

RYAN HARTY

Why the Sky Turns Red When the Sun Goes Down

FROM TIN HOUSE

I GET THE CALL as my wife is setting the table for dinner. It's our neighbor Ben Hildeman, who tells me in a breathless voice that my son has had a problem.

"This is bad, Mike," Ben says, and in the background I hear his boys, Tanner and Phillip, talking in excited tones. "He fell and hurt his leg, is I guess what happened, but then he just sort of lost control. By the time I got there he was in the Kohlers' yard, banging his head against their air-conditioning unit."

"God, you're kidding," I say.

"I'm afraid it's pretty bad, Mike. Some of the kids are upset now. I wish you'd come down."

"I'll be right there," I say, and hang up the phone.

Dana comes into the doorway with a bunch of utensils in her hand. "It's not about Cole?" she says, but she can see in my face that it is. "You should go, Mike. Hurry."

Running down Keehouatupa, past the subterranean houses, I'm hoping that whatever happened to Cole will have nothing to do with the trouble we had in Portland. I know Dana is thinking the same thing back at the house. We came to Arizona at the height of the D3 crisis, with high hopes that the desert air would be good for Cole. Amazingly, in the seven months we've been here he's had not a single problem — no shutdown or twitching hands, no problems with speech or movement. We've only just begun to believe that things might be all right again.

Ben's house comes into view, a newly built subterranean with smoke-tinted skylights, a couple of date palms shimmering in the day's waning heat. Ben stands atop the grassy dome, a stocky man in jeans. Behind him are the red peaks of the Superstition Mountains. A half-dozen boys in shorts and tank tops stand at his side. Cole, I see, is not among them.

Ben jogs down and puts a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't want to touch him, Mike," he says. "He's around the back now. I think he might be unconscious."

"That's good, actually. It means he's in shutdown."

We climb the hill. From the top I see Cole lying belly down on the back slope, his legs splayed out behind him. He is in shutdown — there's that stillness about him — and I'm relieved to see it, though it's clear he's in horrible shape. His neck has twisted around so far that his chin seems to rest in the shallow valley between his shoulder blades. His right arm has come off completely and lies, bent at the elbow, a few yards away, multicolored wires curling out of the torn end. I get a lightheaded feeling and have to crouch for a moment and catch my breath.

"You all right?" Ben asks.

"I'll be okay."

"He just —" Ben gives me a squint-eyed look. "It's hard to describe it, Mike. It was crazy."

"So all this happened when he fell? The arm and everything?"

"That's what I was saying." He jerks a thumb at a metal box at the edge of the Kohlers' yard. "When I came out he was just banging against that thing like he wanted to knock it down or something. He made an electrical noise in his throat, sort of, a whirring sound."

I glance at the boys, who are all studying me carefully — six boys in a line on the hill.

"Everybody all right?"

They nod.

"I asked them to go home, but they wouldn't go," Ben says. "They're worried about their friend."

"Sure," I say. "Well, listen, guys, Cole's gonna be all right, you hear me?"

They nod again and glance at one another. These are good kids, all of them — Ben's son Tanner and our next-door neighbor Sean

Ho, and a Devin something whose parents I've met a few times. One of them, a red-haired boy I haven't seen before, looks as though he might be D3 himself; his skin seems to reflect the sun a little more directly than the other boys'. He holds his shoulders unusually straight. Most people can't see the difference, but D3 parents can more often than not. This kid looks as stunned as the rest of them.

I walk down the grassy slope and kneel beside Cole. His eyes are wide open and staring at nothing, and that's something I hate to see. I lay a hand on each of his cheeks, turn his head to the side, and feel a pop — things seem looser inside him than they should be. I brush his bangs from his forehead, roll him to his back, and slip a hand under his T-shirt, feeling for the power button. I give it a push.

Cole's head jerks just slightly. His eyes change, almost imperceptibly, as if the dimmest light has gone on behind them. It's enough, though: he looks like my son again.

"Hey, buddy," I say.

He blinks at me. "Hey, Dad. What are you doing here?"

"I came to take you home."

He glances around, and I see the disappointment in his eyes, the look of understanding. "I had an accident," he says.

"I'm afraid so, kid. Do you remember what happened?"

"We were playing kick the can," he says, and draws his lips in, concentrating. "I was running, I think. I had a bad headache. I don't remember anything else."

I'm relieved he's come out of it alert and lucid, much better than at times in the past. During the bad period in Portland there were always problems upon switchback — inability to focus, slowed-down speech and movement.

"So listen, there are a few things I need to tell you," I say. "Things you may not want to hear." I help him to a sitting position, a hand at the small of his back. "For one thing, your arm's come off."

He touches his shoulder where the arm should be. A look of panic overtakes him.

"It's all right," I say. "It's just down the hill. We'll get it fixed up as soon as we can. I just want you to know what's going on, okay? The other thing is that I think there might be a little problem with your neck, but that'll be fine too, I promise."

He swallows hard and looks at me. "What about my arm?" he says. "Aren't you going to put it on again?"

"I can't, pal. I wish I could. We'll have to take it along to the hospital tomorrow."

He glances up at his friends on the hill. I know he's embarrassed about what's happened.

"Maybe you ought to say something to them," I tell him. "Let them know you're all right."

"I don't know what to say," he says.

"Just whatever you want. It'll make it easier when you see them the next time."

He seems to think for a moment, his tongue poking out between his lips. Then he glances up the hill and says, "Hey, guys, I'm all right and everything. I gotta go home, but I can probably come back tomorrow."

"Hey, that's terrific," Ben says, and glances around at the boys. "Isn't that great, guys?"

"Yeah," Tanner Hildeman says quietly. "That's great, Cole."

"We just hope you're okay and everything," Sean Ho says, then glances at Cole's arm where it lies on the grass. He turns to the other kids, and as if given a signal they all start down the hill. A couple of them raise their hands to Cole, and Cole waves back.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"I guess not," he says.

"You ready to go home to Mom now?"

"All right," he says, but there's a hint of hesitation in his eyes.

"What's the matter, kid?"

He shakes his head, then says, "Does Mom know what happened?"

"She knows you got hurt," I say. "She'll be glad to see you."

He glances up at the date palms in front of the house.

"What's the matter, pal?"

"Nothing," he says, but I can see there is. For the first time it occurs to me that he might know more about Dana and me than I've imagined.

Dana is outside when we get home, standing at the edge of the lawn with an uneasy look on her face. I try to give her a reassuring nod, but there's little use in that with Cole's arm tucked under my own like a rolled-up newspaper.

"Oh boy," she says, glancing from Cole to me and back. "You all right, kid?"

"I guess," he says, and looks at me.

"He's disappointed," I say.

"Of course," she says. "Who wouldn't be?" She brushes her hands down her sides, glances at the house. Dana is an attorney at an intellectual property firm in Phoenix and makes a good living appearing composed when everything is going to hell around her. But I can see she's flustered now, and it makes me feel suddenly tender toward her. Together we go into the house, where the air is cool and smells of pork chops and mashed potatoes.

While Cole goes upstairs to get cleaned up, I walk into the kitchen. Dana is washing her hands and staring out the window. It's six o'clock and the sky has taken on the pinks and silvers of an abalone shell.

"Don't you think we ought to shut him down?" she says, and turns to me. "I can't stand to see him with his arm like that."

"I think it's better to keep him running if we can," I say. "We don't want him to get any more disoriented than he has to."

"I guess not," she says.

"He seems pretty good in most ways. This is probably nothing too serious."

"He's torn his own arm off, Mike," she says. "Of course it's serious."

"All right. I just mean it might be a mechanical problem. It's not necessarily anything chronic."

Her face is doubtful, weary. "Well, let's hope so," she says.

At the top of the stairs I hear the faucet running in the bathroom. Cole bumps a knee against the cabinet under the sink and says "Ouch," then the faucet shuts off with a knock. I walk into the master bathroom, where the face I see in the mirror is so pale it shocks me. I have to sit on the toilet for a while with my head between my knees. It's that echoey feeling I had in the Hildemans' yard, a feeling I had a lot as a kid — at swim meets and at summer camps, and later during final exams in college. A doctor put me on Zoladex for a while when I was in my twenties, but I didn't like the way it made me feel — sedate and strangely detached from my life. I sit blotting my forehead with toilet paper, breathing deeply until my heartbeat slows.

I had these symptoms back in Portland too, when Cole was at his worst and Dana and I disagreed about how to handle it. Dana wanted to get a new center chip for Cole then, one of the D4 units that seemed to work well for people at the time. To me that would have been like getting a new child altogether, since his personality wouldn't be the same. In D-children, experience affects development the way it affects a human child: D-children become who they are because of the lives they've lived. While it's possible to transfer memory, you cannot transfer a personality that's been formed over the years. We'd been told that the engineers could *approximate* Cole's personality type, which to me was worthless, though a lot of people disagreed with me. My wife happened to be one of them.

Dana's brother Davis had a D3 child of his own, a boy named Brice, who suffered for years from the same kinds of problems as Cole — intermittent breakdown, loss of motor control. A year before we moved to Arizona, on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Brice disappeared after a martial arts class, and it was almost a week before they found him in a wooded field two miles north of Davis's house, where he'd apparently collapsed taking a shortcut home. A week later, Davis had a new center chip installed. The results were so positive he couldn't help calling us about it during our worst stretch with Cole. He knew how I felt about center chips; we'd discussed it many times. Davis had always been protective of Dana, and I'd never got the feeling he approved of me. I began to see his calls as a way of stirring up trouble between Dana and me.

And it worked, too. Brice was a high school junior then, a scholar-athlete and a truly fine kid, a boy Dana and I had always liked. But it was less his personality and accomplishments that impressed Dana, I think, than the sheer absence of D3-related problems. I remember Davis being worried about drugs at one point (he'd found a marijuana cigarette in Brice's underwear drawer), and even that became a selling point, because it was a *normal* problem. You couldn't miss the pride in Davis's voice when he told us about it — about the awkward talk he'd had with Brice, the two of them hashing it out for nearly an hour before finally hugging and crying. The point seemed to be that Brice was living a life of uninterrupted normalcy, and the insinuated question was, Why settle for a child who breaks down all the time when you can have a new one who won't?

I was dead set against it. It mattered absolutely to me that Cole be

my child, the boy I'd come to know over the years. Dana and I fought about it more than we'd ever fought about anything, and in the end I think it changed the way we saw each other. She came to seem harder to me, less nurturing; I must have come to seem weak and sentimental. We'd met during our final year at the University of Oregon, and for the longest time had been amazed by how much we had in common — a penchant for old books and antiques, a respect for nature, a desire to have kids while we were still young enough to do everything with them. But as problems with Cole became worse, Dana receded, took on longer hours at work, grew distant when she was home. We argued about small, unrelated things, like the antiques we'd collected over the years. She said she felt hemmed in by them, even suggested we sell the old gas-powered Bonneville we'd loved to drive in college. For a few months that fall, I became convinced she was having an affair with a man named Stuart Solomon, a high-tech consultant at her firm. I never had solid evidence. Stuart's name turned up a few times on the caller ID, though he and Dana worked on different accounts. Twice, when Dana was supposed to be working late, I drove to her office and found that her car was not in the parking lot. I tried to confront her about it a few times, but always lost my nerve. There's no describing the relief I felt when the reports came in about D3 kids going problem-free in the Southwest. Suddenly there seemed reason to hope our lives could return to normal if we moved.

I stand and walk to the window. Outside, the rows of subterranean houses lie spread out like the fairways of a golf course. Mine is one of the few two-story houses left in the neighborhood now, and it costs so much to cool I'm sure I won't be able to keep it long — though I hate to think of giving it up, since it's a link to my past, to the two-story colonial my family still owns in Eugene. From where I stand, I can see the other two-story on the street, a big stucco home with a pool in the back. A light goes on in an upstairs window, and a man passes through a room. I've never spoken to this man before, but now I find myself thinking about him, wondering if he's anything like me, wondering if he feels himself being ushered into the future, away from the things that brought him comfort in the past.

Downstairs, Cole is carrying a basket of rolls to the table with his one good hand, singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." It's a song he learned at summer camp, but he seems to have gotten

some of the words wrong. Instead of singing "Bonnie," he sings "body." "My body lies over the ocean / My body lies over the sea." He sets the rolls on the table and goes back for more.

"Sit, honey," Dana says from the kitchen. "I'll get the rest."

"I don't mind," he says.

He takes a pitcher of water from the counter and starts into the dining room. Dana touches the back of his neck. I give her a look meant to say, "Doesn't he seem fine?" and she gives me a more doubtful look, which says, I suppose, "We'll see." But she comes over and puts her arms around me — an offering of peace.

"All right, break it up," Cole says, hurrying back in. "Can't you see I'm starving here?"

We bring the rest of the food to the table. As we begin to pass dishes and talk I feel a little better. It seems as if we've gotten past the day's bad luck and tension.

"Good dinner, Mom," Cole says, forking up a bite of pork chop.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she says, and gives him a small smile.

"Listen," I say, passing the rolls, "how'd you guys like to take the Bonneville out tomorrow? After we get everything taken care of at the hospital, we could head out to Papago Lake and have a picnic. Maybe drive around Tortilla Flats."

"All right," Dana says. "Sounds like a good idea."

"Cool with me," says Cole, and glances up from his plate.

Something is wrong with his eyes, I see. One of them points directly at me while the other seems to shoot off at a crazy angle toward the kitchen. I glance at Dana, who's noticed it too.

"What?" Cole says, looking from me to Dana. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Dana says, carefully. "It's just — can you see all right?"

"Yeah," he says, "why?"

I set the bowl of broccoli down and say, "Listen, kid, try this." I put a hand in front of his face, then slowly move it until my fingers enter the line of his wayward eye. "Can you see my fingers now?"

"No," he says, and a flash of panic comes over him. "What's happening, Dad?"

"Well, I don't think it's anything to worry about. It looks like you've lost vision in one of your eyes, is all. But we're going to the hospital tomorrow anyway, right? They can fix this in a snap."

For a minute I think Cole might start to cry. "Gaw!" he says, and throws his balled-up napkin on the table. "I can't believe this!"

"Hey, come on," Dana says, her tone gentle but firm. She goes to Cole and kisses the crown of his head, and says, "Don't let it get you down." Then she gives me a look and walks into the kitchen. Cole and I keep on with our dinners. When Dana's been gone for a minute, I get up and go after her. She's at the sink, staring out the window at the fading sunset.

"We've got to shut him down, Mike. This is just scary. It's scaring *him*."

"I know," I say, because it's scaring me too. I can't think of anything else to do about it.

"Hey, Dad," Cole calls from the dining room.

"What's up, pal?" I wait for an answer, but it doesn't come. "Be out in a second, all right?"

"Hey, Dad, what makes the sky red when the sun goes down?"

Dana breathes out a small laugh. Her face softens. For a moment she looks like the young woman I met in Oregon. I give her a kiss on the cheek and go into the dining room.

"That's just dust," I say. "Dust and pollution, actually."

But Cole isn't looking at me. He's pushing food across the table with his fingers, staring at the mess he's made. An electric drone comes from his throat.

"Cole?"

"I gotta go to the bathroom," he says, staring at the table. "I don't feel so hot." The drone in his throat gets louder.

"What's the matter, kid?"

He glances up, his expression suddenly sly. "I'll bet you a dollar," he says.

"What are you talking about, pal?"

Dana comes into the doorway. "What's going on, Mike?"

"Jesus H. Christ," Cole says, and suddenly laughs. "Holy frickin' shit!"

"Cole! Look up here," I say. "Look at me."

He raises his head, but his eyes veer in different directions. His jaw makes a clicking noise. Then he suddenly raises his head high and brings it down with a violent crack against the table.

"Cole!" I say.

He lifts his head again, his face covered with pork chop grease

and broccoli. I try to get around the table to hold him down, but before I can get there his head hits the table with another crack, rattling the silverware. Dana shrieks. This time, when Cole's head comes up, it swings way back over one shoulder, loose and wild.

"My God, his neck!" Dana says.

"I see it! Help me hold him down."

I get a hand on his shoulder and try to reach under his shirt for the power button, but it's hard to get to with his head lolling around like a jack-in-the-box.

"Whoa!" he says. "Help me, Dad."

The smell of burning wires comes off him. He breathes out an electric wheeze, his head lolling, and then his face seems to fill with wonder and he goes perfectly still my arms. He turns to me, eyes clear and perfectly aligned.

"This is the best Christmas ever," he says.

I shut him down. His head thumps against the table. The electric drone cuts out. I wipe his face with a napkin and go into the kitchen, where I get a bottle of beer from the fridge. When I come back Dana is at the table, arms folded across her chest. She glances out the window.

"That's it, Mike," she says. "I mean it. This has got to stop."

The next morning I pull the Bonneville out of the driveway and carry Cole downstairs. Even with the seat belt over his shoulder, it's hard to prop him up in a way that looks natural. His head tips forward, making his mouth fall open. Dana and I have not talked about taking the Bonneville out since last night, and a picnic no longer seems like the best idea, but I'm in the mood to feel the thrum of the big gasoline engine, the vibration of the catalytic converter under my legs.

After a few minutes, Dana comes down and we take Highway 1073 past the mall and the hydroponics yards. The D-pediatric is twelve miles away, a sprawling complex on the outskirts of Olberg. As we drive, Dana stares out the window, her eyes steady and serious, her mouth drawn into a line.

Last night, after I shut Cole down and we cleaned up the mess in the dining room, Dana went into the den and called her brother Davis, and through the door I heard her talking softly. I couldn't make out what she said, though I'm certain it was something she

couldn't say to me, since we went through the evening without another word about Cole. Sometime late in the night I woke to the sound of her crying and put a hand on her shoulder, and she moved into my arms for a while. It was like holding an injured animal; I couldn't help feeling she just needed a little time to heal, then she'd be out of my arms for good.

Afterward I lay awake, looking at the tiny red light of a smoke detector, listening as the wind pulled an ocotillo branch across the window. Dana was asleep, and Cole, I knew, was much farther away than that, gone in a sense, so that he was not even dreaming and would not wake up and call my name. I waited until the sky whitened in the window, then got up and walked down the hall and into his room. Cole lay dressed on top of the covers, his eyes closed, an inappropriate smile on his face. I had an urge to put his pajamas on him and tuck him into bed, but I knew it wouldn't make me feel better. Eventually I went down and started coffee and made bacon and eggs as the sky whitened through the windows.

We pass Mesa now, and the ground opens up to uncultivated fields and cacti. Just past Alvarado, I catch a glimpse of a coyote between the clumps of sage, golden brown and moving quickly, nose to the ground. It makes me think of driving out to Salmon Creek with Dana when we first got the Bonneville, years ago, laying a blanket across the back seat and making love right in the car with the windows open, the sound of the wind coming through the firs.

In the rearview mirror I see Cole propped against the door, his eyes closed, his mouth open. Dana is staring out the window. For some reason I imagine she's thinking of Davis, and it makes me angry.

"So suppose things get bad again," I say, and glance at her. "What do you think would happen then?"

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"Suppose this is the beginning of more bad times with Cole. We'd have to make some decisions then, right?" I know my voice is sharp, but it seems beyond my power to control it.

"Of course," she says.

"But you already know what you'd want to do," I say. "Isn't that right too?"

"Come on, Mike, don't do this," she says. "I'm not in the mood for an argument right now."

"But suppose I need to know. Suppose it's important for me to know where we stand on this."

She sighs and glances out at the fields of brush. "Why do you have to push things all the time? What if I *can't* say what I'd do in every single situation? Can you?"

"I think I can. Yes."

"Can you really, Mike? You can say what you'd do no matter what happens to him or to us?"

"What do you mean, 'to us'?"

"Oh, God, I don't know," she says, and shakes her head wearily. "I just get tired of waking from the dream, don't you? Don't you get tired of being reminded he's not real?"

"He's as real to me as you are," I say, but when I glance at Cole in the rearview mirror he looks like what he is — a mechanical boy, a sophisticated doll for adults.

The desert floor runs out to a line of purple mountains. A ranch house slips past, then an electric plant, huge and complicated. For a moment I feel as if I don't know what's important to me, what matters the most. Dana has closed her eyes and is leaning back against the headrest.

"There was a coyote back there in a field," I say in a small voice. "I should have pointed him out to you."

We wait for hours in the air-conditioned lobby, sitting on a vinyl couch, trying to read magazines while other parents come and go with their children. Through a tinted window, I see a slice of blue sky. A peregrine falcon dips into view now and then. Finally Dr. Otsuji comes down the hall in a crisp white coat and yellow tie. He gives us his doctor's smile and sits on the chrome magazine table across from us.

"He's fine," he says. "We've fixed the arm and the neck, and right now he's just going through some tests to make sure everything's in good shape. He seems terrific."

Dana nods the way she does in court when conceding a point made to the opposition. "Do you have any idea what happened?" she asks.

The doctor turns up his eyes in concentration. "I'd call it an anomaly," he says, "though it could be more than that. It's like if you have an arrhythmia — unless we can check your heart when it's happening, we have a hard time knowing what causes it."

"But in your opinion, is it likely we'll have more problems?" she asks. "Now that this has happened?"

Dr. Otsuji looks from one of us to the other, as if he's just noticed the tension between us. "He's not showing any symptoms that would point to that, no," he says, "but to be honest, I don't see it as a good sign. For someone with Cole's history, you want as few problems as possible. Problems can lead to problems, is one way of looking at it."

Dana nods.

"Can we see him?" I ask.

"In a few minutes. He's a little upset, as you might expect. He's had a rough day. What I'd like to do is to put him out for a few minutes and run some numbers, then let him wake up naturally. I'll have the receptionist tell you when you can see him." He smiles in his professional way, then stands and shakes our hands and walks down the hall.

"Well, there it is," I say.

"I should call Davis," Dana says, and takes her bag up from the floor. "He'll want to know what happened."

She opens her cell phone, but before dialing she looks at me with an expression I've never seen before — her face hard, her eyes narrowed with what seems like pity. It's as if she's far away and needs to squint just to see me. "Listen, if you still want to go for a drive, that's fine. We can do that."

"Forget it. I don't really feel like it anymore."

"Well. Whatever. We'll go if you want to."

"I said I don't want to." The tone of my voice makes us both fall silent. She stands and walks down the hall.

Outside, clouds move across the sky, changing the light. A young family rushes into the lobby, the man carrying a blond, catatonic-looking girl in his arms. The child stares straight ahead with vacant eyes. I pick up a magazine, but there's no use trying to read or even think about anything before I'm able to see Cole. Finally the receptionist calls my name and I get Cole's room number and go down the hall.

Cole's in a bed in a pale yellow hospital gown, asleep with his arms at his sides. His cheeks are flushed, his hair a little tousled. I stand above him and watch his chest rise and fall. He opens his eyes and glances around, then nods in a resigned way. "The hospital," he says.

"I'm afraid so, pal. They've fixed your arm, though. Check it out."

He raises the arm and rolls his shoulder. I can see he's trying to appear calm for my sake.

"Does it feel all right?"

"Pretty good," he says.

"We'll test it out with a game of catch. How's that sound?"

"All right."

"Maybe we'll drop your mom off at home and head out to Papago Park. I've got the Bonneville. We can just grab some mitts and go."

"Where is Mom?" he says, and gives me a worried look.

"Down the hall. Talking to your uncle Davis."

"Is she mad at me?"

"Of course not. Why would you say that?"

"I don't know," he says. "I know she doesn't like it when I break down all the time."

"You don't break down all the time," I say. "And anyway, none of this is your fault."

He seems distracted, as if he's trying to listen to Dana's voice down the hall. I can just hear her, a low, familiar sound coming over the tiles.

"Let's get you dressed and get your hair combed," I say. "We don't want people to think you were raised by wolves now, do we?"

He lifts the covers away and lowers his legs to the floor. I help him with the ties at the back of his gown. His clothes are on a chair by the window, and as he puts them on I see the seam where his arm has been reattached, a thin band where the skin is a little lighter, nothing you'd notice unless you were a parent or a doctor. I comb his hair, crouching in front of him, watching his eyes, which are alive with private thoughts and worries.

"Now you look like a gentleman," I say. "You ready to go?"

"I guess so," he says, and together we walk into the hall.

On the ride home, we play a game called Blackout. The object is to find the letters of each other's names in the license plates of passing cars, then call them out before the other person does. If you call them all, the person is out of the game. There's very little traffic until we hit the highway, and then we're suddenly in a sea of

sedans and sport utility vehicles. Cole picks up a *D* for Dana and an *M* for Mike. I get an *A* for Dana, who seems not to be paying attention to the game.

"You better hurry up, Mom," Cole says, leaning over the front seat. "You've got two letters already."

She gazes straight out the windshield, a distant look on her face. Ever since our exchange in the hospital, she's been stiff and far away. I've seen the effect on Cole — the way he keeps his eyes on her, the way he won't stop trying to draw her attention.

"There's an *I*, Dad," he says, and glances at Dana.

We get off the highway and drive down Auwatukey, past the golf course and the hydroponic yards. At a red light, I call an *O* and an *N*, and then Cole and I both see a Honda in front of us, the license plate ALA-36940. We meet each other's gaze in the mirror, but neither of us calls the *A*.

At home I park on the street and kill the engine. Dana steps out of the car. She pretends not to hear Cole when he asks if she's coming to the park with us. He watches her walk up to the house with a stricken look on his face.

"She's having a rough time," I say. "It's not your fault, pal. I'll go get the mitts."

He nods, his face tight and willfully composed.

When I go inside, Dana is at the dining table, staring out the window. The sky has burst into color and filled the room with yellow light.

"So what's the plan?" I say. "Treat him badly? Make him feel like he doesn't have a mother?"

She turns, and I see that she's been crying. Her cheeks shine where the light strikes them from the side. "Are you really going to do this?" she asks. "Would you really take him and leave me?"

"I guess I don't know what my legal options are," I say.

"No one said anything about legal options," she says, "though I guess I shouldn't be surprised if you're thinking in that direction." She gives her head a small shake and glances up at me in a surprisingly open way, her eyes soft and even. "If I try hard enough, I can almost imagine how I look to you right now."

"Can you really?"

"Yes, I can," she says. "And it's not pretty."

"I don't think either of us looks very good to the other right now," I say, and try a smile.

"I guess not," she says.

"Of course, we don't know what will happen. He might be fine. He might just get better and surprise both of us."

"Do you think it would even matter?" she asks, smiling sadly.

"Why wouldn't it?"

"I just think you reach a point where you can't go on. Don't you? I feel as if we've gotten close to that point."

"Have we really?"

"I was very in love with you," she says, and puts a hand on top of my own. "You know that, right? I still love you very much."

"I love you too," I say, and let out a laugh, because it all seems so crazy. "It's not as if we've lost everything, is it? It's not as if everything's gone."

"I don't know," she says. "That's what I worry about sometimes."

Cole and I drive out Clementine Road, past orange groves and fields of yuccas. Cole takes his mitt up from the floorboard and socks the ball into the pocket. He's been quiet and somber since I returned to the car, but now he seems to be cheering up under the influence of the drive. We pass an old stable building, the wood planks faded to silver-gray. He asks if I remember a drive we took a couple of winters ago, when it hailed so hard I had to pull to the side of the road and wait for it to stop.

"We were on our way to see the rodeo," I say, remembering.

"I thought the hail would dent the car," he says, and gives a small laugh. "There was a little dog out in the street, remember? You went out and brought him back to the car."

"I remember he smelled like rotten garbage."

Cole laughs. "He did not." He's excited, and seems to be coming to the point of his story, which I'm guessing will be that we should allow him to have a dog. It's an argument he's been making the last few months. Before he can get to that, though, the fingers of his right hand begin to twitch and he slips the hand into his mitt. As we drive past the arboretum, I see the tendons of his forearm jumping. I don't say anything. It's not like him to hide anything from me.

I'm thinking of Dana, of course, thinking she seems like a different person now, though I suppose we'll both have to change if we

intend to go our separate ways. Our conversation has made it necessary to imagine raising Cole by myself. I imagine taking him to the grocery store, having him break down in the produce aisle, carrying his inert body back to some empty apartment. It's hard to be optimistic when you know you'll be alone, when you know it will be only you in the D-pediatric waiting room, waiting to hear whether your son will seem like a child again.

At the park we walk across a field of fresh-mowed grass, the sun cutting over a long line of oleanders. A Mexican family barbecues flank steak under a picnic stand, and the smell of charred beef is in the air. Cole's hand seems to have improved enough for him to play catch, so we take our usual positions on a strip of grass near the snack bar.

"So, Dad," he says, winding up like a big-league pitcher, "you think I'll be able to play Little League next year?" He looks an imaginary runner back to first.

"You'll be eligible. You can try it if you want to."

His sidearm pitch skids on the ground. "Sorry about that," he says.

"Your arm all right?"

"Little sore," he says, and takes his mitt off and massages the shoulder. Even from twenty feet I can see the hand twitching, though he's playing it cool. "I'm trying to decide if it would be too much to do baseball *and* soccer," he says, and puts the mitt back on.

"What are Tanner and Sean going to do?"

"Tanner's gonna do both. Sean hasn't decided yet."

"Maybe you should just play baseball and see how it goes." I throw him a grounder, and he fields it and makes a pretend throw to first.

"Soccer's my main sport, though," he says with intensity. "I want to play soccer for sure." He throws a pitch that hits the grass a few feet in front of him, then hustles up like a catcher going after a bunt. But his throwing arm is shaking so badly he can hardly hold the ball, let alone make the throw. He falls abruptly to a sitting position on the grass, pressing his bad hand into the mitt.

"Let's take a break," he says.

I walk over and sit down beside him.

He's gazing off at the covered picnic tables, watching a young

Mexican girl in a white lace dress swing at a piñata with a broomstick. He hunches over his mitt, rocking back and forth. What seems remarkable is not that he's having problems, but that he's been able to throw a ball at all, ever — that we've stood here and played catch and it's seemed normal.

"Maybe we ought to go home," I say. "It's been a long day for everyone."

"I'll be all right in a second," he says.

I lean into him, touch his face. When he's looking at me, I say, "It's really all right if you're having problems. You don't have to hide anything from your dad."

"I'm not hiding," he says, but his eyes suddenly fill with tears and he has to glance off at the picnic tables, where the girl has opened up the piñata now and kids are clamoring underneath. He watches, his jaw set tight. His voice, when he speaks again, is as thin and frightened as I've heard it before. "What's going to happen, Dad?" he asks. "What'll become of me?"

"You'll be fine," I say, because sometimes it's a father's job to lie. "Don't worry, kid. You'll be great."