

Waiting

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The woman with the big black handbag slid out of her car. She slammed and locked the door, smoothed down her skirt, and looked around. She caught a pair of dark brown eyes staring at her. They blinked. They were a boy's, round and mysterious, peering from the car opposite hers. She smiled at them, and they disappeared somewhere beneath the dashboard. The rascal, she thought to herself.

Tim watched her walk across the parking lot to the drugstore. She was following Grandpa!

He watched as the large figure of his grandfather passed through the revolving doors of the store. The lady with the big black handbag was crossing the street. Tim had watched her park the car; he had seen her turn in at the intersection as they drove by, and had looked back to see if she was following them. She had been three cars back. He did like the car she was driving, with its silver swan on the hood, and the bugs and butterflies plastered across the front grill.

"Where're we going now?" he asked his grandfather as they turned into the parking lot.

"I'm going to the drugstore," was the answer.

"What'd'ya going to do there?"

"I have to get some pills."

"What kind of pills?"

"Doctor's pills," his grandfather said, finding a place to park. He switched off the ignition and pulled on the parking brake. The silk of his palm tree-covered sports shirt whispered across the car seat as he eased himself out. His big spotted hands dug into his loose trouser pockets and rattled the keys and change.

"What'd'ya need pills for?" he asked his grandfather.

The bald, deeply tanned head dipped back inside the car and looked over at the boy. The grey eyes smiled.

"To keep my insides going," he chuckled. "How about a candy bar?"

"Can't I go too, Grandpa?"

"Why don't you stay here and guard the groceries. I'll be back in just a minute."

"But I got nothing to guard them with."

"You'll do all right," his grandfather laughed. He stood back up until his head was above the car. Tim watched his wrinkled arms, covered with the soft white hairs, slowly shut the car door.

"A Clark Bar!" Tim called.

"One Clark Bar!"

"Are we going fishing?" he called when his grandfather was about to cross the street.

"Maybe this afternoon," he called back to the car.

"For sure?"

"For sure."

Okay then. He sat down in the seat to wait. *A gun! You needed a gun to guard the groceries!* His hands formed into guns. *Click.* Triggers cocked and everything ready for trouble.

Grandpa was halfway across the street by the time the lady with the crushed butterflies on her car found her place to park. Tim drew his guns. He watched as she fumbled about with something in there, then slid out of the car, then looked at him. *Hold your fire, she's smiling.* He ducked down. *Phooey. Why did she have to smile?*

The next time he looked up she was walking toward the drugstore, behind his grandfather. She walked with quick, choppy steps that brought her closer and closer to him. *Walk faster, Grandpa! She's catching up with you!* He raised his hands — his guns. *No—better wait until Grandpa gets inside.*

Hey, where's the groceries? He sat up in the seat and looked to the floor in the back. *Safe. There's peanut butter in there somewheres—but let that wait until*

later. *First watch the lady. One gun aimed at her black bag, the other — She's got a bomb in that bag, huh? Okay. Don't worry, I've got her covered, Grandpa.*

Hey! And how about the machine gun! Better use that. He scrambled over the top of the seat to the back and made believe the machine gun was kept in a special hiding place in the floor, under the foot mat. He lifted the mat, and while getting the imaginary gun, he found a penny. He put it in his pocket. *Okay, cock the gun. Click, clack. Roll the sights up. Ssssst. Okay.*

The lady walked quickly, but she didn't quite catch up with Grandpa before he was in the store. *What did she want in the store anyway? There she goes.*

Just as she pushed on the revolving door and was about inside, he —uh-uh-uh — let her have it.

Mmmmmmm, he was up in the front seat again, in his grandfather's place now, humming like the motor of the car, and driving the steering wheel back and forth. *Eiichh!* that was the brakes, only his feet didn't quite reach them. He leaned over and turned the knob of the radio. *Click.* Nothing happened; the motor had to be running. *Click.*

Where was Grandpa? Wish he'd hurry up.

He looked at the radio again. *Click. BOOM!* That was the secret bomb, just in case that lady came back before his grandfather did.

Tim lay down on the seat. *Wish he'd hurry . . .*

It had been a long morning. Eight o'clock haircuts; and Grandfather had said to the barber, "Trim the sides and put the scraps up on top."

Everyone had laughed.

"You remember George?" Grandfather said, pointing to the barber. He had done this so many times before. Tim knew what to say.

"No."

"He's the one who first cut your hair. This long," Grandfather held his hand down near his wrinkled neck. "You remember that, George?"

The barber nodded and smiled as usual.

"I think your grandad cried louder than you did when I cut off those curly kid locks."

The men laughed, but Tim never thought it was so funny.

"Can I go in too?" he had asked at the doctor's office.

"No, you stay here, Tim. I'll only be a minute."

"Why do you want to see the doctor, when you saw him only last week?"

His Grandfather had laughed, rattling the change in his pockets.

"Because your grandma makes me," he said.

That took about an hour. Sitting in that office that smelled like laundry soap or something. There was only one comic book and the rest were catalogs and magazines without pictures. He had almost fallen asleep. Like now.

The high morning sun fell hot and heavy through the windshield and covered the front seat and the boy's thin, outstretched body. His head lay on an arm, the fingers of his free hand pranced across the seat covering like little men. *These are the good guys and these . . .*

Fishing this afternoon! Tim perched up on an elbow. *Yeah, remember we're going fishing.* Such a long time. Not since that time that they had gotten too much sun and were both in bed for a day or two. Three days for his grandfather, and Grandma kept telling him he could never do that again. *Well, we're going today. Today's the day. Yeah. Minnows, the jetties, ten yellow-tail each. Yeah.*

Tim's eyes closed; his head settled back down on the seat.

In his half-conscious dream he put himself and his grandfather out on the low rock jetties that lead out to the bay. Beyond that — so you could only see it as a dark blue line against the pale afternoon horizon — was

the cold Atlantic. All the fishing boats came in that way, and a lot of the time they had to reel in on the rods before a boat passed over and tangled their lines. The men in the boats always waved. Some threw them stray fish that had been entangled in their nets.

"Your grandma will think we're some fishermen all right," his grandfather would say, filling the fishing bucket in the trunk of the car. "We'll have to come out here more often."

Tim shifted on the seat of the car. One arm slipped over and his hand touched the floor.

The color of the water splashed around in his mind. The yellowgreen, clear waving cloudiness of it swayed behind his eyes: seeing again the distorted little rocks of the shallows, the breezy sea weed, and tiny transparent fishes that skitted out of reach of his hands. When he got bored with trying to catch them, he hit the water with his flat open palm.

"Hey, watch your line," his grandfather would say. "Don't hurt little things."

"When I learn to swim," Tim said, "and can go under water..."

Other afternoons the sun wouldn't be out; the wind would blow up, and the water made no shallows, but splashed up over the rocks in big salty sprays. That was no time for fishing, but they were there.

"But where are the boats, Grandpa?"

"The boats are out there."

"Why aren't they coming in?"

"When they're ready they'll come."

"Oh, its cold now, isn't it. Are the fish down there cold now, Grandpa?"

"It's warm down there," his Grandfather said. "You'd be surprised."

Tim's eyes opened wide, then shut again for the glare of the sun. He was warm and perspiring. He licked his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Dimly he thought of Pepsi-Cola.

"But I don't think you should bother your grandfather."

"But he wants to go too, Mom."

"But I don't think he should; do you, John?"

"Tim, your grandfather isn't the best person anymore."

"What?"

"Tim--"

"What, Dad?"

"Tim, your grandfather deserves his rest."

Tim's eyes squinted; his head turned against the seat. The jetties again; the breeze; the boats passing by; the shallows.

"Are you going to fish, or aren't you?"

"I thought I saw this little fish," he said, dropping the rest of the rocks into the shallows.

"You're never going to catch a fish by throwing rocks at it. Here, take your line back."

"Grandpa?"

"Take your line and hold it steady."

"Grandpa?"

"What?"

"Grandpa, are you tired?"

He woke up with the taste of peanut butter in his mouth, but it was only dried dribble on the side of his chin. The back of his hand wiped it away. *Boy, it's hot.*

Where are you, Grandpa?

He sat up and looked out across the parking lot and the busy street to the drugstore. Something had woken him up. It wasn't the taste of peanut butter; it was a noise.

Look!

The lady!

She's coming this way, and there's a man with her. A badge! The cops! Get your guns ready boys -- here they come.

His hands formed into guns again. Two forty-fours, the machine gun in his lap, and the secret bomb knob in

close reach. She was walking fast again, but faster than before, and the man in blue was talking to her.

What was that noise?

Here they come. Grandpa, they're coming, but I'm all ready for them. I'll take care of them.

Click, click. Guns are ready. Here they--

Hey, what's wrong? Why's she pointing at our car? Stay away lady or I'm going to have to shoot. I'm going to have to shoot you people. I'm going to have to blow up your car with my--

Grandpa, they're coming over here. They're pointing at me. Grandpa, where are you? Grandpa?

Grandpa!

The ambulance was in front of the drugstore as the woman with the big black handbag, accompanied by the policeman, crossed the street. She had a hard time walking fast, her legs were weak and shakey, and she felt faint the whole time. Just to show him the boy and get to her own home. That's all she could be expected to do.

Bullhead

FRED MOECKEL

*Knee deep the boy,
splashing naked joy
and water and mud,
feels the throbbing blood
in him pulse pulse,
feels the swelling of hands' full
of fish, the tail slapping
his stomach, the body leaping
but held down: lithe thing
and slime squeezing, splattering
between his legs. The head
enlarges, sucks air instead
of mud; its barbs hang useless,
spent and limp as the child's flesh
of him who caught the still fish.*