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Domestic Interiors of the Midwest: Two Stories

I. All Boy

Later, when Harold finally learned that his parents had not fired Mrs. Norman, the babysitter, for locking him in the closet while she watched her favorite television shows, he could not imagine why he had ever attributed her firing to this in the first place, especially since his parents had not seemed particularly upset by the news of his confinement. His father had said something vague about it building character and teaching inner resources, and his mother, in an attempt to be more specific, said that it could not hurt to learn how the sightless got by. Nor had Harold minded being in the closet, where he kept a *survival kit* inspired by the one that his parents, indeed all Minnesotans, stored in their cars in winter, though his contained only a small flashlight, several books, water, and a roll of Life Savers, chosen because he liked the surprise—there in the dark—of not knowing which flavor was next.

Furthermore, he understood Mrs. Norman's motivations, which had to do with the fact that if he were allowed to watch television with her, he would inevitably ask questions, which she would feel obligated to answer, thus diminishing her concentration and so her pleasure. Her concerns seemed to him reasonable: he had a tendency to ask questions, for he was a curious child (though awkwardly so), a characteristic that his teachers cited as proof in making comments both positive and negative.

Mrs. Norman, it turned out, had been fired because she sometimes wore his father's socks while she watched television, slipping them on over her own bare feet. It was the "bare" part that completely unhinged his father, who did not like to drink from other people's glasses or sit in the dentist's chair while the dentist stood close to him smelling of metal. One night, Mrs. Norman left a pair of his father's socks on the sofa instead of putting them back in his father's drawer, and when his father asked her about it, she said, "Oh my, I took them off when my toes got toasty and forgot all about them," apologizing as though the issue were the forgetting and not the wearing. This had further angered Harold's father, who considered the sharing of socks—his naked feet where hers had been—an intimacy beyond what he could bear, and after he talked about it "morning, noon, and night for two days," as Harold's mother later put it, they fired Mrs. Norman.

Harold was quite familiar with Mrs. Norman's feet. They were what old people's feet should look like, he thought, with nails so yellow and thick that she could not cut them by herself, not even with his assistance. Instead, her daughter, who occasionally stopped by on one of the two nights each week that Mrs. Norman stayed with Harold, cut them using a tool with long handles and an end that looked like the beak of a parrot.

"May I watch?" Harold asked because he was the sort of child who differentiated between "may" and "can" and found that adults often responded favorably to this, granting him privileges that they might not otherwise have. He did not feel that he was being dishonest because he cared deeply about grammar and would have gone on using "may" even without such incentives.

"You may," replied Mrs. Norman, inclining her head toward him as though she were a visiting dignitary granting him an audience, and Harold sat down next to her. Her daughter, a powerful-looking woman in her thirties, stood over them with the device, holding it in a way that suggested that she enjoyed tools and was looking forward to using it. Harold did not like tools, which he thought of as destructive, even though his father told him that he needed to learn to view the bigger picture: it was true that tools were used to cut and bore and pound, but these small acts of destruction generally resulted in a much bigger act of creation. "Like our house," his father said, as though their house were an obvious example of the way that creation came out of destruction.

Mrs. Norman's daughter was what his parents called "jolly." There were other words that they used, words that he did not yet know despite his extensive vocabulary, but he knew "jolly" and felt that she was. She drove a very old motorcycle, which she had to roll to start, and once when his father, who knew nothing about motorcycles, made polite conversation, asking, "Is it a Harley?," she replied, "More like a Hardly," and then she thumped his father on the shoulder and laughed. His father had also laughed, surprising Harold because being touched by people he didn't really know was another thing his father considered too intimate.

Mrs. Norman's daughter grasped her mother's foot and positioned it on her thigh, but this gave her no room to wield the device properly, so she helped her mother onto the floor, where Mrs. Norman sat with her back braced against the sofa while her daughter squeezed the ends of the cutting device together and the tips of the nails broke free with a loud snap and flew into the air like Tiddlywinks.

"Can you please pick those up, Harold?" said Mrs. Norman. "They're sharp, and I don't want anyone stepping on them."

Harold crouched on the floor around Mrs. Norman's newly trimmed feet and began to collect the nails, gathering them in his cupped left hand. He studied one of them, flexing it between his fingers, surprised at its sturdiness. "May I keep it?" he asked, thinking that it would make a welcome addition to the contents of his pocket, which already included a small snail shell, an empty bullet casing, a strip of birch tree parchment, and several dried lima beans, items chosen because they offered a certain tactile reassurance.

"Ish, no," said Mrs. Norman. "I want you to throw them away this minute and then

scrub your hands. You too," she admonished her daughter, who was using the hem of her shirt to brush away the chalky residue that clung to the tool's beak.

Harold went into the kitchen and emptied Mrs. Norman's toenails into the milk carton filled with compost—all except the large one, which he slipped into his pocket. As he scrubbed his hands at the sink, Mrs. Norman's daughter came and stood beside him, so close that he could smell her, an oily smell that he suspected came from the Hardly. Harold did not like to be this close to people, close enough to smell them, though his mother said that this was simply his father rubbing off on him and that he needed to focus on the positive aspects of smell, the way that it enhanced hunger and rounded out memory. Harold tried to embrace his mother's perspective, but he could not get over the way that odor disregarded boundaries, wrapping him, for example, in the earthy, almost tuberish smell that hung in the air after Mrs. Norman had spent time in the bathroom.

"How old are you these days?" asked Mrs. Norman's daughter as she scrubbed vigorously at her hands.

"Ten," he said. "Well, eleven."

"Which is it?" asked Mrs. Norman's daughter, still scrubbing. "Ten or eleven? Age is a very clear-cut thing, you know. When you become eleven, you lose all rights to ten." She said this in a serious tone, looking him in the eye rather than down at her soapy hands, but then she laughed the way she had when she said "more like a Hardly" to his father, and Harold instinctively stepped away from her.

"Eleven." This was true. He had turned eleven just two weeks earlier.

"And what sorts of things do eleven-year-old boys like to do these days?"

"I'm not sure." He knew what *he* liked to do. Besides reading, which was his primary interest and one that he would not belittle by calling a hobby, he liked very specific things: he enjoyed making pancakes but not waffles; he took pleasure in helping his mother dust but could not be convinced to vacuum; he kept lists of words that he particularly liked or disliked the sound of. At the moment, he thought that "vaccination" and "expectorate" were beautiful but could not bear the word "dwindle."

He did not, however, know what boys his age liked to do, for he had no friends. At school, he interacted only with adults, who, he had learned, were subject to many of the same foibles he witnessed in his classmates, especially Miss Jamison, his homeroom teacher, who cared deeply about having the approval of her students and found ways to ridicule Harold in front of them, not overtly as his classmates did but making clear her intention nonetheless.

For example, after he had been home with a cold for two days, she asked, "Harry, how are you feeling?" She was the only teacher who called him Harry, though all of his classmates did, and he hated it, convinced that they were really saying "hairy," but when he complained to his mother, she told him to explain that he "did not care for the diminutive," and so he did not mention the problem to her again.

"I'm better," he said.

"Better?" Miss Jamison repeated loudly. "So you're feeling *better*?" She said this with a smirk, exaggerating "better" as though it were wrong in some fundamental

and obvious way, and his classmates all laughed knowingly. He spent the rest of the morning thinking about it: hadn't she been asking him to compare how he felt today with how he felt yesterday? Ultimately, he decided that there was nothing wrong with saying "better," but that night at dinner when his father asked how he was feeling, he said, "Well," just to be safe.

Shortly after Mrs. Norman's firing, it seemed that Harold might acquire a friend, a boy named Simon, who transferred into his class just after Thanksgiving. When Simon came over to his house to play, however, he announced to Harold that his mother had a lustful look.

"I don't know what that means," Harold replied grudgingly, for he was used to being the one who knew words that his classmates did not.

"You know. Like she wants sex," Simon said matter-of-factly, as though this were a perfectly normal observation to make about a potential friend's mother. Harold did not reply, and the two boys sat on the floor in his room chewing summer sausage sandwiches, made for them by his mother, who had chatted away with Simon as she cut and buttered the bread, trying, Harold knew, to be overly gay as a way of making up for his inability to say and do the sorts of things that would make Simon want to visit again. This is what her hard work had earned her, Harold thought sadly, the indignity of being described as lustful by an eleven-year-old boy who then gobbled up the sandwiches that she had so lustfully prepared.

Simon's comment struck him as particularly unfair because he knew that his parents did not have sex. He had heard his mother telling Aunt Elizabeth as much on the telephone. His aunt lived in Milwaukee, and because it was a long distance call, she and his mother talked just once a month, generally when his father was at work, though lately they had begun to talk more often, and his father had started to complain about the higher bills. "Why doesn't she ever call you?" asked his father, adding, "Goddamn hippies."

Harold did not know what hippies were, not exactly, but his aunt had spent two days with them in August, and so he had his theories. Prior to this visit, he had not seen his aunt since he was six because she and his father did not get along, and throughout the visit, he felt his father's unspoken expectation of loyalty, but he could not help himself: he had liked his aunt, who wore fringe and waited until both of his parents were out of the room to say, "Harold, I'm deeply sorry about your name. I should have tried to stop them."

Harold didn't know how to respond, for he thought of his name as who he was, a feature that could not be changed without altering everything else. Still, he liked the earnest, conspiratorial way in which his aunt addressed him.

"What do your friends call you?" she asked. "Harry?"

He did not tell her that he had no friends. "No, I don't really care for diminutives," he said instead.

She laughed. "Well. Now I can certainly see why they chose Harold."

He smiled shyly then and offered to make her iced tea.

"Groovy," she said. "I like a man who can cook," and when he explained that

iced tea did not actually involve cooking, she laughed her throaty, pleasant laugh yet again.

Eventually, Harold understood that his mother called his aunt more frequently because she and his father argued more frequently, their arguments sometimes taking root right in front of him but over things so small that he did not understand how they had been able to make an argument out of it. Thanksgiving was a perfect example. As the turkey cooked, his parents sat together in the kitchen drinking wine and chatting, their faces growing flushed from the heat and the alcohol, and when everything was ready, his father seated his mother and then placed the turkey in front of her with a flourish.

"Le turkey, Madame," he declared, pronouncing *turkey* as though it were French.

His mother giggled and picked up the carving knife. "Harold, what part would you like?" she asked.

"White meat, please."

"I'll give you breast meat," his mother said, adding with a small chuckle, "God knows your father has no interest in breast."

For the rest of the meal, Harold's father spoke only to Harold, asking *him* for the gravy when it actually sat in front of his mother. His mother was also silent, and when the meal was nearly over, she dumped the last of the cranberries onto Harold's plate even though all three of them knew that cranberries were his father's favorite part of Thanksgiving. Later, as Harold sat reading in his room, he heard his parents yelling, and he crept down the hallway and perched at the top of the stairs, letting their voices funnel up to him.

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about," his father yelled.

"Come on, Charles. Lighten up." Harold heard a small catch in his mother's voice, which meant she wanted to laugh. "He thought I was talking about the turkey breast." She paused. "Which, of course, I was."

There were five words that were forbidden in their household, words that, according to his father, were not only profane but aesthetically unappealing. Harold heard his father say one of these words to his mother, his voice becoming low and precise as it did when he was very angry. His mother did not reply, and a moment later, Harold heard his father open the front door and leave.

When his mother came to tuck him in, her eyes red from crying, he asked where his father had gone. "To the pool hall," she said, which made her start crying again because this was an old joke between them. When his father occasionally disappeared after dinner, slipping out unannounced, Harold's mother always said, "I guess he's gone to the pool hall." She had explained to Harold what a pool hall was, and they both laughed at the notion of his neat, serious father in such a place, there among men who smoked cigars and sweated and made bets with their hard-earned money.

"You have a lot of books," Simon said after he had proclaimed Harold's mother lustful and they had finished their sandwiches, and there seemed nothing left to do.

"Yes," said Harold. He almost added that he was a "voracious reader," but remembering what his father always said, that words were meant to be tools of

communication but just as often drove wedges between people, he opted for triteness instead. "I love reading," he mumbled.

"Have you read all of these books?" asked Simon with a shrug.

"Yes. Now, I mainly check them out of the library. The limit is three at a time, but Mr. Tesky lets me take five." Mr. Tesky was his favorite librarian because, in making recommendations, he never relied on expressions like "the other boys" or "kids your age."

"Yes," replied Simon. "That's because he's a fag."

Harold had no idea what "fag" meant, but he regretted terribly not using "voracious." "Figure it out from context," his mother always told him after he had bothered her one too many times to explain words. He considered the context and decided that "fag" had to do with being helpful.

"Yes," he agreed. "He is."

Simon laughed and threw a pillow at him. "You're a fag also," Simon said.

It turned out that "fag" meant to work really hard: "toil," said his dictionary. Which made sense, for Mr. Tesky did work very hard. Of course, Harold normally would have noticed that this "fag" was a verb while Simon had used it as a noun, but Simon's visit had left him feeling tired and unmoored, and so he overlooked this obvious distinction. He set the dictionary back on the shelf in the spot that it always occupied and surveyed his room, looking for something out of place, something to explain his uneasiness. Finally, he decided to calm himself by slipping into his kimono.

Harold had purchased the kimono that summer at a yard sale at which his mother had been convinced to stop only because there were books for sale. Overall, his parents did not approve of yard sales, for they felt that there was something *unsavory* about putting one's personal belongings outside for strangers to see, and not just to see but to handle and even buy. Harold, however, liked wandering amidst carpets with dark, mysterious stains and mismatched cutlery and stacks of clothing that had presumably once fit the people selling them, people who seemed in no way embarrassed to be associated with these dingy socks and stretched-out waistbands.

The kimono, by contrast, was the most beautiful piece of clothing he had ever seen, black with a crane painted across the back, and his mother, who lent him the two dollars to purchase it, told him that it was from Japan and that in Japan everyone wore such things, and though he found this hard to believe, Mr. Tesky later showed him a book from his personal collection with pictures of Japanese people wearing kimonos as they walked in the streets and sat around drinking tea. Harold wore his kimono only at home, but he felt different when he slipped it on, more graceful and at ease, though whether this meant that he felt more himself or less, he could not say.

He stopped wearing the kimono quite abruptly when he overheard his father referring to it as his "dress," though there had been issues before that: as he ate, the sleeves dragged across his food and became sullied with red spaghetti sauce and pork chop grease, and as he descended the stairs one night, he tripped on the hem, toppling down the last three steps and wrenching his ankle. For days afterwards, he worried that he had inherited his mother's clumsiness, though she tended to fall only in public, usually on special occasions. On his first day of school this year, for example,

she turned to wave at him and caught her foot where the tile became carpeting. She flew forward, upsetting an easel at which one of his classmates stood painting, and landed face down on the floor, her skirt hiked up along her thigh. Miss Jamison rushed to help, and his classmates gathered around her in awe, shocked and excited to see an adult splayed out on the floor. His mother always attended carefully to his cuts and fevers and upset stomachs, and he knew that he should go to her, but he did not because he could not bear being regarded as the boy whose mother fell. Instead, he stayed at his desk with the top up against the sight of her, arranging his books. When he got home that afternoon, his mother teased him about it so relentlessly that he knew he had hurt her deeply.

His mother knocked at his door and came in. If she was surprised to see him wearing his kimono again, she did not say so. Instead, she got right to her point, which was that she felt he should invite Simon for a sleepover.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Harold.

"Why not?" asked his mother, ready, he knew, to tell him yet again that he would have more friends (using "more" as though he actually had some) once he learned not to be so hard on people. "He seemed like an affable fellow."

"Yes," agreed Harold, trying to think of a way to turn his mother against Simon without having to use the word "lustful." "He is affable, but he's also a Democrat."

His mother sighed loudly and stood up. "I thought you'd had enough of that thing," she said, meaning his kimono, and she went downstairs to make dinner.

Harold's parents were Republicans. For Halloween, they had insisted that he go as the Gallup Poll, a costume requiring two people, one to be Jimmy Carter and the other, Gerald Ford. He wanted to be Carter because he liked the slow, buttery way that Carter spoke, but his parents had forbidden it, instead phoning the parents of a girl in his class whose father was his father's subordinate at the bank. The girl, whose name was Molly, had been dropped off the afternoon before Halloween, and the two of them sat in his living room, where, with the help of his mother and several newspaper photos, they sketched the two candidates. He was surprised at how well the masks captured the two men—Carter's sheepish smile and Ford's large, bland forehead—and after cutting small slits for the eyes and stapling elastic bands to the sides, he and Molly slipped them on and practiced trotting around the living room side by side, pretending to jockey for position and calling out, "We're the Gallup Poll."

Later, after Molly had gone home, his mother told him that he needed to be sure to finish ahead, and so, as they paraded in front of the judges the next afternoon, he made a halfhearted surge at the very end, nosing ahead of Jimmy Carter. After the prizes had been given, predictably, to a witch, a robot, and a farmer, Mr. Tesky came up to Harold and complimented him on his costume. "Do you follow politics?" Mr. Tesky asked, his Adam's apple bobbing playfully. As usual, he wore corduroy pants with a belt so long that it actually made another half turn around his body. Harold wondered whether Mr. Tesky had once been fat, a man better suited for this belt, but he did not ask because he knew that it was impolite to ask questions about health. Actually, his parents included money, religion, and politics on this list as well, so Harold did not know how to respond to Mr. Tesky's question.

"No," he said finally. "I'm too young to follow politics."

Mr. Tesky laughed and reached out as though to ruffle his hair, then seemed to think better of it and retracted his hand, thrusting it into his back pocket as though putting the gesture literally behind him.

At dinner, Harold's father asked nothing about Simon's visit, which Harold took as an indication that his mother had been sufficiently convinced of Simon's unsuitability. Instead, the conversation centered on back-to-school night, which they would all three be attending the next evening. Harold did not understand why his parents required him to participate, but the one time that he had protested, explaining that none of his classmates would be going, his father berated him for his apathy. As his parents chewed their roast beef, Harold went through the list of his teachers again, making sure that they understood that Mrs. Olson taught science and Miss Olson, social studies, because his parents tended to mix up the two women, expecting Miss Olson to be young when, in fact, she was just a few years from retirement.

"You should also meet Mr. Tesky," he said, and then because it was his habit to utilize new words immediately, he added, "He's a fag."

"Harold," said his mother in her severe voice. "I don't want to hear you ever talking that way about people. That's a terrible accusation." His father said nothing. Harold did not reply because he had found that when his mother became angry like this, it was best to remain silent and let the moment pass, even when he did not understand what had caused her outburst, for his confusion often provoked her more.

The next night, as his mother stood in his homeroom talking to a group of other mothers, his father announced, "I think I will have a talk with your Mr. Tesky. Perhaps you can escort me to the library, Harold."

Mr. Tesky was on a ladder when they arrived, wearing his belt and a half, the tip of it sticking out at them from behind like a tongue. He did not seem to realize at first that they had come to talk to him, and so while they stood looking up at him, he continued to shelve books, sliding himself nervously along on his rolling ladder. When he finally came down and shook hands with Harold's father, Harold saw that his collar was twisted inward on one side; it occurred to him that Mr. Tesky's collars were always askew but that he had never thought to note it until now, now that he was viewing Mr. Tesky through his father's eyes.

For nearly ten minutes, they discussed Harold and his reading habits, his father comporting himself as though he were gathering information on a new hire at the bank, revealing nothing about himself while asking questions that sought to lay bare gaps in Harold's knowledge or abilities, weaknesses in his approach to reading. Then, shifting the conversation suddenly away from Harold, his father asked, "Say, what do you make of these speed reading courses?"

"Speed reading?" repeated Mr. Tesky.

"I've been doing some research," said his father. "Apparently the Carters are big fans and so was Kennedy," adding with a snort, "for what that's worth," as though speed reading, like opinions on communism or the economy, must be discussed along party lines. "I'm thinking about holding a seminar at the bank, maybe bringing in a specialist."

Mr. Tesky sawed his index finger vigorously back and forth beneath his nose.

"Did you know that the average person reads just two words a second?" his father continued. "But with training, that can be increased to five, even seven. I've just been reading about the Wood Method. Ever heard of it? You move your hand across the page as you read, and apparently the motion catches the eye's attention and stimulates it to work faster." He opened a book and demonstrated, sweeping his hand across the page as though blessing it or driving out demons.

Mr. Tesky regarded him the way that Harold's mother regarded guests who added salt to the food before tasting it. "Mr. Lundstrom," he began, his neck growing blotchy. "The point of reading is to luxuriate in the words, to appreciate their beauty and nuance, to delve fully into their meaning."

"Speed reading maintains comprehension," insisted Harold's father.

"Understanding has its own rhythm, Mr. Lundstrom," said Mr. Tesky. "Waving your hand about? Well. That is merely a distraction."

Harold had never heard Mr. Tesky speak with such severity, not even when children ignored basic library rules, laughing loudly or moving books around so that others would have trouble finding them. In turn, he had always been impressed with his father's ability to make conversation with all sorts of people: when the electrician came to update the wiring in their kitchen, his father asked him why electricians made less than plumbers when their work was so much more dangerous, and when the plumber came the next week to unclog the toilet, he told the plumber that he deserved every penny he charged and then some, given what he had to endure. His father deftly calculated people's interests and needs, drawing them out by soliciting their advice, by making them feel knowledgeable and competent, yet with Mr. Tesky, he had failed. He had asked him about speed reading but said nothing about the stacks of books that he kept on his nightstand and read faithfully from each night.

Harold and his father made their way back down the half-lit hallway to his classroom, where his mother was still deep in conversation with the other mothers, standing in a circle near the bulletin board on which Miss Jamison had placed examples of what she considered their best work. In Harold's case, she had tacked up an uninspired summary of the process of photosynthesis, something he had dashed off one morning before school. Harold knew that people would assume that science was his favorite subject, particularly given the correctness of the writing, but the truth was that he hated science and had written about it correctly only because it would have required more effort to write incorrectly, to misplace commas or choose less exact words.

His mother, unaware that he and his father had returned, was indeed pointing to his paragraph as she described a boy fascinated by earthquakes, the solar system, and creatures without legs, speaking for several minutes but never mentioning that his fascination was a function not of curiosity but of fear. The other mothers chuckled politely, and then, her voice rising toward closure, his mother announced, "I guess Harold's just all boy," invoking his name to refer to a boy who seemed to him as unknowable as God. His mother turned and saw Harold behind her, and her words became a door shutting between them.

By Minnesota standards, the winter was mild, meaning that the temperature hovered just above zero rather than dipping precipitously below. Still, as they drove home, the road stretched before them treacherously, the icy patches more difficult to detect at night. His mother, who was better on ice, was behind the wheel, Harold beside her because his father had climbed into the back, indicating his wish to be left alone. His mother did not take heed of this, however, instead offering comments about the other mothers that would normally have made his father laugh. Harold wondered whether he would some day grow to care about the sorts of things that his parents did, things like whether a person was missing a button or had applied slightly more mascara to the right eye than the left.

"Oh," she blurted out, as though suddenly remembering a missed appointment or forgotten birthday. "The librarian. How was he?"

"Ichabod Crane," said his father tiredly. "Skinny. Bookish. Disheveled."

Harold's father did not approve of skinniness in men. He believed that men should be muscular, and though he himself was not, he had established a workout space in a small room at the back of the house, filling it with variously sized barbells and two weight machines and covering the walls with pictures of men flexing their muscles. Harold knew that his father had taped up the pictures to provide inspiration, but the men frightened Harold because they had a hard, geometric quality: they wore v-shaped swimming suits, and their torsos—small waists and broad shoulders—were inverted triangles topped off by square heads. Often, his father came home from work and went directly into this room without even changing out of his suit and tie, and when Harold was sent to call him for dinner, he always paused at the door and then left without knocking because he could hear his father inside, groaning.

A week later, Harold entered the house to the now familiar sound of his mother speaking to Aunt Elizabeth on the telephone. School had been dismissed an hour early because it was the start of Christmas break, but his mother seemed to have forgotten this, and Harold set about quietly preparing his favorite snack, minute rice with butter. "Before we even met, apparently," he heard his mother say as he waited for the water to boil, "but do you suppose he thought to tell me about it? I'm just the wife—the blind, convenient, little banker's wife."

She listened a moment, then cut in sharply. "Don't patronize me, Elizabeth. I know that." She snorted. "In the closet," she said derisively. "Where do you even get these terms?" She slammed down the receiver, and as Harold ate his minute rice with butter, he could hear his mother sobbing in her bedroom upstairs.

When she came down an hour later, she looked surprised to find him sitting at the kitchen table. He had washed his rice bowl and pot and put everything away, and he let her believe that he had just arrived.

"Should I make you a snack?" she asked.

"No," Harold said. "I'm not really hungry." He waited until she took out the cutting board and began cutting up apples for a crisp. "Remember when you fired Mrs. Norman for putting me in the closet?" he said in what he hoped was a casual voice.

His mother turned toward him quickly. "That's not why we fired Mrs. Norman,"

she said, and she explained in great detail about the socks. "He's always been like that. So particular." She paused. "Harold, your father is leaving. I'll let him explain it to you." She turned back around and continued cutting.

That night, after the three of them had eaten dinner in silence, Harold walked outside with his father, who was carrying two suitcases and a garment bag. His father stowed the luggage in the trunk of his car and then told Harold that he had something to say.

"Okay," said Harold.

His father cleared his throat several times, sounding like a lawnmower that would not turn over. "According to basic economic theory," he began, "human beings always work harder to avoid losing what they already have rather than to acquiring more. You see, loss is always more devastating than the potential for gain is motivating. I want you to remember that, Harold."

Harold nodded and thrust his hands deep into his pockets, seeking out Mrs. Norman's toenail, which he flexed between his thumb and index finger.

"I have a new friend," his father said, "and I'm moving in with"—he hesitated—"him."

"Does that mean that you won't be checking the windows and doors anymore?" Harold asked. Every night before shutting off the lights, his father walked through the house, staring at each window and each door, checking to make sure that they were properly closed. His mother had always been annoyed by the practice, by the time it took his father to inspect the entire house, but it was something that he had done every night of Harold's life and so Harold considered it as much a part of bedtime as brushing his teeth and closing his eyes.

"I guess not," his father said, sounding disappointed at Harold's question. He reached out and placed his hand on his car door, and Harold knew what this meant: that his father was ready, even impatient, to leave, that as he stood there explaining himself to Harold, he really wanted to be in his car driving away, away toward his new friend and his new house—while Harold stayed behind in this house, where he would continue to brush his teeth and close his eyes as he always had, except from now on he and his mother would sleep with the windows and doors unchecked all around them. The thought of this filled him with terror, and as he stood there in the driveway watching his father leave, Harold found himself longing for the dark safety of the closet: the familiar smells of wet wool and vacuum cleaner dust; the far-off chatter of Mrs. Norman's television shows; the line of light marking the bottom of the locked door, a line so thin that it made what lay on the other side seem, after all, like nothing.