

Liar Liar

By David Alan Armstrong

It's 1960. I turn eight next year. John F. Kennedy is running for president. He's my hero. I get an Ivy League haircut to look just like him. I know nothing about the new war in Vietnam or the Russian capture of a U-2 spy plane pilot. I have enough to do learning to maneuver through second grade.

"Remember your manners, sweetie," Mom calls through the open car window.

I race up the cement path to the porch of my new friend's house. I know about manners. Say please and thank you, yes ma'am and no ma'am, share, and don't take the last thing from the serving plate, no matter what it is or how much I want it.

I don't like Mom calling me "sweetie." Especially at Scott's house. I'm way too old for "sweetie." I'm old enough for a playday at Scott's house without Mom even being there. Mom has never met Scott's mom, yet here I am, walking by myself to a strange door of a strange house on a strange street. Granted, Scott's street is only a couple of blocks from mine. Still, acting "grown-up" is heady stuff, and I straighten my shoulders and touch the doorbell.

The bottoms of my feet tingle. I glance back at the familiar white and green Chevy idling at the curb. I take a breath to steady myself. The doorknob rattles, and I jump. A woman with longish, dark brown hair and bright lipstick smiles through the open door.

"You must be Tommy."

I nod, then remember my manners. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, I'm so glad to meet you. Scottie has been waiting on the swings in the backyard all morning." The woman beams a big smile and waves at the two-toned Chevy at the curb. I peer over my shoulder to see Mom wave, then pull slowly away. Committed, I turn and walk into an unfamiliar house with a stranger. "Grown-up" at this moment doesn't feel quite so comfortable.

Scott's mom steps back. "Go right through the kitchen to the back."

"Thank you," I reply with practiced precision. I hurry through the living room, dining room, and kitchen to the back door, but notice stuff. The sofa and the big chairs in the living room are shiny brown leather, not plaid and floral fabric like in my house. A big chandelier hangs over the polished wood table. My house doesn't even have a dining room. The fridge in the kitchen is twice as big as ours. I hit the screened back door and leap off the porch.

A shiny red A-framed swing—pretty much like the swingset in my backyard, only bigger—occupies the middle of the lawn. With a whoop, my red-haired, freckle-faced friend launches himself from the seat, arches awkwardly through the air, arms and legs flailing, and lands on his feet, stumbles forward, tumbles into a somersault, and springs up with a triumphant,

“Ta Da!” Scott’s quite the athlete, probably why he and I hit it off on the playground so quickly on that first day of school.

Equals in climbing the jungle gym, hanging by our knees from the chin-up bar, and racing around the playground, we are a well-matched pair. I can beat Scott in a sprint to the fence, but Scott can make it all the way around the rings without falling. I usually lose my grip and drop to the sand about halfway. I chalk it up to Scott’s slimmer build. Otherwise, we’re evenly matched, which makes for a strong friendship. Now here we are, just two weeks later, in Scott’s backyard, ready for a day of adventure.

We explore the territory. Scott shows me hiding places behind tall, stiff, leafy bushes. He has buried a time capsule, way off in the corner of the lot by the cinder block fence. He marked the spot with a smooth, round stone. Grabbing the handle of a soup spoon stuck in the dirt, he digs up a Buster Brown shoe box tied with kite string. He removes the string and lifts the lid, displaying fabulous treasures calculated to amaze future generations—a St. Christopher medal his cousin gave him, a yo-yo his dad used when he was a kid, a seashell he picked up during a family vacation at the beach, a brand new golf ball he “borrowed” from his dad’s bag, a penny, a wallet-sized photo of himself in first grade, the hook on which he caught his first trout, and a piece of lined notebook paper on which he scrawled, “Here Lies Scott.” I don’t know why Scott digs up his capsule so soon. Time capsules are supposed to stay hidden for a hundred years. Scott says he digs it up every week just to make sure everything remains safe. I’m going to make my own time capsule. It will be bigger and have more stuff in it than Scott’s. And I won’t dig it up, not ever.

Scott dusts the dirt from the knees of his Levi’s. The little red tag on the back pocket catches my eye. Wow, Scott has real Levi’s! I don’t have to look at the dull blue patch on my back pocket to know it says “JCPenney”.

We spend the morning in games and competitions—who can swing higher, jump farther, climb faster, hit softer? The soft-hitting contest turns out to be a joke. Scott says I can go first. I touch Scott’s arm with the softest possible hit. On Scott’s turn, he hauls off and rocks me with a full blow to the shoulder. Scott thinks it’s hilarious. I vow to pull that joke on one of the kids in my class who constantly picks on me. The teacher couldn’t get mad if the kid volunteers to let himself get hit, could she?

In backyard games, we are evenly matched. I hold a headstand the longest, Scott beats me in thumb wrestling three out of five, and I make Scott blink first. I keep the score in my head, and when Scott’s mom calls them in to wash our hands for lunch, I’m just barely behind on points. Scott has the home-field advantage. If we were in my backyard, I could easily beat Scott at more than half the contests. Dad taught me to always be a “good loser,” which means to pretend like losing didn’t matter. But losing always matters.

After splashing water on our hands at the bathroom sink and leaving muddy streaks on the towel, we sit at the kitchen table with glasses of grape juice and bologna sandwiches with mayonnaise and mustard. The wooden tabletop is painted glossy red, just like the table in my kitchen, only my table is painted deep blue and is smaller. Scott’s table has room for at least six

people. Mine can barely fit me, my parents, and my little sister. Mom says another baby is on its way to our house. I don't know what we will do about that little table. Still, the blue table at my house is better.

Scott grabs his sandwich in both hands and takes a huge bite. "After lunch, you want to play GI Joes?" he asks. The words are muffled by the food in his mouth. "I got two last Christmas. You can be the camo one, and I'll be the regular uniform."

"Sure!" Two GI Joes! My handful of little green plastic army figures couldn't stack up to real GI Joes. Scott is one lucky kid.

Scott's mom sits in the chair across the table from me, sipping a steaming cup of coffee. She folds her hands on the table and smiles at me. "I'm so glad you could come over to play today, Tommy."

Manners at the ready, having rehearsed this very scene with Mom last night, I respond, "Thank you." I take a bite of my sandwich and a drink of juice.

Mrs. Allison raises her eyebrows at my polite reply, and her smile warms. While I'm chewing, she says, "Scottie was worried he wouldn't make friends in his new class. But it looks like he has made a friend right away."

"Yes, ma'am," I say. I shoot a glance at Scott, who rolls his eyes. A drop of mustard clings to the corner of Scott's mouth, and the urge hits me to point it out, but I don't want to embarrass my friend in front of his mom. I try to look away, but I can't make my eyes focus on anything but the mustard.

"So, Scottie, have you told your new friend yet about our family?"

Just at that moment, Scott licks, and the offending mustard disappears. I sigh with relief.

"Nope." Families are pretty much irrelevant between seven-year-old friends. Bikes and snails and races and scratched knees matter, but not brothers and sisters.

"Well, I think it is good for new friends to get to know each other's families. Don't you, Tommy?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say, although I can't think of a good reason why.

"So, Scottie, why don't you tell Tommy about your brothers?"

Scott rolls his eyes again, stuffing the last bite of sandwich into his mouth. "My oldest brother, Matt," he mumbles around a wad of bread, "goes to Lakeside High. He's on the football team. Not the real team, just the 'B' team." He swallows and takes a swig of juice. "Jake goes to Adamson Academy."

Sounds like a military school. "Where's that?"

"It's a private school for math geniuses. But I don't know how my brother got in there."

The wheels start turning in my head. A football player and a math whiz for brothers. All I have is a baby sister who doesn't even go to school yet. She's just a pest.

"There's Timmy. He goes to our school, but we'll never see him, because he goes to the sixth-grade side of the playground. He's the dodgeball captain for his class."

The score in my brain for best family is adding up quickly, and it isn't looking good for me.

"Did Scottie tell you what his father does for work?" Scott's mom asks.

I shake my head. Scott glances longingly at the back door, anxious to get back to the next game. Yet, in my mind, the “My Family Is Better than Your Family” game is already underway. I can’t top Scott’s score in the “brother” category. And the what-does-your-father-do-for work category has just been announced.

Scott wrinkled his brow. “My dad’s some bigshot at Wesley International.”

Scott’s mom beams. “He’s actually the head accountant. You’ve probably never heard of Westley, but I’m sure your parents know of it. It’s the largest plastics manufacturing plant in the state. If you have something made of plastic in your house, there’s a good chance it came from my husband’s factory.”

The score is stacking up fast in Scott’s favor. Dad works in the meat department at the grocery store downtown. The bologna I just ate may have come from Dad’s store, but that is about all I can say for my dad’s job.

“And I’m the librarian at the junior high. I love working with the children. Do you like to read?”

I nod, but I’m not really listening. My mom is just a mom. She used to be a waitress before I was born. She still likes to tell stories about her favorite customers at the diner and the ten-dollar tip she got once, but when I came along, she gave up waitressing to be a mom. Nothing fancy like a librarian.

Wow! The tally is in, and it’s six to zero. I should give up and admit total defeat, but quitting gnaws at me. I feel small, unimportant, less. . . I can’t find a word, just less. I hate it, like I hate losing a race to a slower kid just because my shoelace comes untied.

“So, can we go now?” Scott blurts, looking steadily at the back door. My silent plea is the same. I desperately want to get back to the yard where I can be on an even playing field again.

Scott’s mom frowns. “I think we should hear something about your friend’s family. After all, he knows about us, and we don’t know anything about him.”

Scott slumps in his chair and puts on a face that tells me, “Hurry up and let’s get this over with.”

My brain whirls. I don’t want to look stupid or inferior to Scott and his mom. I can say everything about my parents and sister in ten seconds. I can already imagine Scott’s mom clucking her tongue and saying, “Ah, that’s too bad.”

In that moment, something huge and powerful breaks loose in my seven-year-old mind. I don’t want anyone looking down on me and my family. I simply have to have a better family than Scott. I *will not* be less. I can make something up.

“So, how many brothers and sisters do you have?” Scott’s mom asks.

The number twelve jumps into my head and out my mouth. That’ll show them!

“Wow!” Scott’s mom raises her eyebrows, and the corners of her mouth turn slightly down. It looks like she has just bitten into a sour apple. “That’s quite the family! How many boys and how many girls?”

My mind’s racing now, and I decide on the fly that if Scott has all brothers, I would have all brothers, too. “All boys.”

“And how old are they?” Scott’s mom leans forward and fixes her eyes on mine. I look straight back without a flinch.

“Well,” I start, “the oldest’s in college.” I hope she won’t ask which college because I don’t know the names of any colleges off the top of my head.

“And?” she prods.

“So, actually, *two* are in college. They’re both really old, around twenty-three, I guess.” Now the ideas start to flow. “Two are in high school, older than Scott’s brother, he wouldn’t know them.” A nice touch to keep the questions down. “Two are in junior high.” I almost stutter, “but not yours.” “They’re in private school for, uh, science geniuses. And the rest go to Keller Elementary. But I don’t think they know Scott’s other brother.” I can’t remember any of Scott’s brothers’ names. Doesn’t matter.

“And you are the youngest?”

“Um, yeah, I mean, yes, ma’am.” It seems like a reasonable answer.

Scott’s mom is quiet for a moment, looking at her hands, running her thumb over her fingertips. “That’s a lot of children in fifteen years. Your mother is quite the woman.”

Maybe I’ve made a mistake. I don’t have time to do the arithmetic while I’m making up my imaginary super-family. Then a stroke of genius— “Some are twins.”

“Oh, wow! How many twins?” She practically leans across the table.

“Three,” I say proudly. I catch a glimpse of Scott out of the corner of my eye. He’s leaning forward as well, his eyes big, his mouth in the shape of an “O”.

Scott’s mom scrunches up her forehead. “Three *twins*, or three *sets* of twins?”

Twins—even number. What was I thinking? “Three sets. Yep.” I breathe a sigh of relief.

“That’s amazing!” Scott’s mom says. She sits back in her chair. “How in the world does your mother feed a family that size?”

An image pops into my head of a family picnic in the park with a bunch of my cousins. I just need to change a few details. “Well,” I start, “we got this big long picnic table that sits out on the patio. We sit on benches, and Mom brings the food out on big platters, and we all pass it around.”

“Your mother serves every meal on the patio?”

Oops, maybe a little over the top. “Not every meal, mostly just dinner.”

“I see. And how big is your house?”

I picture my tiny yellow tract house. I share a small bedroom with Sis, and my parents have the other bedroom. The tiny bathroom has one sink and a shower-tub. The eat-in kitchen barely has room for the blue table and chairs, and the front room—not much to it, really. A super-family needed a super-house. “Well, let’s see. We got eight bedrooms—”

Scott’s mom’s eyes widen, and she lets out a low whistle. I didn’t know girls could whistle.

“And our kitchen is pretty big.” How big does a kitchen need to be to take care of more than a dozen people? “Two refrigerators, two stoves, you know, that kind of thing.”

Scott’s mom nods and glances with a frown around her kitchen, which actually looks pretty much like my real kitchen.

“We got four bathrooms.” That only makes sense for so many people. “The front room, of course, which is really big, and the patio I already told you about.” I try to stop myself, but the words pour out before I can catch them. “And a pool.”

“Oh, wow!” Scott says with a huge grin.

“My goodness!” Scott’s mom replies. “That’s a very amazing house for this neighborhood. So, tell me, what does your father do for a living?”

I have a ready answer. “He’s a pilot for the airline. Yep, he flies all over the world. We don’t see him much.” I plan on becoming a pilot when I grow up.

“I see,” she says.

“And my mom’s a—” My mouth is getting ahead of my brain. What did I want Mom to be? “A doctor,” I decide. She seems to spend a lot of time in the doctor’s office with me and Sis. She might as well *be* one.

“Well, for heaven’s sakes. I had no idea. She must be a very busy woman with a family that size and a career and her husband gone so much of the time.”

Now I’m beaming with pride. “Yeah, she’s busy. We all have our chores and kind of keep the place cleaned up for her.”

“I should hope so. That poor woman!” She clucks her tongue.

Scott pipes up, “Hey, Mom, can we go to Tommy’s house today and swim?”

My heart sinks. I search my brain for an excuse, but Scott’s mom comes to my rescue. “Honey, you don’t just invite yourself to someone’s house like that. I’m sure they are very busy today. His mother is glad Tommy can play here today, so she has one less thing to worry about.” Whew, that was close!

“Okay,” Scott says as he hangs his head. “Can I show Tommy my aquarium?”

“You got an aquarium?” A thrill of excitement runs through me.

“Yeah, you want to see?”

“You bet! I love fish. I want to get some fish one of these days.”

Scott’s mom smiles. “I think that’s a good idea. Go look at the fish, and then you two go out and swing. Tommy’s mother will be here in an hour to pick him up.” We scoot our chairs on the linoleum floor and hop down. “I’m really looking forward to meeting Mrs. Bradford now,” Scott’s mom adds.

Now, that might be a problem.

The fish tank is in the family room. The brightly colored fish swim among the waving green leaves and the open pirate chest full of treasure. “I really want some fish,” I say.

“Tell your mom to get you some.”

“Mom doesn’t like fish. Says the tank gets smelly. But I’ve been thinking about maybe getting just a little bowl and one goldfish. A goldfish wouldn’t smell, would it?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. Let’s go out and play.”

Out in the backyard, Scott tries to swing high enough to do a three-sixty all the way around the top bar, but I mostly hang around near the gate so I can keep an eye on the street. Play time in

the morning had gone by in a flash, but this final hour seems to drag on forever. I can't focus on anything except the street.

When the white and green Chevy rolls up to the curb, I yell "Bye" to Scott and bolt out the gate. I get to the car door just ahead of Scott's mom, jerk on the handle, and jump in.

Scott's mom leans in through the open window. "Hello, Dr. Bradford. I would invite you in for a cup of coffee, but I know how busy you are."

I shoot a quick glance at Mom's face, which registers a mix of surprise and confusion. "Thank you. Maybe next time. That would be nice."

"Well, I won't keep you. We enjoyed very much having Tommy over. I'm glad my Scottie has such a good friend." Scott's mom waves and smiles as we pull away from the curb. I turn and watch her shrink through the back window, and with her dwindles my memory of the super-family and the super-house.



Summer melts into fall, and fall brings the annual school carnival, the most exciting event at Keller Elementary. Last year, I stuck to Mom's legs the whole time. This year, I'm a veteran. Mom promises to let me roam on my own, provided I don't leave the schoolyard. Dad stays home to tend Sis. Mom signs up to run the cotton candy booth for the second hour. On my own with a roll of tickets indicates a sure sign of growing up.

Mom waits with me at the ticket booth for my friends. Tim and Kelly show up, and each gets a fistful of pink tickets. Besides the cotton candy booth, I can see game booths for ring toss, fishing for plastic fish, darts, tennis ball throwing, and pin the tail on the donkey—one ticket for three tries. If you beat the game, you get a prize—Chinese finger traps, marbles, a baseball card, bubble gum, jaw breakers, and taffy. Other prizes are for girls, but I pay no attention. My heart is set on the game of games and the prize of prizes—the ping pong ball toss to win a live goldfish. If I land the white ball in a little glass bowl with a fish, I get to keep the fish. This could be the start of my aquarium, like Scott's. Maybe Mom won't buy me a fish, but she can't complain if I win one on my own. Positive I will win, I figure to save this booth for last, not wanting to carry a fish around all day and have it croak before I can get it home.

With tickets in hand and prizes to win, the three of us can't wait any longer for Scott. We set off to claim our booty with a casual "See you later" to our moms.

We are leaving the bean bag toss, chewing our sugary winnings, when Scott catches up, pink tickets flapping from his jeans pocket. With no mothers to supervise us, we run like flags blowing in the wind, rushing from booth to booth and stuffing trinkets into our pockets.

The morning flies by before we know it. We have spent all except our last tickets, which we agreed to hold in reserve for the fish bowl game.

We are ten paces from the fish booth when Mom intercepts us. Her face is stern, brows furrowed, mouth forming a firm, straight line. But the eyes, hot and penetrating, are the sure giveaway that I am getting "the look." Something's up. Scott's mom stands behind my mom and

peers over Mom's shoulder directly at me. She also has "the look." It is a "mom thing" that apparently all moms learn somewhere along the line.

We all freeze in our tracks. Mom sweeps her fiery eyes across all four of us and says, "Tommy, I want to talk to you. Your friends should go on and play somewhere else."

The other guys don't have to be told twice. They scatter like cockroaches after the kitchen light flips on.

Mom advances on me, towering over me. She can be really tall when she wants to be. "Young man." Not a good sign. "Mrs. Allison and I have been chatting. She found me at the cotton candy booth and wanted to know if my husband was out of town this weekend."

What an odd question. Why would Scott's mom want to know about Dad? Mom's expression doesn't change. The face of Scott's mom looms over Mom's shoulder. She looks like she just swallowed a worm.

"She also wanted to know if any of my other boys were here at the carnival. She wanted to meet more of your *brothers*." Her tone chills me like ice going down the back of my shirt.

What brothers? This whole thing is totally confusing. What's Scott's mom talking about? What is *my mom* talking about?

"She also wanted to know," Mom continues, eyes becoming even steelier, "if we drain our swimming pool during the winter or leave it filled."

Oh. Oh no! Memories of sitting at the kitchen table across from Scott's flood in. I can suddenly taste the bologna sandwich and see the spot of mustard on Scott's cheek. All that talk about how great Scott's brothers were and his big-shot dad, and his mom's lipstick and perfect hair, and the Levi's and the GI Joes—what else could I have done in the face of that withering competition? How would my new friend's mom like me if I were ordinary?

Heat flares into my face, enough to melt the asphalt under my feet. What was I thinking? Actually, I wasn't thinking. I'd been caught up in the competition and the need to defend my family, and I didn't know how to do it without lying. I hadn't considered what would happen later—how I might have to keep the lie alive. It never crossed my mind that I should tell my parents what I had done.

As much as I hated feeling "less" compared to Scott's family, I'm hating even more that I've let Mom down and embarrassed her. Consequences—Mom always talks about consequences. This must be what she means.

"Tommy," begins Scott's mom with what looked like little tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "You told me all these things about your wonderful family. Your father, your brothers, your home, your mother, the picnic table on the patio. Why did you make up all those things?"

I have no words for why I simply wanted to be liked. The looks of surprise and delight on Scott's mom's face in the kitchen that day made me feel good. At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do.

Now, not so much. With the two moms staring down at me, examining me like a bug to be squashed, I desperately want the playground to open up and swallow me whole. I feel like every person at the carnival must be staring at me, laughing at me, shaking their heads at me. If I could

disappear, make everyone stop staring, maybe my heart wouldn't beat completely out of my chest. Hot tears sting my eyes, and electric shame burns up one side of my body and down the other.

"Tommy, I don't understand. What got into you?" Mom's look never wavers.

No explanation can push past the lump in my throat. My lower lip quivers, and I can't stop it. Unable to bear Mom's angry look, I turn my face to the ground. Tears spill out onto my red-hot cheeks.

"I am so disappointed in you, young man." Mom doesn't raise her voice. I might feel better if she screamed at me. I was screaming at myself. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I can't look at Mom's face. I don't dare look at Scott's mom.

As if on cue, Scott sidles up to his mom, a quizzical look on his face. He must not have heard the conversation, but he's smart, and he must know trouble's brewing. I keep my face to the ground and stare at my shoes.

"Your father and I did not teach you like this." Mom pauses. "Are you ashamed of us? Is that why you made up these stories about our family?"

I can only shake my head as I stare at my feet. *No, Mom, I'm not ashamed of you.* But I've got no words to say how bad I feel. I'm suspended over a burning pit of spikes, threads above my head snapping one by one.

Scott nudges his mom's hip and looks up at her, shrugging his shoulders. She shakes her head and says, "Go on back with the other boys. Play some more games. This doesn't concern you."

Oh, yes, it does! My friend turns and trots away. Scott will probably never speak to me again after this. The rest of my friends will turn on me. Pretty soon my whole class will know how stupid I am. The whole school will laugh at me. How can I go back to school? How can I leave my room? Mom might not let me into the house, let alone back into my room.

"Young man, what do we call stories that are not true?" Just a hint of gentleness enters her tone.

"Lies." I force my mouth to say the word.

"That's right, and what do we call a person who tells lies?"

"Liar," I blurt out. There, I've said it. That is what I am. Liar, liar, pants on fire! I've sung it a million times. Now that's me, and I will never be anything else.

Mom reaches out her hand, tucks it gently under my chin, and slowly raises my face until I can see her eyes again. Right there, in the middle of the carnival, with Scott's mom looking on, Mom has tears in her eyes. Her tears almost match my own. The straight line of her mouth melts at the corners, and her lower lip quivers in unison with mine. "Tommy, you are not a liar. We are not a family of liars. You made a mistake, a big one, and now you need to apologize to Mrs. Allison."

Scott's mom steps to the side so I can see her full on. She has tears, too. The lump filling my throat hurts all the way down to my heart, but I manage to mumble, "I'm sorry."

Scott's mom breaks into a sweet smile, and the lump starts to dissolve. "I really am sorry," I say with more conviction.

"I know, honey. I'm sorry this happened."

"So, are we done with lies now?" Mom asks, her eyes soft and moist, a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"Yes, ma'am," I say with all the earnestness I can muster.

A new thought strikes me and threatens to swallow me up again. "Do I have to tell Dad?"

Mom brushes the tears from my cheeks. "Well, I don't know. I'll have to think about it. This was pretty bad." She looks over at Scott's mom, who gives a little shrug of her shoulders, and then back at me. "What do you think?" she asks me.

"I think I'll never tell another lie ever ever!" Relief washes over me like the waves at the beach, cooling my feet in the warm sand.

"I think that's a good plan." Mom looks again at Scott's mom, who smiles, touches her shoulder, and then turns and walks away. "I think it's time to go home," Mom says.

The sting of guilt is already fading. I stick my hand in my jeans pocket and feel something. I pull out my last two pink tickets. The thick paper is no longer stiff after sweltering in the heat all morning, but they're still spendable. The goldfish! I haven't made it to the ping pong fish bowl booth. I hold the tickets in the palm of my hand, not sure of what to say.

"Hmm, still a couple of tickets." Mom sighs. "What should we do with them?"

Hope rising in my breast, I offer, "Can I win a goldfish?"

"Do you think you *deserve* a goldfish?"

The hope fades quickly. "No, I guess not."

Mom sighs again. "Well, I don't suppose you do, either." The words crush my spirit. But then Mom continues, "Still, you have the tickets, and I paid for them and gave them to you. Do you promise to take care of a goldfish if you win one?"

Hope sends tingling delights into my fingers and toes. "Oh, yeah! You bet!" The smile breaks across my face until I can feel my ears almost touching the top of my head.

"Go ahead and win your fish," she says with a smile.

I get in line at the ping pong booth. Apparently, every kid at the carnival has waited for the last minute to try for a goldfish. As I inch my way towards the counter, kid after kid walks away with a little white waxed cardboard container with a wire handle, the prized fish swimming around in the dark in great surprise. A lot of other kids, though, walk away with nothing, their faces glum.

One little kid doesn't walk away. He stands at the corner of the booth, his chin resting on the edge of the counter, hands thrust into his pants pockets, eyes trained on the bowls of water and the pouncing, jaunting ping pong balls. He probably wants a goldfish as badly as I do.

Happiness fills me. I had done something really stupid, which I can't explain even to myself, and yet here I am, just a few feet away from the prize I really want. I'm not in trouble, not being punished, not even getting yelled at. Just moments ago, shame and guilt pounded me nearly to death, and with a smile from Mom, I am released. Wow, how does that happen?

Scott pops into my head. I need to tell Scott the truth. Or maybe Scott's mom will tell him. It would be better coming from me. I want Scott to still be my friend. If I tell Scott about my lie, I can make it right. Finding Scott and talking to him pushes out the desire for a goldfish. He might still be at the carnival. If his mom hasn't taken him home yet, I could go look for him right now. I hope I can find him before it's too late.

But if I leave the line now, the booth might close by the time I get back.

The line dwindles, and my feet are itching to jump out of line. I notice that kid again standing at the corner of the booth—a short, scrawny, first-grader, watching intently through thick glasses. I pull the tickets from my pocket and hold them in my fist. I teeter, torn in my decision, and then step out of line and walk up to the kid with the glasses.

"You want a goldfish bad, don't you?"

"Yep," the boy says with all the longing a boy could put into a single syllable.

"Me, too... but maybe not as much as you. Have you already played the game?"

"Five times," the boy sighs. "No luck."

"If you had a goldfish, would you take good care of him?" It's the very question Mom had just asked me.

The boy never takes his eyes off the bowls on the table. "I'd love my goldfish. No pet would ever have a better owner."

I hold out one of my last tickets. "Here, you can have this. Maybe it'll bring you better luck."

For the first time, the boy with the glasses turns his head and looks at me. "Really?" Excitement fills his voice.

"Sure." I raise my open palm. "I got something else I got to do. Take it and go get in line before it's too late."

His eyes nearly pop out of the sockets behind the heavy lenses. A grin splits from ear to ear. "Gee, thanks!" He grabs the ticket from my outstretched hand. His eyes follow my other hand as I stuff the very last ticket back in my pocket. "What're you going to do with the other ticket?"

"I'm going to put it in my time capsule."

"You got a time capsule?"

"Not yet, but when I do, this ticket'll be the first thing I put in it."

The kid gives me an odd look and then darts to the back of the line.

Feeling lighter than light, I turn and walk from the booth, scanning for Scott in the thinning crowd. There he is walking with his mom across the playground. I can catch him. There's still time.