

See in a Mirror Dimly

The boy flung the screen door open yelling "Home Mom" and threw his load of books on the cracking plastic couch. A fly buzzed around his head: he swatted at it and pulled the aluminum door closed, watching it weave away outside through the bright air where across the street over small lots of grass a row of light pink, yellow and white houses interrupted his view. Below him an old red bicycle leaned over the three step porch.

"Hi, Dino," his mother said from the top of the stairs. He turned to watch her slow descent. "How was your day?"

"OK," he said. He went to the television set where their thick gold Bible sat coated with dust next to a crumpled TV Guide. His mother's weekly purchase of lottery tickets covered the book.

"Good," she said ruffling his hair. She stepped into the kitchen.

"What're we going to eat?"

"Stew." A wooden spoon clunked in a pot. "Beef stew."

He made a face and stared at the shows his parents had circled in the TV Guide. A curious depression pinched his heart, and he let his palm rest on that evening's schedule. The paper was still hot from the TV. He went to the kitchen to see what his mother was up to now.

"Would you set the table?"

Dino acquiesced without a word. He dragged the table out of its corner and stopped below the kitchen's only window. Light centered on the table, reflecting white in Dino's eyes, and he saw a smooth piece of ice melting in an ocean under a dull sun. He imagined a great catastrophe and his family as the only survivors, drifting slowly. He played with the situation in his mind while he unstacked the four chairs and maneuvered them about the limited space. The armful of dishes and silverware he took and laid down carefully. Finished, he stood back to admire his work.

"Done."

"Looks good," said his mother at the stove. She never looked up, just kept on stirring, shifting her dry, bare feet on the green-yellow spotted floor. It reminded him of the hallway in school when someone has just thrown up.

"Did you learn anything in school today?"

"There was some weird stuff in Science class."

"What was that?"

"Oh, the teacher told us about Darwin and how we came from apes and stuff."

His mother stopped stirring, turning full body towards him.

"A nun told you that?"

"A lay teacher did."

"A lay teacher told you that? You're kidding." Her voice confused him. "I don't believe it. What the hell am I sending my kid to Catholic School for to be taught that crap?"

Dino grabbed the back of a chair for strength and watched his mother take one step to the table. A curl of black hair limped over her dull-brass colored forehead. She held the spoon ready to strike, looking over his head at something.

"Those damn *lay* teachers. What the hell do they think they're doing? I should call that school right now and tell them to—" and she moved to the phone on the wall.

"Don't do that," Dino cried. He didn't want to cause trouble. He could picture too easily what would happen to him in school if his mother did call: something like that same afternoon in class:

"Then how come I'm not an ape?" he had honestly asked.

The kids around him sniggered and one sardonic face bobbed in agreement. His teacher had then explained again, talking slower at times, but Dino still wasn't sure how it could have worked. How could animals ever become human? His cool approach to this new idea had turned quickly to sarcasm.

"Do you mean my parents were apes?"

The class had roared.

"I should call," his mother said again.

"Don't call, Mom. It's OK. It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" she said, her voice sharp, her face changing into that ugliness he had grown to despise. "It's not right. It's Holy Thursday and that school—did you know today was Holy Thursday?"

"Yes, Mom." Dino kicked a leg of the chair and leaned it back towards himself.

"Don't talk to me that way. It's not right. That school should be teaching you what's right. Don't do that to the chair."

"It's not important," he said softly. He eased the chair back, considering what *was* important. Looking down, unable to feel anything but the blackness of his tight shoes, he regarded his pants and tie, faded together into the same weary black color. His azure shirt had been worn into a comfortableness he enjoyed each morning before tightening the tie up to the hollow in his throat where it stayed and pressed all day; then his shirt too would be ruined. He

fingered the tie, twisted it, looked up: "It's OK. Really. I'm going to change now," and he followed the path marked in the carpet to the stairs, past the couch and the wooden chair next to it. Climbing up, he stared down upon the space in his father's chair and felt better.

In the bathroom after peeing he looked in the mirror and grunted. Then he combed his straight black hair forward and pushed his chin out. Hunched and bow-legged, he lurched across the pink and green tiles, grunting, swinging his arms loosely, trying to get at something. He stopped after awhile, feeling drained beneath the jeans and T-shirt. He looked into the mirror again, searching his sharp, sand-colored face. Still me, he thought, touching his chin, his cheek. It's something. Turning his head slowly, he checked his eyes and different parts of his face, then rapidly looked down and back to his eyes several times. He wanted to see himself looking away, as other people would see him. He would be convinced of himself then; he would know that he belonged. But his eyes, the mirror, everything always failed, and the attempt was tiring. He turned the lights out and opened the door.

"It's about time," his sister said. "I've been waiting long enough," and pushed past and closed the door.

"How am I supposed to know you're home already?" he said to the door.

The sound of water running, splashing, and, "They let us out early for vacation. Go downstairs. Mom's got dinner almost ready."

He walked to the top of the stairs and looked down. The space in the chair was full; the screen blinked colors of a pre-news news program. Dino jumped the last three steps and landed doubled over: his father turned.

"Didn't I tell you to stop that? You're going to crack your head open on that wall yet, and then what're we going to do with you?"

"You'll have to pick my brains up and put me back together, Dad." He pulled himself up and walked to the couch. "What's on?"

"News. Important stuff, kid." He reached over and swung at Dino who laughed and dodged and slapped the hand, which had been scrubbed red. Dino saw black under every fingernail. He couldn't remember ever seeing them all clean at the same time.

"I think its boring," he said.

His father grinned. "Well someone in this house has to find out what's going on in this world."

"I guess so."

Dino thought. He didn't know if it was important. What he learned in school, *that* was important. What he read in books, too. After dinner his father would chase him away from the television set and tell him to go do his homework, go read something, go outside and play, get some exercise. There were so many things to do besides what his father was always telling him. He thought it must be important to be a grown-up, though. Then you were big and you could tell people what to do, especially your kids, and you got to sit around the house all day watching TV. Or you got to go away all day, then come home for dinner and watch the news and the TV all night long. He thought that would be nice. All except the news.

"Dinner's on," his mother yelled, popping her head into the room.

Dino and his father looked at each other smiling, and he rushed down upon his son and poked and squeezed his sides until the laughter came free from both of them. He hit his father's hands and tried twisting his body loose, but his father only grabbed him closer, and those strong earthy, oily smells filled Dino's head. Now he didn't want to break apart, but his father straightened up and stepped back and said, "That's enough, now. Time to eat."

"Awww." Dino slapped the hands once more.

"Hey, come on, now."

So it was over already. Dino kept quiet and followed behind his father on the path into the kitchen.

"Did I miss something funny in there?" his mother said.

"I don't know. Did you say something funny in there, Dino?"

"Nope."

"Nope," his father grinned to his mother.

She sighed and they sat down. The food was all set out. She went to the edge of the kitchen again and called out "Rita! Dinner!" and came back and sat down with them. Dino thought it was funny that they sat at home like they sat at school: boy, girl, boy, girl: Dad, Marguerita, me, Mom.

"Dino tell you what he learned at school today?"

Dino sat upright, cold, his mouth open. He was back on the ice in the ocean again, with his parents.

"No, but you did," his father said, scooping the stew onto his plate. His hands gripped the handle and spoon; his black eyes were shiny and quick like the fly he had let out of the house.

"Well what do you think?"

"They're just ideas. No harm comes from teaching ideas." He put the pot on its plate and Dino took it up.

"It's bad to teach that stuff to kids so young. They can't understand it. Let them get it when they're in high school or college. I was going to call that school and tell them."

But you never will. You always talk but you don't know anything. You don't know *anything* important. At least Dad goes out all day. He watches the news. He gets to *see*.

Dino shuffled his spoon through the small puddle on his plate and listened to feet pounding down the stairs and across the floor. His sister dropped into her seat. The ice floe tipped. "Stew!"

"Yes, stew," his mother said. "Don't complain, just eat."

"Why didn't you call?" his father said.

"Dino didn't want me to."

"Then leave it at that."

"Call who?"

"No one," his father said.

"Call who?" his sister said again to him.

"No one," Dino said, looking from one parent's eyes to the other's.

"Fill up your plate, Marguerita," his father said.

She did what she was told, knocking the wooden spoon hard against her plate.

"I'm going out tonight," she said. "Jimmy's coming over right after dinner."

"Today is Holy Thursday, Marguerita," his mother said.

"I know," she said, blowing on the stew in her spoon.

She looked so smart — Dino wanted to smash her into dirt. *Then* let Jimmy come over and see her.

His mother said, "The family is going to church after dinner."

"Oh, Mom, I'll go tomorrow and Sunday. That'll be enough."

"Marguerita, you knew what today was."

"But I already told Jimmy to come over after dinner."

"Where are you going that's so important?"

"To a movie."

"So early?"

"We're stopping by a friend's house first."

"For what?"

"Oh, god, must you know every move I make?"

"No I don't have to know every move you make. I just like to know what you're planning. And don't talk to me that way."

"What way?"

"You talk to me like I was a child. I'm your mother."

"I know that, Mom!"

His father grunted and chewed his food slowly in his throat and said quietly, "Can't you two just shut up and eat?" Both elbows were on the table and a piece of Italian bread stuck out of one hand. His eyes looked like tired flies turning from his mother to his sister. Dino heard him breathing that heavy way through his nose. "All I want is one meal without a fight."

"We're not fighting," his mother said. "We are talking."

His father snorted and used the bread to load his spoon with stew, which he gobbled.

"Don't you think the children should be taught what's right? That's why we sent them to Catholic School."

"I'm not in Catholic School," Marguerita said.

"And then they teach that crap they're shoveling everywhere."

His father dropped his spoon. "Jesus Christ, Maria, what do you want me to do? Call the school? It's done already. He knows about it. Ideas from books won't hurt him if he knows what's right. That stuff can't change anybody."

Dino looked across at his father.

"What crap're they teaching you?" Marguerita asked him.

He felt each word form on his tongue: "How we descended from apes."

His sister made ape noises and giggled and punched Dino in the arm, and he grunted back bursting laughter. *This* was the way he liked his sister to be. Now he could remember the times they used to have together, the fun.

"What're you laughing at?" his mother said. She stared him into silence. His sister stopped laughing. A bitter taste rose in his throat.

"You think it's funny?"

The spoon burned in Dino's hand. His feet sucked up the ice and froze him to his place, else he might have fallen. He could smell his sister. The blackness under his father's fingernails seemed to crawl up his old hands and arms, shoulders and face, and settle, bloating, under his eyes. A sigh and a shiver grabbed his body. Dino looked up at his mother.

"I just thank God my mother can't hear how you two talk in front of your parents. You kids think you know everything?"

Dino watched his mother's face and hated it. He hated her when she kept pushing. It was like she was testing them, watching to see how far she could go before any of them fell. Did she want to save herself by pushing him off? Did she really want to destroy him?

Dino heard water licking the ice. The sun was spinning heat around his head. Only his thick feet made him steady.

"I can't believe the way you treat us."

Marguerita pushed herself away from the table and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Upstairs," she said. She took her plate and shuffled her feet to the sink, left the food on the counter, and walked away.

His father never turned around. His mother was shaking. Her eyes had her husband cornered.

"Marguerita," he said.

She turned in the living room, waiting.

"Excuse yourself from the table."

She looked at Dino as if he were a dog lost from home, then said, "Excuse me," and went upstairs. Dino watched her go. Everything felt light and heavy at the same time. A door shut upstairs. He wondered if he would ever be able just to walk away from it.

"You should've told her that she has to go to church."

His father pulled out another slice of bread and bit into it. He shook his head. "She's not going."

"She is going. She's got to. She's not old enough to say she will or not."

"She's old," his father said and chewed his bread. "Finish up your stew, Dino. It's pretty good, huh?"

Dino tried to smile but couldn't. He was trying not to scream. He was biting his tongue, concentrating on the hard tip between his front teeth. His mother was opening her mouth again. The noises were coming fast. That face she saved for times like these was shaping itself, forming an image for Dino to hate. Pushing lower into his seat, he gave up on his tongue and started grinding his teeth.

"I'm done," he said.

His mother stopped with a jolt. His father peered over the table and some of the blackness paled from his eyes. He nodded. Dino wanted to cry for him, but he jumped away before the ice could carry him down with them, and he followed the path upstairs. He knew then that his parents were alone together forever, and he saw himself floating along over all that water. In the bathroom he brushed his teeth until blood came on the bristles.

He knocked on her door.

"I'm on the phone."

He suctioned an ear to the wood.

"Nobody. So anyway I just got up and left. I did—I'm tired of her shit, you know? It's all I get anymore—I know—Can you believe what she said? And Dino just sat there. What the hell *can* he do?—If I was his age I wouldn't of done it. I couldn't—I know—Yeah—We're going out—I don't know—I'll give him a few ideas. I'll let you know what happens—Have I ever before?—Yes, Carol—I won't—Carol! God you're so queer sometimes. I'm going to ask Jimmy to get you somebody—They are not. They're just different—Jimmy's not. God you should've heard him the other night—Over his house—He was almost crying—I am not, Carol. He does it to himself—I swear—Yes—Yes—Well he wanted to—Yeah—I know he's going to want me to—What if I hurt him?—On *what?*—Carol—You're *kidding?*—What did it taste like?—*Salty honey?*—How *queer*—Oh, I know that. We're just waiting for a good time—I'll know—Well he was grabbing my head—I don't want to hurt him. He looks so cute when he does it. Like a dog—Yeah—" And she laughed.

He thought of her laughing with him at the table five minutes ago, and he hated her. He couldn't believe how much hate he was feeling. The strain was too great. Dino pulled away from her door, rubbing his neck, sad and wondering. Noises from the living room had wandered upstairs like a bad odor from the kitchen. He went to see.

"Shit."

It was his mother.

"Two numbers. Did you see that? A three and a seven. Can you believe it?"

He hopped down the steps. Then he punched his father's arm and jumped onto the couch.

"You're really going to get it one of these days, kid."

"Don't do that, Dino."

"Did you win, Mom?"

"Not tonight, dear."

"What're you going to do if you win?"

"Buy a car and drive away."

His father chuckled.

His mother put her tickets back on the TV. "Don't laugh, buddy. I can't believe I hung around this long. Someday it'll be my number they're calling, and then watch out."

Dino had a picture in his mind of his mother buying her lottery tickets. The thought of her losing sent him adrift. A warm sadness ached in his bowels. He wondered sometimes how his parents got along, if they ever hated each other, the house, or Marguerita. She might be ruining everything for him with her dates and her Jimmy talk; she didn't even know she was abandoning him. Now it was only him against his parents.

"You love it here, don't you?" his father said.

"If we're going to church we'd better get dressed," his mother said. She turned the TV off.

His father grumbled and squirmed, but he lifted himself out of his chair, and went to the front door. Dino waited.

"Dino," he said, "What're you doing with that bike?"

"I still ride it, Dad."

"You do?" He turned and went past him and slapped his knee. "Good."

"OK, OK, let's get ready, you two. No more stalling. You've got to take a shower, Juan. Let's hurry up."

Dino felt small and trapped going up the steps behind his parents. He could easily lose his balance on the stairs, and no one was behind him to save him.

He came out of his room in the one set of good clothes he had ever owned. His mother made such an ordeal out of buying clothes for him that he shunned anything new. But he was comfortable. He waited downstairs.

Someone knocked on a door.

"Marguerita, we're going now. Be sure to lock up before you go, and be careful tonight. Remember your curfew. And say hello to Jimmy."

A door opened and he heard a few exclamations. Then his parents were downstairs and walking out the door. He got up and followed.

"She did look good."

"She did," his father said.

"She's only fourteen."

They got into his father's car.

"I can't believe how good she looked."

"I can," his father said.

Dino saw several girls from his class in church. They were all dressed up like he'd never seen them before. Each one was different and pretty. Then he studied his own clothes and wondered. He

remembered what he'd said in class that afternoon. He looked around for the kids who had laughed. Some were there, but they didn't see him or pretended not to. Dino watched his parents—his mother leaning forward, waiting, his father sitting back, his eyes twitching, looking for a way out. Dino looked down at himself. A thumping deep inside was beginning. He thought how sad and alone he was with this good burning inside. It was warm and it hurt and it was good, it felt good. Then it moved to his chest, tingling his lungs. Then it moved and breathed through his nostrils. It took over his head, but he stopped the good tears from coming down. He was aware of his hair, his eyes, his lips, the point his long nose ended in, his brown face. Everything was his. HIS. How could there be anyone else?

He watched the girls and his parents and thought of his teacher and Marguerita and the boys who laughed in his class. He felt the sun through the stained glass and looked and saw a fly bumping in a corner, bumping and bumping against the glass, and he knew it would die because it would never just fly away. Then he watched the priest up near the altar and had the feeling of being secretly cheated out of something in his life.

Robert Alan Jacoby