Bently says, "Howie wants a pony, Bob. Not a hamster."

"Have to start small," Mr. Bently says. "Maybe next year. Maybe next year, after he's more tall."

"Is it okay," Howie says, "if we *don't* get a hamster. I mean, at least for this year?"

After supper, he helps his mother clear the plates. Then he listens to the television, which his father is watching all by himself. There is an important baseball game on, and during commercials, Mr. Bently hits the Mute. In the kitchen, helping his mother do the dishes, Howie watches her drop a glass into the sink. The glass doesn't break, but it makes a loud noise, and Mr. Bently calls, "What?"

9

By now Mr. Bently is up to seven miles: each and every night, you can hear him in the back yard, rowing for a couple hours. At the airport, Roger smiles nicely. Roger is a tall boy with acne and a huge duffel bag. Then they wait a

long time in order to greet Lynda Fritag who had to take a different airplane. Lynda Fritag has a small carry-on and her purse and a plant for Lucas. Mrs. Bently says the plant is lovely.

At the hospital, Howie spends a lot of time outside on the lawn. While Roger and Lynda visit, Mrs. Bently goes inside the chapel to talk to God, and the minister, who is always friendly. After a couple hours, Lynda and Roger step outside the huge automatic doors, holding hands. Lynda is crying, because it's so sad, the way Lucas is sick, and Roger says, "Maybe we should bring him a pizza?"

At home that night, they eat pizza. Howie picks off the mushrooms and asks Roger questions about wrestling.

"Do you win a lot?" Howie asks.

"Well," Roger says, "I like football. But I have friends who wrestle."

"Do they win a lot?"

"Oh sure," Roger says.

Lynda Fritag says, "Wrestling is disgusting."

"Do you play football?" Howie asks.

"Not really," Roger says. "I mean I'm not on the team or anything."

That night Howie sleeps alone, though according to Mr. Bently, Roger is supposed to be bunking in with him. Lynda Fritag gets the couch. After a while, Howie gets up, and goes into the TV room. Lynda Fritag is lying on the couch with her shirt off. Her bra is unhooked, in back, and Roger is kissing her all over the

place.

When she hears him, Lynda sits up fast and tries to find her clothes. She covers her chest with Roger's pants and says, "What do you want?"

"I heard noises," Howie says. "I thought you were watching TV."

"You have to go to school," Roger says. "You're not allowed to be awake."

"It's okay," Howie says. "I just want a drink of water."

That night, when Roger finally comes to bed, he climbs onto the top bunk. Howie thinks most people are supposed to be asleep, though of course lots of people are still awake. Howie is still awake. Roger is still awake. In the hospital, Lucas is probably still awake. Then Roger starts making noises, the kind which make the bed shake. There are springs, squeaking, just the way it was before, and after a while Howie shuts his eyes. He listens to the springs, and to the covers, sliding back and forth, and knows someday it's going to stop.

10

At the Golden Hills Country Club, sitting in the sand trap, Howie tells Melanie that Roger stole his brother's girlfriend. They are sitting in the sand trap drawing pictures with their tees. Melanie is wearing a pair of blue shorts, which is Howie's favorite color. Also Chip's, which Howie knows, because Chip already said so.

Then Chip said, after showing them the door, and pointing his finger, "Play golf."

Howie says, drawing in the sand, "They went to Homecoming together, last year. Before he got sick, and now Lynda doesn't love him anymore."

"How do you know?" Melanie asks.

"I watch about it on TV," Howie says. "First, the girl loves the guy. Then the guy goes away, or falls in love with another girl, and then the girl falls in love with his best friend and makes a lot of phone calls."

"Is Lucas mad?" Melanie asks.

"No," Howie says. "You have to lie a lot too. You have to pretend that everything is the same."

"Oh," Melanie says.

Across the fairway, Howie sees a small pond. Usually the ponds are full of thick green water and have cement. He's not sure if that's precisely where they put the suitcase.

"I'm not old enough to be a donor," he says. "I have to go to school."

"Okay," Melanie says. Now she picks up Howie's hand. She puts his hand in the center of her lap and wraps her fingers all around it.

"Okay," Howie says.

"We're moving," Melanie says. "Next week. But we can still be friends, can't we?"

"I guess so."

Melanie says, giving back his hand, "Does it still hurt?"

It scares him, her hand, touching him. It doesn't hurt at all, which is the funny part, because normally it does. Even with the stitches all dissolved, it hasn't gone away, and he thinks this is something he will have to tell Lucas. The way Melanie put her hand there. He thinks Lucas will know exactly what he's supposed to do.

11

The night before the big day, the *operation*, Mr. Bently drives Roger and Lynda Fritag to the airport, while Howie tags along. Actually, his mother and father have had an argument over who is supposed to drive. Actually, Mrs. Bently doesn't want to go anywhere at all; she says the visit was a bad idea. She says Lucas is *depressed*. She says she should have known better and that she's going to spend the night.

On the way to the airport, Howie sits in the back seat with all the luggage. Mostly he is thinking about Melanie, and maybe asking her if she wants to be his girlfriend. At least until she moves away. When Melanie moves away, they won't talk to each other anymore. Howie wonders how long it will take for her to fall in love with somebody like Roger. Not that Howie is love with Melanie. Mostly, Howie just likes the way her hair smells, and the way her teeth are so big. He thinks maybe they will be able to move away by then, too, maybe to the same city. He thinks he is going to have to ask her for her

phone number. Later, while waiting in traffic, Mr. Bently asks Roger questions about his science project, just to be polite.

In the airport, waiting for all the people to go away, Lynda Fritag says to Mr. Bently, "Thank you, Mr. Bently."

"Thank you, Lynda. It meant a lot to Lucas."

"Bye," says Roger.

"Bye," says Lynda. "We had a great time!"

In the car, on the way back to the hospital, Mr. Bently begins to slap himself. He slaps himself hard, driving, and starts to cry, which makes him sound as if he's going to be sick. After a while Howie rolls down the window and looks into the sky for airplanes. The sky, he knows, is dark, and it's hard to see things in it that don't have any lights.

12

The day after the funeral for his brother, Lucas Bently, Howie returns to school, where Mrs. Zuniga asks him if he'd like to go the nurse. Then she asks him if he'd like to go to the library.

On the second day, Mrs. Zuniga gives Howie a pile of letters, each of which was written to him while he was in the library. The letters are from his classmates, all explaining how sad they are for Howie. Sometimes, there are pictures too, and later after several weeks have passed, during *Show or Tell*, Mrs. Zuniga calls on Howie for the very first time.

He is supposed to describe an important day in his life without any pictures—*Tell*, she says. And Howie knows this isn't the way it's done in Wisconsin. Howie says, standing in front of his class, that the most important day he ever had was when he turned eleven—the day he spent collecting golf balls with his brother, Lucas. And he was going to tell that after they had a couple hundred, they planned to take them to the Pro Club, to give back all the lost balls they found. They thought maybe they might get themselves a big reward. Instead, a woman yelled at them for being stupid. In the back, they could see Chip, drinking beer, and laughing, and the woman said the balls were supposed to be on the range so that the ball man could pick them up with his tractor. The golf balls were not lost. There would be no reward.

But that's not the part Howie told. Lucas always said you're not supposed to tell, and Howie didn't explain the way he never got to drive the cart, but Lucas did, because Lucas said they were just borrowing it. They drove the cart from Tee to Tee, lobbing golf balls from the suitcase, pretending they were hand grenades. Lucas drove the cart fast as it would go, and Howie had his new hat, which he didn't like to wear anymore because other people took it, and then he did not explain the way the battery died

because of all the sand inside the sand trap and the way they had to run away from an old man in orange pants. They had to lie about the suitcase, which was still somewhere in the middle of a pond, and standing in front of his class, Howie realized he wasn't explaining anything at all. Because he couldn't remember any of the things he was allowed to tell.

When you do something wrong, it always makes you feel bad, even if you know you've done it. In the bathroom, scrubbing golf balls, Lucas had taken off his mask. Then Lucas had said, "Don't tell Mom."

"Okay."

"It's a secret," Lucas said. "No one will ever find out."

Lucas meant the way he kept falling down and fainting. He meant Howie was supposed to keep it secret—the kind you never talk about but always carry with you, like a spare quarter to use the phone. Like Lynda Fritag, and the way she looked sitting on the couch with the television on, her skin pale and sweaty. Or the way your father stopped rowing and never came out of the bedroom anymore to go to work.

Afterwards, in front of the entire class, Mrs. Zuniga said, "Howie? Howie, do you have anything more to tell?"

"You're not supposed to take away things that don't belong to you."

“Yes, Howie. That’s correct.”

“So we gave them back. The golf balls. After we cleaned them.”

And Mrs. Zuniga said, smiling, nodding to

the class, “Then what?”

“It’s secret,” Howie said. “I promised to protect it.”

