

ONE  
April 20th 1971

It was raining. It would always be raining.

John looked at his watch, drummed his heels irritably against the metal sides of the tank he sat on. *Come on, Dad, this is bugging me.*

He jumped down and tucked his shirt in, crossing to the shed door. His mother drove in as he emerged. He looked at his watch again, shook it.

*Slow. Bloody cheap shit.*

He watched his mother climb out, leaning on the door frame. The passenger door opened and Danny got out. John smiled. Danny saw him and ran over.

"Danny!" his mother shouted after him. Danny ignored her.

John caught him in his arms and swung him up, calling out, "I'll bring him in."

She gave him a black look, said something he didn't catch, then ran for the house. It was obviously too wet to argue.

John accepted the proffered sticky kisses, withdrew his head far enough to ask, "What d'you do today then?"

"Made Easter cards."

"Oh yeah, and where is it then?"

"Mum's got it."

"And who are you going to give it to?" John asked, already knowing the answer. Danny didn't disappoint him.

"You."

John kissed his cheek, slid him onto his hip. Just then, his father came into the yard. John lowered Danny to the floor. "Here's your dad. Go on into the house."

Danny gripped his hand tighter and immediately began wheedling to stay. John finally sent him out into the rain with a small push and a soft slap to his rump. "Scat," he said.

Danny darted off across the yard like a small red kingfisher.

His father came in, sparing John a short accusatory stare. John turned away and went back into the shed. They went back to work on the tank.

Ian was refusing to eat his meal, politely but firmly.

John got up, irritated with his father's grumbling and her sour irritation. Only Danny, obliviously balancing peas on his knife, paid no attention.

John went upstairs to wash. He was stripped of his shirt, washing at the bathroom sink, when Danny came in.

John turned to him, drying his ears. "You eaten all your dinner already?"

Danny nodded and perched on the edge of the bath. It was an old bath, with black laminate sides. His feet dangled. They were in grey woolly socks that flapped over his toes.

"Pull your socks up," John said, glancing at him in the mirror.

Danny pulled them up obediently, almost falling off the bath to do it.

"So what else did you get up to today?" John asked him.

Danny told him, at length and with barely a pause. John stopped him eventually with a, "Hold it, hold it, you'll talk my ears off. Come on, let's go through."

Danny jumped down off the bath and followed him. He began singing Onward Christian Soldiers, not very tunefully. He only appeared to know four lines, so he just kept repeating them.

John went into his room and changed his jeans, put a clean pullover on. Danny perched on his bed like a small elf, watching him intently. When John transferred his belt from his dirty trousers, Danny asked, "Are you going out tonight?"

John looked up at him. Instead of answering, he asked, "Want me to stay in?"  
Danny nodded.  
John laughed. "Want to play cards again?"  
Danny wrinkled his face up, hugged his legs. "Nup."  
"Why not?"  
"Just don't."  
"What then?"  
Danny started chewing his knee, apparently thinking. John said, "Don't do that."  
Danny stopped.  
"Well?" John prompted, coming to sit down beside him.  
Danny immediately scrambled onto his lap, pushing him down. "We can play fighting."  
John fell back, smiling. "I always win," he pointed out, but Danny began bouncing on him, unperturbed with the inevitability of anything. Maybe hope sprang eternal.  
John tussled with him, letting him win, then when he grew bored with it, effortlessly pinning Danny under a leg. Danny tried to bite him.  
John laughed, "You're a dirty fighter, Daniel Jackson Moore."  
Danny gave up eventually, saying, "I'll win you when I'm big."  
"Beat me," John corrected.  
"I'll beat you when I'm big," Danny asserted again.  
"We'll see," John said. He lay, pleasurably sleepy with the exercise and his meal, studying Danny's face. "How'd you scratch your nose?" he asked abruptly.  
"Tommy." Tommy was the farm cat, an old querulous ginger tom.  
"You teasing him again?" John pushed the hair out Danny's eyes, curling the rich silky stuff round his fingers.  
Danny's eyes were closing sleepily; he shook his head. John pulled the curl gently.  
"What then?"  
Danny's eyes fluttered open. "Dunno." He closed them again.  
John took his leg off his and moved closer. He sat up on one elbow, looking down at him. Danny opened his eyes and looked up, smiled. John smiled back. "Sleepy?"  
Danny immediately made his eyes wide. "No."  
"Little liar." John flicked the tip of his nose. "Time for your bed."  
"Not yet," Danny begged. "Mum said I could stay up till nine o'clock."  
John laughed softly. "Danny, you can hardly keep your eyes open."  
"I'm okay," Danny said determinedly.  
John relented. "Another five minutes then."  
Danny settled in against him, wriggling closer. He held John's buckle, feeling the warm metal. John stroked his hair. He watched Danny sink surely and easily into sleep.  
He looked over at the window; it had started to rain again. It had rained almost incessantly for the last week. He saw Danny's Easter card on the window ledge, where he'd put it, the crude little chick constructed roughly out of twists of yellow tissue paper, stuck on like so many little blue salt bags.  
His room door opened; he looked up.  
Ian came in, shut it. He sat down on the bed.  
"Careful," John admonished. "You'll wake him."  
"Mum's looking for him."  
John said, "I'll take him through in a sec'." His thumb and forefinger were circling Danny's small wrist on the hand that held his buckle.  
Ian looked at it, looked away again. He saw the card. "He make that?" he asked, looking back at John.  
John nodded. He was looking down at Danny's face again, lost in his own thoughts.  
Ian got up and crossed to the window ledge; he picked it up. "Doesn't look much like a chicken."  
John didn't say anything, didn't appear to have heard him. Ian put it down again, moved away from the window to John's wardrobe. He opened it.

John looked back at him over his shoulder, hearing the noise. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, just looking."

John snapped, "Well don't. I've told you before – shut it."

Ian shut it again, came back over to him. John was watching him now. Ian sat down and said, "It's time for his bed."

"He'll go to bed when I'm good and ready." John's eyes were steady and black on his.

"He's supposed to be in bed by half-eight."

"Who the fuck are you, mother's little helper?"

Ian dropped down onto his back, arms under his head, and stared at the ceiling.

John took a breath and uncurled Danny's fingers, taking his eyes off Ian to look down at him again.

Danny didn't even stir. John got up and picked him up bodily. Danny went over his shoulder like a sack of coal, wrapping his arms round his neck. John turned his face into his, kissed it and said, "Come on, warrior." He hoisted him a little higher and went out the room.