

THE FAMILY NAME

A. McAfee

A notice posted at the college put me in touch with Mr. Petreson and his family. They offered a room to a student and I needed one. It was arranged over the phone.

The day before I had my first class at the college, I caught the bus to Sudbury and a cab to the house.

Mr. Petreson welcomed me in and introduced me to his son and daughter. He showed me the room I would have, and told me to make myself at home.

"I'd just as soon not tell you what the rules are here," he said. "Probably aren't many anyway, but I'd get embarrassed sayin' the stuff you can't do. The kids'll tell what's off limits."

I wasn't worried about breaking rules. I was shy, this was the first time I'd lived away from my mother and sister and brother. I stayed to my room the first few evenings.

The third night I had an assignment from my psychology class, part of the nursing course I'd enrolled in. I had to interview someone, and have it ready for the next day. I waited for Mr. Petreson's son or daughter to come home, but they both stayed out all evening. I finally asked Mr. Petreson if I could interview him. He agreed.

"But these questions might be a little personal," I added. "Nothin' bothers me, kid," he said. "I'm happy to help you out." We sat at the dining room table and I turned on my micro-cassette recorder. He leaned across the table and picked it up.

"...gadgets..." he smiled. "Is it on? Are you ready to start?"

"All set," I announced.

"Fire away..."

Q What's your name?

A Bob Petreson.

Q What do you do for a living?

A Shop foreman at the Metal Works. Been doin' that for 28 years. Started off as a Joe-boy, lugging the scrap away, and just worked my way up.

Q Where are you from originally?

A Right here, Sudbury. Never been around much, just stayed here all my life.

Q Are you married?

A I was. I'm a widower now. Annie died three years ago. We'd been married almost twenty-seven years, from when we were teenagers. Q What about children?

A I've got four kids. Gail's married and lives in town. Frank's married too, but he works for some ad agency in Toronto. He's been there a couple of years now. Bobby Jr is at the Metal Works too, following my footsteps, you know. He's not married, he's out late all the time with his buddies, I wonder if he's ever thought of it. And Missie is finishin' off high school. Her name was s'pose to be Melissa, but Bobby Jr had trouble sayin' that when he was small. It stuck, you know?

Q That's the whole family then?

A Actually, Gail has two little boys, and so they're family. Frank and his wife don't. Seems nobody livin' in Toronto ever does 'til they're thirty or thirty-five or somethin'.

Q Are you happy with your life?

A Oh, can't complain. It's as good as anyone else's. The family are all healthy.

Q But you're only saying that you can stomach your life. Are you happy?

A Most of the time. Yup, I think I am. I'm optimistic, I figure I've done okay and there's more good days comin'. So I feel happy about it all.

Q What's the best thing that ever happened to you?

A The best?

Q That's right. What event or moment made you the happiest?

A Now, that's tough. Like I said, I've been happy a lot. My weddin' was nice. So was Gail's five years back. I felt pretty good that day. You know: proud.

Q Which was better?

A You know, somethin' else comes to mind. When Bobby Jr was born he was so sick and scrawny, he almost didn't make it. And it was worse because Annie'd had a miscarriage before gettin' pregnant with Bobby Jr., and it seemed more important that he live. They put him in some plastic case with tubes and wires and suction cups, and Annie and me could

only see him every so often. The doctors and nurses said the first two days were the hardest for a baby like him. So when forty-eight hours were up we figured we'd get an answer. You know: live or die. Well, the doctor wasn't much for black and white. Maybe this, maybe that. But there was somethin' 'bout the tone of his voice, and enough good maybes, that when he left the room we looked at each other and we just knew he was gonna be okay. You know? I've never felt happier than that moment. Annie held me 'cause I shook so bad, and I cried and cried. But I was just so damn happy that we'd get to see Bobby Jr grow up. He used to be a bit slow in school 'cause of it all, but he's a good kid still. Yup, the day we knew we were gonna keep him, that was the best day I ever had.

Q What about your worst day?

A Saddest?

Q If you like.

A Easy. The day they told me Annie was real sick and wouldn't see Christmas that year. The day she passed wasn't as bad, I was used to the feelin' by then, you know? And Christmas wasn't as bad either. No, it was the day they told us. Annie smiled and rubbed my arm. Imagine that, they were tellin' her she's gonna die, and she was supportin' me. I couldn't move, I was all tense and couldn't think straight. And Annie smilin', she had the most sweetest smile, and sayin', 'You're gonna be fine, Bobby, you'll be fine'. She made sure everythin' was all set up before she passed, especially with Missie bein' so young. She didn't have much time to do it either. Bobby Jr started workin' at the shop with me the next week, and after she passed, Frank was even able to stay with us for a few days, (pause) Ya... that would have to be the worst times I've seen.

Q Do you want a moment?

A No, I'm fine. Could've been worse. I had a chance to tell her how special she was before...God... And she saw her first grandson. Scotty was born in the spring, before we knew Annie was so sick.

Q Is there anything special you'd like to accomplish in your remaining years?

A Accomplish?

Q Do, see, fulfill a dream...

A Hadn't thought about it. My family is my dream. I'd like to see the other kids married, and all of 'em with families of their own. Lord knows when Frank will start. Works 60, 70 hours a week, then they fly off to Boston or somewhere for the weekend. Never a moment to themselves in their own home. Oh, well... No, I can't think of dreams to fulfill. Maybe I should see Ottawa before I die, you know, bein' the capital. Or Washington if the States take us over. I read an article about that once. Do you think they're worth seein'?

Q I think so.

A Sure...

Q What about regrets?

A I wish I was closer to Frank and Bobby Jr. They just don't see things the way I do. Wish I hadn't had that blow-up with Frank after the funeral. I just can't understand why they won't have kids now. And when he said they may never...well, I didn't take that too well. I wish Bobby Jr could find himself a girlfriend...

Q But what about you?

A Me? I'm fine. Missie has learned to be a real good cook and Gail must off drop a half dozen pies a week. No, I'm okay. I'm just gettin' fat, that's all.

Q If I asked you to sum up what life is all about, what would you answer? A You wanna know what life's all about? Easy. It's family.

It's not money, it's not chasin' women, it's not workin' hours so long you forget where your front doorstep is at. Everything else don't add up to squat if you don't have a strong family. I should know. Every time I've been happy, it's been because of them, you know, what we mean to each other.

I remember the Christmas of...whatever it was, fifteen years ago or so. I bought them all pajamas and everyone opened them up in their rooms before they came downstairs for the other presents under the tree. Annie and me made sure we had ours on first and we waited at the bottom of the stairs for them to come out of their rooms. Bobby Jr was the first one, he was in such a hurry to see the other presents that he hadn't buttoned the top or tied the bottoms. They were fallin' off him as he came down the stairs two at a time. Frank's were buttoned to the top and tucked in and lookin' as smart as ever. Gail was helpin' Missie down the stairs, Missie was only one and a half, and Gail was sayin' the size was all wrong. But we got everyone together, and Annie's mother, who was alive then, took pictures of us all in our matching pajamas. I'll show you the picture sometime, it's in an album; all six of us grinnin', and wearin' the same red and blue pajamas.

That was special, you know?

I wish to God that Frank would have a family. He could give all his kids pajamas like I did. There's not a lot of us Petresons left. I just had two sisters. Had a brother once, but he died really young. So I was the only one carrying on the name, far as I know. It's not common, Petreson, there's only Frank and Bobby Jr to pass it on some more. We really had it out about that, Frank and me. I still don't believe that he says he doesn't want to be tied down. Tied down! It's what I've lived for, what I've tried to pass down. Annie died just the day before he tells me this, and I thought of all the work she did to raise him a good Petreson. That son of a bitch doesn't give... he doesn't care about my name!

Excuse me... I shouldn't get so upset. He's my son, you know, and smart as a whip, but we sometimes don't agree... Most of the time we don't agree, to tell you the truth. He should give somethin¹ back, I think.

Bobby Jr may never get married. I don't think the lot of 'em even look at a woman when they go drinkin¹. He's out with Earl Thompson and the Phillips boys, Ricky and what's-his-name. None of 'em's married, none have girlfriends as far as I know. I thought he was funny, you know, likin' the boys, and I'd have tried to beat that out of him, but he says he just hasn't felt strongly enough for a woman yet. Like I did for his mom. So he says he's not ready yet. What do you have to be ready for, it's what life is all about. At least he isn't, you know, funny-like. He wouldn't have carried on the Petreson name if he was, I'm sure of that.

I didn't feel strongly for Annie when I met her, or even when I married her. That wasn't what was important to me. We both wanted to raise a good family. That's what it's all about.

I saw Gail often, she really did bring a lot of pies over for Mr. Petreson. He would eat a pie every day. Missie and I usually declined a piece at dinner, so he'd wink and say he'd eat our pieces so Gail wouldn't be offended.

Gail brought her boys over several times a week, and her husband came for Sunday dinner as well.

When the whole family went out together, taking the children to the fall fair, or going to a junior hockey game, I was always invited, and I went. Missie's boyfriend went too, so I wasn't the only outsider. It felt good to be included. I still didn't say much around the family, and Bobby would tease me about being shy, but it was nice teasing and I didn't mind.

On these outings the only family member missing was Frank, who was in Toronto. I met him briefly at Thanksgiving. As soon as they arrived, he and his wife, Dorothy, gave me a drive to the bus terminal so I could go home for the weekend.

They were supposed to stay for a few days the next week, but I didn't see them when I came back. I asked Bobby if they had gone out.

"They went back to Toronto on Saturday," he said.

"Saturday?" I asked. They had only arrived on the Friday.

Bobby shrugged. "Frank and Dad had a fight. You'll get used to it."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that Dad has this goal for each of us: to start our own family. Gail's been a success and Frank's been a failure. He's not sure what I've been yet. But it's the one thing he still has the energy to fight about."

"That's too bad," I said, "that they argue about it."

Bobby shrugged again, and grinned a little. "It's not so bad. You're supposed to fight with your old man about something, right? Half of my friends used to get beat up by their fathers. Their fathers were drunks, and they'd beat them pretty bad. It made them tough, but cold about havin¹, their own kids. So my dad is pretty good compared to them."

"You're right. I like your dad alot."

"Your father left you when you were a kid, didn't he?" Bobby asked. "Yes," I answered. "Ever heard from him?"

"Not for over fifteen years."

"I wonder if that's worse than beating up your kid..." Bobby thought out loud.

"I have no idea," I said.

As Christmas approached everyone was busier than usual. Missie and I decorated the Christmas tree between studying for exams. Mr. Petreson and Bobby worked longer hours as the Metal Works tried to run up its inventory before the holiday shutdown.

I thought Mr. Petreson was looking pretty worn out, but I'd only known him for a few months and I wasn't sure if this was unusual. I did hear him say to Gail once that he would probably be too tired to argue with Frank if Frank and Dorothy came for Christmas.

"I hope so, daddy," Gail said.

Frank apparently had threatened to spend Christmas with Dorothy's family, even though it was the every-second-year they should be with the Petreson side.

While we decorated the tree, Missie said she wished that I would stay for Christmas.

"I would like to," I had said. "But my mom wouldn't understand."

Missie playfully tossed tinsel at me, whispering as she did: "I'm not the only one who wishes you would stay."

"Why are you whispering?" I asked.

But she wouldn't answer me, she only giggled as she put more tinsel on the tree.

It happened the Thursday night before Christmas. I'd written my last exam that day and bought my bus ticket for home. I was

leaving Saturday, and Christmas was the following Wednesday.

After supper Missie had started clearing away the dishes from first course. Bobby, who usually helped, clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back, taunting us about doing the real woman's work. Missie carried Gail's cherry pie to the table and was ready to serve it out.

"Same size as always, dad?" she asked.

When Mr. Petreson did not answer with his usual chuckle and "oh, not too big now...", I felt a sudden fear go through me. We all looked at him at once.

His arms were slumped at his side, his mouth was open, and his eyes vacant.

Missie looked in alarm at her brother. "Bobby...help him, Bobby!"

We did what we could. An ambulance was called. I did what emergency measures I knew of, attempting mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; mostly knowing what not to do. Gail was at the house before the ambulance and continued the mouth-to-mouth. I felt so helpless, but I know our actions kept him alive long enough for the ambulance attendants.

We followed the flashing lights to the hospital.

We waited.

It was dawn on Friday before the doctor walked over to the waiting room where we huddled. He looked at Gail, but pointed his thumb at me. "Who's this?"

"A family friend," Gail answered.

He looked at me for a second, and turning back to Gail, spoke. "Where's Frank?"

"Toronto. He said to call if there's any news."

"Call him then," the doctor said sternly. "Tell him to get up here."

"You mean..." Missie started, her voice cracking. Her tears were blotting her blouse. As soon as some dried, more tears followed. Her emotion was more evident than from the rest of us.

"I mean, your father is in very bad shape," the doctor continued. "He's had a heart attack. I have no idea which way he will go, that's the truth. But he hasn't any margin to allow a bad turn. One bad turn and we'll lose him." He looked at Gail again. "Call Frank. He should be here no matter what happens."

The doctor turned and was walking away. Bobby called after him.

"Dr. Lewis?"

The doctor turned around.

Bobby extended one hand a little from his side. He choked his question out. "What do we do now?" The words were painful to say, and painful to hear.

"Do what you want, Bobby. You could all stay here if you want, but it would be better if you stayed in shifts. It could be a couple of days before anything happens, or," he added cautiously, "It could be next hour. Call Frank. You should all be around."

He walked down the hall and around the corner.

"I'll take the first shift," Gall announced.

"Can't we all stay?" Missie pleaded. She looked like she would crumble if she was told to go home.

Gall nodded. "We'll stay for the day. We can decide what to do next sometime in the evening."

No one moved right away. Bobby sat between Missie and me on a sofa, and Gail stood over us, one hand on her stomach, the other rubbing the side of her face.

"I can bring back some breakfast," I offered, though I desperately hoped no one would let me. I didn't want to leave them, and I could feel the fear and sadness welling up inside me; I had been in control until now. I could see my question hanging in the air between us. I wanted to pull it back, that no one would let me leave. I put my hand to my face, unable to keep the tears from being seen.

But nobody answered. Nobody wanted breakfast. Bobby put his hand on my free hand and squeezed it. I wanted to say 'thank you, I'm strong again', but I couldn't stop sobbing. Instead I cried harder, and I put my face on his shoulder.

Missie curled up on the corner of the sofa. Gail left to call Frank.

Frank arrived at suppertime that day. He must have hurried. We hadn't been told of any change to Mr. Petreson's condition.

When Frank came into the hospital, he first took off his coat and overshoes, and put them on a chair next to the sofa. He approached Gall and they exchanged one of those traditional, reserved family hugs. He patted her back softly, and she patted his. He shook hands with Bobby, who had stood, and gripped Missie by the shoulder for a second. "Hang in there," he said to her, for she had begun crying again when he came in. He said hi to me.

"No more news," Gall said to Frank.

Frank looked awkwardly past Gall, observing nothing in particular. "Dorothy is with her family for the holidays. She wished she could be here, but she'll come up if there's a change."

Gail smiled. "That's okay, Frank. There isn't anything she could do, and It Is Christmas. I hope she doesn't..." Gail winced, and for the first time I saw her let the feelings show. "I hope she doesn't have to come up here at all." Her eyes were wide and frightened as she looked at Frank. "We can't lose Daddy too."

Gail stayed at the hospital while the rest of went back to the house. Frank moved his things Into Bobby's room, the room they had once shared.

Frank came downstairs and sat with Bobby at the dining room table. I could hear bits of conversation as Missie and I gathered dishes for dinner, and put together a simple meal.

What they talked of was light at first, and I could barely hear them, but Frank spoke louder, even angrily at times.

"He doesn't run me," I heard, and "why does he make us feel guilty?"

"He does the same to me, you know," I heard Bobby reply. "He doesn't mean anything."

Frank scoffed. "He doesn't hate you yet, that's all."

When I carried dishes into the room, they stopped talking. I didn't want to interfere, so I didn't look up much.

Leaving the room I heard them whisper and laugh quietly. It made me smile.

Mr. Petreson's sister arrived from out of town and stayed at the hospital. Gail stopped in to see how we were, and she sat down at the dining room table with us.

No one spoke at dinner for a long time. Our attention was focused on the cherry pie at the end of the table near Frank. It was certain that Gail would have to take some of this pie home.

The silence was broken by Gail. She addressed me.

"Frank will take you to the bus terminal in the morning."

I looked up from my plate. I didn't want to hear that particular suggestion.

"Does she have to go?" Missie asked quietly.

"That's not our decision," Gail answered.

"What would you rather do?" Bobby asked.

I swallowed the food that had been in my mouth when Gail brought up the topic. "I'd like to stay here if nobody minds. Maybe I can help."

"I'll call the bus station and cancel your ticket, then," Gail said.

"And," I began, my voice cautious, "I'd like to take a turn at the hospital like the rest."

Gail glanced at Frank, then back to me. "Okay," she said casually, then took another bite of potato.

We started shifts in the morning. Gail went in, then her husband, followed by Frank, Bobby, Missie, and me. My shift was in the middle of the night. I insisted on that time; their sleep was more important than my own. Mr. Petreson's sister sometimes stopped in during the day to keep someone company.

Nothing happened Saturday. Or Sunday. Or Monday.

The doctor was apparently especially concerned on Tuesday, he had hoped that Mr. Petreson would have shown some response to the treatment by then. But he hadn't. He lay close to death, never moved, never changed.

Tuesday was also Christmas Eve. It seemed cruel to be. The rest of the city was happy; last minute shoppers were scrambling and children laughed excitedly. It made all of us want to stay inside. We might spoil their fun and they were certainly spoiling our depression. We moved around slowly, and mostly in silence. The fear and sorrow took more energy than each of us could spare, even my own, despite not being family.

The evening of Christmas Eve became even lonelier. Missie drove to the hospital around eight. She had turned the lights of the Christmas tree on before she left, trying to brighten the moods of those in the house. But Gail was with her husband and two boys, and Frank went to bed early after spending sometime on the telephone. I was alone in the living room, sitting on the floor next to the presents. I left all the lights off except those on the tree.

When Bobby came back from the hospital he saw me and came over to where I was.

"Any change with your dad?" I asked.

"No," he said, sitting down on the floor next to me.

"Isn't this a gloomy night?"

"I'm afraid of it getting worse," Bobby said in a low voice.

I looked at his expression closely. "What do you mean?"

He put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes. He looked very tired. "I just don't have a good feeling about Dad. It's been almost a week and he's the same as he was lying on the dining room floor. There should have been some positive signs by

now. I can see it on the nurses faces when they come in to take the readings." His fingers closed to fists and pushed under his chin. "I just don't think he's going to make it," he said.

"Don't say that."

"I really mean it. I'm afraid. He hasn't moved; he hasn't even opened his eyes. I'm getting afraid to go into his room now. I'm sure he's going—"

"Please don't say that, Bobby," I pleaded.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid, too," I said, shivering now and trying not to cry.

I know it was to comfort me when he hugged me. That's all he meant at first.

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When midnight drew near I left for the hospital. The family let me drive the car in and Missie would drive herself home.

This was my fourth shift at Mr. Petreson's bedside. I gave Missie the car keys and she put on her coat. As she had the times before, she kissed her father and whispered a few words to him.

I sat in one of the chairs next to the hospital bed. Lights on the equipment flashed periodically, and the intravenous dripped, and Mr. Petreson breathed lightly. The other two patients in the room also slept. One snored. No one sat with them, and I couldn't see them from the white curtains around Mr. Petreson and me. There were few staff in the hospital at this time of night, but I heard distant clattering from time to time.

I held Mr. Petreson's hand as he slept. I'm not sure if he was aware of me or not.

Two hours of silence passed.

I heard a noise in the room, and I turned. A woman stood at the foot of the bed.

"May I speak to Bob?" she asked.

Mr. Petreson hadn't opened his eyes since his heart attack, but still I nodded to her. I withdrew my hand from his.

She moved closer to him on the other side of the bed. She smiled as she looked at him, and she shook her head slowly. She reached her hands out and lifted his forearm and began to stroke it. She kissed his hand.

Mr. Petreson opened his eyes.

He watched her for several seconds, no expression showing on his face. Then, straining, he breathed her name.

"...Annie..." he said.

"Hello, Bobby. You don't look the best."

"It hurts, you know. My chest hurts," he whispered, his fingers unconsciously pointing to his chest. She lowered her head through the wires around his chest and kissed him there. He leaned his head back to the ceiling and he smiled.

When she raised her head they looked at each other again. I couldn't hear a sound from anywhere in the hospital, and I was afraid I would move and make a noise. They watched each other for minute after minute after minute.

She shook her head slowly again, the smile on her face never changing.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've missed you Bobby."

"Not as much as I've missed you."

"You've been here almost a week now. Did you know that?"

Mr. Petreson shook his head.

"And someone has been with you every moment," she continued. "All the kids have been here. They take shifts so that you're not alone."

"All of 'em?"

"Even Frank," she answered, smiling a little wider. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

"What?"

"You've been too hard on him, Bobby. His ideas about a family aren't the same as yours."

"But Annie, no kids... we didn't teach him that."

"No, no we didn't. But he's a good man, he loves his wife. We taught him that."

"But."

She put her hand on his lips.

"I know what family means to you, Bobby. God knows, I know what it means. And you are right. But so is Frank and his ideas. You're right for you, and he's right for him. We don't know why he hasn't got kids. Maybe he can't. Maybe Dorothy can't. Or maybe they just don't want to have any. But you two pretty near hate each other because of it. Imagine, Bobby, you hating your own son when your whole argument with him is the strength and importance of family. You're right in what you believe, but you're wrong to make him believe it."

"I want my name carried on, Annie..."

"It will, it will. Maybe Frank will change his mind, but you let him do it. No more arguing between you. Okay?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're right. Why can't I ever figure this stuff out for myself?"

"You just did. You only need someone to help you look in the right direction."

"Do you think Frank will change his mind?"

She took his face in her hands. "No, I doubt he will. But there's still Bobby Jr."

"But when, Annie? Look at me, I'm getting old."

"You slow down, Bobby. It will happen." She leaned closer and spoke again, emphasizing each word. "There will be more Petresons in this world. I promise."

He nodded.

"Until then," she continued, "let them be different. They aren't your carbon copies. They're half of me too. So no more arguing, Bobby. Not ever."

"Okay."

Mr. Petreson spoke again. "You'd be proud of Gall and Missie. They've done so well."

"I'm proud of all of you." She put her hand to her chest and caught a breath. I could see a tear roll into the curls of her Ups. "You're my family. I love you dearly."

"Come closer, Annie."

She moved closer and held his arm again.

"Closer, Annie," he said. "I need your strength."

She leaned over the bed and they embraced. She held him firmly, but his arms were limp. As moments passed, then minutes, his grip grew stronger. They were together a long time, perhaps a half hour. I couldn't see her face, or his buried in her hair, but they rocked their faces together slowly, and he stroked her hair. I watched, but I felt invisible; they were so close to each other.

She began to pull back from him, and he released her.

Mr. Petreson spoke her name, an uncertainty in his voice. "Annie..."

She took his face in her hands again. "It's all right, Bobby. You'll be okay

"But when will I see you again?"

She whispered to him, her face near his ear. "Just a little while. I promise. We will be together again."

As she moved away she kissed him. He looked stronger, and happy. She had never stopped smiling.

Suddenly, she nodded towards me.

"She's a nice girl, Bobby," she said.

Mr. Petreson glanced at me. I was noticed so suddenly that my mouth dropped open. I felt like I had been watching a play from the front row and the actors had just pulled me onto the stage with them. I was embarrassed and I didn't want to intrude in their moment. I thought I would have to say something, but Mr. Petreson had only nodded and looked back at her.

"Goodbye, Bobby," she said.

He smiled, and raised his arm and waved.

I was watching the expression on his face, the strength, the radiance, and I didn't notice where she went.

The room was as it was again. I heard the other patient snoring.

"Hey, kid," he said to me.

"Hi Mr. Petreson."

"That was Annie, you know."

"I know."

"Doesn't she have the sweetest smile you ever saw?"

"She does," I answered smiling, and crying too.

"I should get some sleep now. Save my energy, you know."

"Okay."

I was going to let him fall asleep, but he hadn't closed his eyes, so I said something else.

"Mr. Petreson?"

"Uh?" he murmured, turning his eyes to me again.

"Mrs. Petreson was right. Your family really does love you. All of them."

He smiled. "You could be right kid."

I went out of the room and found the nurse.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, noting my tears.

"He spoke to me just now," I said.

"I'll tell their doctor," she said. "You stay with him."

The doctor told me not to say anything until he had run some tests.

I was waiting in the hall outside the room when one of the nurses came out carrying some bottles and charts.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Like nothing ever happened," she said. "I wish we knew how he recovered so fast. We'd make a mint selling it."

Frank arrived at dawn instead of Gail and I stayed, and a few hours later the doctor told us we could phone the rest with the news.

By noon he let everyone go in to see him. "I normally wouldn't do this, but he is a lot stronger than could be expected. And it is Christmas."

Mr. Petreson was even sitting up when we went in. I offered to stay behind, but Bobby pulled me along with him.

Gail and Missie rushed to the bed and hugged him. Tears fell everywhere and Mr. Petreson seemed almost uncomfortable with the attention.

"Hey," he protested, "I'm not dead."

"That's not funny," Gail exclaimed, looking up. "We were worried about you."

"I know. I heard."

"Well," Gail began, wiping her face and pressing her shirt down so that it was neat again. "I should let your sons come over to see you too."

So the attention was shifted to Frank and Bobby standing at the foot of the bed, but mostly to Bobby. He stood behind me, arms around my waist, head rested on my shoulder. The affection he showed to me shocked his sisters into silence.

"Bobby's got a girlfriend," Missie finally gasped.

"Don't be so dramatic," Bobby scolded her. "We're just friends to you."

"I like your choice of a friend, son," Mr. Petreson said, motioning to us to come closer. He motioned at Frank also.

Gail stepped behind Bobby and me on one side of the bed, and Frank moved beside Missie on the other. Bobby leaned over his father and they hugged each other affectionately.

Then Mr. Petreson turned to Frank. He held out his hand. "Good to see you Frank."

Frank shook his hand, but didn't say anything. He still looked uncomfortable, his eyes were jumpy and his body was rigid.

"You don't have to hug me," Mr. Petreson assured him. "I'm just glad to see you here."

"It's hard, Dad," Frank blurted. "All the things we've said to each other recently. I'm not sure what I'm feeling now or how I felt when you were unconscious."

Mr. Petreson raised his other hand up and took hold of Frank's shirt and pulled him closer. "I should be dead, Frank," he said. "I'm not gonna quibble over differences anymore. Let's say this is a new start for me and you."

Frank was physically closer to his father, but the skepticism in his face was lingering. He motioned at Bobby and me. "You mean you're not going to give Bobby a bonus if they have a baby by next Christmas?" he asked sarcastically.

"Frank!" Gail yelled at him. She was prepared to say more but her father glanced at her and she stopped.

Addressing Frank again, Mr. Petreson spoke. "No bonus. Hopefully no advice, even. It's their life, you know. And your life is yours. I was wrong."

Frank's face relaxed. He smiled weakly and nodded. "I said things that I shouldn't have too," he said. He didn't hug

his father, but the handshake seemed firmer, more earnest. That can be just as special.

"And would everybody stop talking about us having a baby. I told you, we're just friends," Bobby finally protested.

"Yeah, right," Missie teased.

I felt Gail lean forward from behind me. "Mom would have liked you," she said, squeezing my arm.

"I can vouch for that," Mr. Petreson said to me, winking.