



Atheneum Books for
Young Readers

A
Solitary
Blue

CYNTHIA VOIGT

Atheneum Books for Young Readers
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To Gail Paris
Editor ludorum,
editor egregia
et fidelis

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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

WHEN JEFF GREENE was in second grade, seven and a half years old, he got home from school one Tuesday afternoon in early March, and found a note from his mother, saying that she had gone away and would not be coming back. He could read the note all by himself:

Dear Jeffie,

You know I love you best, better than anything. I love to come into your room when you are in bed, and read The Lorax to you, and then kiss you on each big gray eye before you go to sleep. I am going away, but I'm not really going away from you. I will hold you in my heart, and you will hold me in your heart, and we can't ever be very far from each other then, can we?

There are some hot dogs in the refrigerator. If you don't remember how to cook them for bread sandwiches, you will have to ask the Professor for money when he gets home and go get some rolls. But you shouldn't bother him for unimportant things, so try hard to remember. You're my helper, my best assistant, you remember everything. You won't need to ask, will you?

I will think about you tonight, eating hotdog sandwiches, and I will be very sad and missing you. But you are old enough now, and there are people everywhere who need me, little boys like you who don't get enough to eat and are hungry every night when they go to bed. Imagine that, Jeffie. You know how I feel about that. Or children with no parents at all to take care of them and grownups who can't help themselves and little animals hunted down and wiped out and air and water made dirty. I have to help the people who need me. I have to try to make things better, for you and for all the little children. You are big enough to understand. It is such a big job that I will not be able to come back to see you, so I have to say goodbye. Goodbye, little boy, my own sweet Jeffie, from your sad

M

M was for Mommy and for her own name, Melody. Jeff read the note twice. He did understand about all the work she did, because she had explained to him about how people had made the whole world sick, all of nature, and it was the last chance to make it better, or little children like Jeff wouldn't have any world when they got big. He knew how sad it made her to think about rivers or the lion in his cage at the zoo or the dirty sidewalks and streets. He knew she couldn't be happy unless she was doing something to make things better — she said so.

But he didn't know why she had to go away to do that. And not come back. A cold, frightened feeling lay all over his body like a wet blanket, and he started to cry. He wrapped his arms around himself and cried.

Jeff knew he shouldn't cry, he knew he had to stop. The Professor, his father, didn't like crying, because he wanted things regular and even. He wanted a boiled egg every day for breakfast and his usual times in his study when nobody disturbed him. He had all of his classes in the afternoons so he could stay home and study in the mornings. After supper, he went back into his study to do more. Melody had explained that and Jeff knew how to keep the kind of quiet house his father wanted, the kind Melody always kept.

When Jeff was too young to go to school, his father took him to a day care center, every morning. Melody picked him up in the afternoon, when she was free. Usually, that was on her way home to get supper. Sometimes, if the weather was nice, she would be free early and they would go to the zoo or to a museum or shopping together. If the day care center was closed, she would take Jeff with her to her work, and he would color at the table where she was talking. Once he started school, he could spend a day there. He even went to both kindergarten classes, the morning one and the afternoon one.

Melody wasn't free most of the time because she worked to make the world better. As he got older she explained to Jeff how people were making the world worse. Industries dumped their garbage into the water, into the rivers and into the Chesapeake Bay. Because of the garbage, the water got too dirty to swim in, and the fish couldn't live there, and the animals who ate the fish died. People put dirty smoke into the air. Politicians and countries fought wars and murdered people with bombs and fire and even, if they wanted to, poisons. Not everybody was as lucky as Jeff, not everybody had a mom and a daddy, not everybody had enough to eat, not everybody had their own rooms or got to go to Ocean City for a week every summer — but Melody could help those unlucky people. It was her job to help make things better because if she didn't, things might get worse.

That was sad and scary. It was that picture of the world getting worse that came to haunt Jeff when he woke up in the middle of the night and tried not to think about it. Sometimes, at night, Jeff wanted to go into Melody's room, just to hear her breathing, just to see her. But she had explained to him that the Professor didn't like to have his sleep disturbed, so he couldn't.

Melody didn't talk to the Professor the way she talked to Jeff; she didn't talk to him very much at all. When she tried to, he asked her questions that she answered unhappily until he finally said, "It's not as simple as that."

Jeff, still crying, thought about his father now. He wasn't sure what his father liked. He knew what Melody liked, she liked lots of people at her meetings, she liked Jeff to know about what was going on in the world, she liked to hold his hand outside of the lion's cage and tell him about how the lion's life used to be. She didn't mind if he was sad or cried, because she would hug him. She liked new people and new ideas, and sometimes she worried about Jeff because he was too much like the Professor, no matter how hard he tried.

All Jeff knew about the Professor was that he liked things regular and even. He didn't like feelings and crying. Melody said he wasn't much of a father, and now — Jeff cried quietly, alone — he was a

Jeff had. Jeff would have to stop this crying.

* * *

He had stopped before the Professor got home at five. He had stopped with a glass of milk, looking out the window over the sink through a cold, sleety rain to the row of houses behind the row of houses they lived in, looking out to the taller buildings behind them, sticking up into the gray sky like irregular teeth. The rain spattered on the tin roof of the back porch.

When the Professor entered the kitchen and put his worn briefcase down on the table, Jeff turned around, holding the empty cold glass in his cold hand. He watched his father open the envelope she had addressed to him and read the short note once. He watched him throw the note and envelope away, crumpled up, into the yellow plastic wastebasket. His father didn't look surprised, his father didn't look unhappy, his father didn't look worried. His father didn't look anything.

“Did she leave you a note, too?” the Professor said to Jeff.

Jeff nodded. “Do you want to read it?”

The Professor shook his head quickly. “Is there anything for dinner?”

Jeff nodded.

“Can we eat at six-thirty?”

The Professor left the kitchen, but he forgot his briefcase. He didn't come back for it. Jeff heard him go into his study, which used to be a living room, back down the hallway at the front of the house. What used to be the dining room was the living room. They ate all their meals at the Formica table in the kitchen. Jeff did his homework at that table too, because there was no room for a desk in his tiny bedroom tucked under the eaves at the back of the house.

That evening, after his father had left him alone, Jeff did homework. He did a page of mixed addition and subtraction problems; he copied out sentences into his French notebook, being as neat as he could. He boxed in all the verbs in the ten English sentences and then went back to find the subject and label them with an S. He wrote a paragraph about lizards for science. He filled in the names of the original thirteen colonies on the social studies map, then memorized it. He worked carefully, because teachers liked neat, careful work. When he was finished, he gathered his books up into a pile and set them on the counter by the refrigerator, for the morning. He looked at the clock: six.

Jeff knew how to set the table and how to get a hot dog dinner for himself and his father, because Melody often could not get home for dinner, when she had a meeting, or when she had a lot of work to do with a committee, or a demonstration to plan. Jeff and the Professor were pretty used to getting themselves a hot dog dinner. Jeff set the table, then cut up lettuce and tomatoes for a salad. He split the hot dogs and piled the slices of bread up beside the toaster. He put the bottle of salad dressing out on the table and the mustard, catsup, and relish. He kept himself busy except for just a couple of minutes when he had nothing to do but wait; for these minutes he stood at the sink and looked out the

window into the darkening rain. Across their little square of cement yard, blocks of yellow light shone from the kitchens of the row of houses a street up. The tall shape of the humanities building of the university was all dark, and in the rain its edges merged fuzzily into the clouds. "But what will I do?" Jeff asked himself, inside his head.

He knew that if he stayed there, looking out, with room for questions to rise up in his head, he might cry again; so he took a warm sponge and washed down the drainboard by the sink, scrubbing it with Comet. He had lost his mother, he didn't want to run any risk of losing his father too.

When supper was on the table, Jeff went down the hall to knock on his father's door and say that everything was ready. Then he went back to sit down. The Professor always came right away and poured himself a glass of wine from the carafe in the icebox before he sat down to eat. After the Professor had tasted the wine, he lifted his fork and took a bite of salad. That was Jeff's signal to begin. When Melody was there, it had been her fork he waited for.

They ate without talking. After he had finished, the Professor put on some water to boil and took out the small Chemex pot. Melody had tried to get him not to drink coffee, she had told him all about caffeine and cancer in it, she had even made him taste some of the herb teas she drank; but he wouldn't change. "Coffee's addictive," she had warned him.

"Anything in excess tends to be addictive," the Professor answered. "The point is to avoid excess. Isn't it?"

"I can't talk to you," Melody said. "You already know all the answers." Her voice sounded as if she didn't think what she said was true.

"I never said that," the Professor said.

Melody didn't answer, just sat staring at her cup of tea, but Jeff saw tears come up in her eyes, so he went around to hug her.

* * *

But this night she was gone. Jeff cleared the table, then sat down again, watching his father drink his mug of coffee. The bright white light bulb in the kitchen shone on the straight white hair that lay across the top of the Professor's head and reflected off his big, square glasses. Jeff's father looked like a professor, Jeff thought, even though he knew every professor looked different. Jeff's father was tall and broad-shouldered, and he never put on weight no matter how much he ate. He had pale blue eyes and thin lips. His white eyebrows were almost straight, his nose hooked out where it joined his face. He had taken off his tie and his shirt was unbuttoned at the neck. He looked, in his calm face, in his quiet way of sitting or slow way of moving, as if nothing could upset him. Jeff knew that his father would want to say something about Melody, so he waited.

"She's not coming back," the Professor said at last.

"I know."

“We’ll rub along all right,” the Professor said. “Although there will be a couple of changes.”

Jeff felt alarmed. His father didn’t like changes, his father couldn’t change; Melody said that. “What changes?”

“We’ll have to get someone to live in, a student, room and board in exchange for housekeeping and babysitting. We can’t afford a maid and there has to be someone while you’re so young. I’ll move my books upstairs, to the bedroom, that’ll give us a room for him.” The Professor sipped at his coffee. “I suspect we’ll find it doesn’t make much difference at all. Most things don’t. I’ll see if we can’t find a boy, they’re more reliable.”

Jeff relaxed. The Professor always said things didn’t make much difference, wouldn’t make much difference. He said that when Melody talked about women’s rights and signing anti-war petitions or endangered species. “Don’t you *care*?” Melody would ask him, her voice ringing, her big gray eyes filled with feeling. She was fifteen years younger than her husband and had long, thick dark hair that she let hang loose down her back, all the way below her waist. “What about nuclear war?”

“That would make a difference,” the Professor agreed, without any change of voice or expression. His mild blue eyes looked at his wife.

“Oh my *God*,” she would say, turning away impatiently. Her dark hair rippled down her back. Her patchwork skirt whirled around her slender legs. When she was unhappy like this, Jeff didn’t know how to comfort her.

Jeff went to the University School, where children of professors could attend without paying, but the children from other families had to be rich. There were sixteen children in his second grade class: six boys and ten girls. One of the girls had a mother who taught math at the university. Two of the other boys, Sean and Jason, had fathers there. Sean’s father and mother both taught, physics and English. Jason’s father taught history too, only Jason’s father taught American History and the Professor taught European. The boys weren’t friends, because the parents weren’t friends. Jason’s father wanted to be chairman of the department, but the Professor had that job because he was older. Jason’s father wrote articles that got published in history magazines, and he wrote reviews of history books for the Baltimore paper and sometimes the *Washington Post* too: Jason brought them into school for show-and-tell. Jason’s father said the department was a shambles and that was why they didn’t attract good students. Jason’s father said the curriculum hadn’t been changed since 1958, and it was out-of-date. Any man who didn’t publish in his field, Jason’s father said, could offer no leadership to his department. Melody agreed with Jason’s father, but the Professor didn’t pay any attention. “It wouldn’t make any difference,” he said and went back to the work he was doing.

That Melody had gone away didn’t make any difference to Jeff at school. His father walked him over in the mornings anyway, and he went home by himself in the afternoons. He wasn’t friends with the university children. The town kids never played with the university kids, because the children of professors weren’t rich enough to have good toys, and besides, they were the geniuses of the class. Except Jeff, who didn’t ask many questions, who did his homework neatly and handed it in on time, who sat quietly at his desk. Jeff was never a favorite with the teacher, or with the student assistants from the Education Department, but the town kids didn’t like him even so, because he was a universi

kid. Jeff sat quiet and did his best to do exactly what the teacher said she wanted them to do. His papers were always perfect.

Sometimes Jeff wondered how everybody knew, right away, what kind of child you were. They all dressed in uniforms, gray flannel pants, white shirts, and blue jackets for the boys, with a red and blue striped tie. The girls wore gray pleated skirts and white blouses and blue sweaters. Everybody looked alike, but just the same, everybody knew the difference.

That spring, after Melody left, the Professor found a student to live with them, a young man named Jackson. Jackson moved into the Professor's old study. For a month he did the shopping, vacuumed the house, saw to the laundry and meals. Jackson was thin, with long hair he tied at the back of his neck like George Washington and terrible pimples on his face that he tried to hide with a wispy blond beard. He almost never went out except to classes. He studied all the time, because he wanted to graduate *summa cum laude* and go right to graduate school without being drafted. At the beginning of May, he told Jeff he had exams and long papers coming up, so Jeff did the vacuuming and shopping and put fewer clothes into the laundry. Jeff wasn't tall enough to run the machines at the laundromat so Jackson still had to do that, and the cooking. Jackson cooked huge pots of stew that they could eat for two or three days in a row or spaghetti sauce or pot roasts you could warm up. The Professor didn't seem to mind, so neither did Jeff. But after Jackson had gone, the Professor told Jeff they'd have a better selection of possibilities in the fall.

"You could get a girl," Jeff suggested quietly. Girls could cook, probably, at least as well as Melody. He thought a girl would clean the house to brightness.

"They tend to be unreliable," the Professor answered.

During the summer, the Professor concentrated on his research and Jeff amused himself. "Thank God you can amuse yourself," the Professor had often said. Jeff thought probably they wouldn't go to the beach for a week, the way they used to, because Melody wasn't there any more, but they did. They drove over to Ocean City on a Saturday morning and stayed in a one-bedroom apartment a block away from the water. Jeff played on the beach, digging, building castles, watching the people. The waves towered and crashed beyond him. In the mornings, the Professor took him across the highway to the beach and left him there while he went for a walk. "Stay out of the water until I come back," the Professor told Jeff. "I will," Jeff promised. He watched his father walk away down the beach to think walking at the water's edge where there were fewer legs to step over. His father wore long khaki pants even on the beach, and a cotton shirt; but he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt in the heat, and he took off his shoes and socks to go barefoot.

When the Professor walked back, Jeff could tell him from far off, because nobody else wore long pants or walked so slowly along the packed sand down by the water. Jeff always watched for the first glimpse of the Professor, because he always knew he might not return. "He doesn't know anything about being a father," Melody had told him, "so you can't expect very much from him, Jeffie."

They ate sandwiches Jeff had made, then he could play in the water until it was midafternoon and they returned to the apartment to cool off. There, the Professor wrote notes.

They ate dinners in restaurants, crab cakes and crab imperial and steamed crabs, and once, steamed lobsters. They both got sunburned, but not badly. One night, they went down to the boardwalk, and Jeff rode the roller coaster and the rocket — but it wasn't fun anymore, so they came straight back to the apartment. It was different when Melody was sitting beside him, being scared and excited, laughing out loud when the car rolled down an incline, holding him within her arm. Every night Jeff indulged in the pleasures of watching television, because there was a television set that came with the apartment. At the end of the week, they packed up and went back to Baltimore. "It'll be good to get back to work, won't it?" the Professor asked Jeff. Jeff said yes.

The year Jeff was in third grade, the housekeeper was named Tony and he was a sociology major who liked to have noise around him. He liked to tell the Professor what was wrong with the university when they sat at meals, he liked to listen to his radio while he did housework. And he liked to cook. He taught Jeff to help him and also taught him good recipes. Jeff did his homework after supper that year, because, as Tony said, since they didn't have a TV, there was nothing else for him to do. The Professor worked before dinner and after, as usual.

"I never thought they worked so much," Tony said to Jeff. "I always figured professors had kind of an easy life. Not your old man. But he doesn't publish, does he? I dunno, there must be more to life than this. Where *is* your mother, anyway?"

"I don't know," Jeff said.

"I saw her a couple of times, my sophomore year. At rallies, across a crowded room. She was a good looker. She seemed sincere. Taste that spaghetti sauce and tell me what it needs, will you, kid?"

It was Tony who, by forgetting to take Jeff down to the barber to keep his crewcut short, changed Jeff's way of wearing his hair. Before then, it was cut off short and straight, like a mown field, and it would grow out slowly until it stuck out over his head like a puffball until the Professor would say, "Isn't it about time to cut his hair?" But Tony didn't get around to it, and Jeff's hair grew until it lay long and flat on his head, like the Professor's. But Jeff's hair was dark, almost black, like Melody's.

When Jeff was in fourth grade, a boy named Andrew kept house for them because he had to or he couldn't afford to go to the university. Andrew really wanted to live in a fraternity, he wanted to go to friends' parties, he went to all the football games and basketball games and baseball games. What he did around the house, he did angrily, his face angry above the vacuum cleaner, his hands angry in the dishwater. That

year, the Professor started going out every Thursday evening, to have dinner and then play Whist afterwards. If Andrew had something he wanted to do Thursday night, Jeff was old enough to be left alone. Andrew didn't tell the Professor this, but he told Jeff. Jeff didn't tell the Professor either, because he didn't want to upset the Professor's routine. When he was alone at night in the house, he just went up to his room with a book and sat on his bed reading until he heard someone come in. Then he turned off the light and fell asleep.

The year Jeff was in fifth grade, they had a graduate student from the Physics Department, Ian, who had a thick beard and spent long hours in the lab, working on his thesis. At the beginning of each week, Ian put up a list of when he would be in the house. He took Friday and Saturday nights off and went to see his girl friend. He was going to be married in June, "Although why anybody gets married these days I don't know. Given the statistics on divorce. What about your old man?" he asked Jeff. He sat with Jeff at the table, doing labs or problems, while Jeff did his homework. Jeff looked up at Ian. If he was teasing, Jeff was ready to show that he got the joke. He didn't seem to be teasing, so Jeff looked serious. "Your father, for example; he's easy to live with. Maybe he was just too old for her. What do you think?"

"I don't know," Jeff said, although he thought he did know, maybe. He knew Melody's complaints anyway. He didn't know about his father; his father never said anything, one way or the other.

"Don't you wonder?" Ian asked.

Jeff shook his head. As long as the Professor's life suited him, he would probably stay. "He's afraid of changes," Melody used to tell Jeff. "He's a creature of routine. And he doesn't know how hard it is on other people." It wasn't hard on Jeff, however; not nearly as hard as it would be if the Professor decided to leave too. So Jeff didn't wonder, he just made sure that the Professor's life was what the Professor wanted.

The summer before sixth grade, sitting behind his father as they drove back from their week at Ocean City, Jeff asked who was going to

housekeep for them that year. “Nobody,” the Professor said. “You’re old enough now, aren’t you?”

Jeff could hear that his father wanted him to be old enough. “Yes,” he agreed. He looked at his father. The back of the Professor’s neck was sunburned, and so were his hands on the steering wheel. They got caught in two traffic jams, where the road narrowed to bridges to cross rivers.

But the Professor didn’t mind. He turned around to Jeff. “It doesn’t make any difference what time we get there, does it.”

“No,” Jeff agreed.

That fall, one of the Professor’s Whist players became a friend. This friend came to their house to visit and do Greek with the Professor, so Jeff met him. He was a man in his forties, younger than the Professor, who taught Theology at the university. He was a Catholic Brother, Brother Thomas. “Doubting Thomas,” he introduced himself to Jeff, the first night he came to their house. Jeff wondered, without asking, what he meant. The brown eyes studied his face. “It was a joke,” Brother Thomas said, so Jeff smiled. “I had no idea you had a son, Horace. Well, I guess gossip said you did, but I’d forgotten.”

Jeff shook his hand and looked at the man. He was round and short, his round head was bald except for a fringe of pale hair that ran around the base of his skull. Like the Professor, he wore big, square glasses. He wore a black suit, with the round white collar showing above his black shirt front. “You’re old for such a young son, aren’t you, Horace?”

“I married late,” the Professor answered.

“Ah,” Brother Thomas said. He had brought a bottle of wine with him. He insisted that the Professor let Jeff taste it. Jeff sat quiet at the table, working out how they wanted him to behave. He watched their eyes and listened carefully to their conversation. Brother Thomas’s eyes often rested on Jeff, but the man didn’t ask him questions so he didn’t volunteer anything. The Professor paid close attention to what Brother Thomas said, so Jeff deduced that he thought the man was interesting and wanted him to enjoy himself. Jeff took special care over the dinner, so that the brother would like the food, even if it was only hamburgers on rolls. He toasted the rolls and buttered them. He turned the hamburgers frequently, so that they would be cooked but not too thickly crusted. He chopped onions and sliced celery to add to the salad.

“A man with your taste should have a decent set of wine glasses,” Brother Thomas said, holding up his glass. They were all sitting around the kitchen table after dinner. The Professor had moved his study back downstairs, and after three years the living room was filled with boxes of books and boxes of papers and boxes of old clothes. There was no place else in the house to sit.

“I can’t afford to indulge my tastes,” the Professor said.

“You could strike for a raise,” Brother Thomas suggested. “Carry placards, deliberately teach

untruths. Or how about a sitdown strike?" Jeff had never heard of anyone talk to his father in the easy off-hand way Brother Thomas did. It looked like the Professor didn't mind.

It was from Brother Thomas that Jeff learned that some people thought the Professor did a good job at the university. "What do you think of your father, putting together the best history department in Baltimore, maybe even Maryland," Brother Thomas said.

"I think that's good," Jeff said. Brother Thomas winked at him.

The Professor, however, denied it. "It's nothing like first-rate."

"Academic reputations take a while to spread; there's a five to ten year lag, you know that — or you should; you're the historian." Brother Thomas sounded very sure. "You watch, Horace, your reputation is catching up with you. The students you've dreamed of are lurking on your horizon."

The Professor opened his mouth as if to say something, but just shook his head. Jeff sipped at the wine. It didn't taste fruity to him, but thick, so that it left a coating across his tongue, and slightly bitter. He kept his face expressionless.

"Look at the sign-ups for your courses," Brother Thomas insisted. "Horace, you can add two and two. Honestly, Jeff, your father," he said, but he said it fondly, as if the Professor amused him.

Jeff looked at his father. He wondered if this was the way the Professor liked to be talked to, but he knew he himself couldn't talk that way.

"Time will tell," was all the Professor said.

"Time is telling," Brother Thomas corrected him. "The other members of your department have even stopped trying to get your fired."

"Have they? That's a blessing," the Professor said.

Brother Thomas chuckled. "I must admit I wondered if you handled their attempts at rebellion the way you did on purpose."

"I didn't handle them at all. I knew it didn't make any difference what they said."

The Professor sounded pleased, though. Jeff could hear that, and he offered Brother Thomas another hamburger.

Jeff waited a couple of weeks before asking his father about Brother Thomas. "Who is he?"

"A monk. A Christian Brother, that's a teaching order," the Professor said. "From the Catholic University; he teaches a Bible course for us."

"That's not in your department. How did you meet him?"

"He played Whist with us — then I wanted to study Greek and he wanted to freshen his up."

Jeff sat in surprised silence, wondering why his father needed to learn Greek, wondering how long this friendship had been going on. While he wondered, his father got up from the table and returned to his study. Jeff didn't mind. As long as the Professor was doing what he wanted he would be content with Jeff. The hard thing was trying to figure out what he wanted, because he seldom asked for anything. Jeff washed the dishes, rinsed them, and placed them in a rack to dry. He took out the broom and swept the floor. The Professor liked things neat. All of their extra belongings they packed away into the unused living room, and the rest of the house they kept neat. After four years, Jeff was pretty good at figuring out what the Professor might want, reading his reactions. It was pretty easy, after all because mostly the Professor didn't think things made any difference. He often said that. And in the same way, so he could give the teachers what they wanted to get, Jeff worked at school, listening carefully not only to instructions, but also to the teachers' reactions.

Occasionally that fall, Brother Thomas would come over to their house for supper. He always brought a bottle of wine with him. Early on, he brought four wine glasses, tall, stemmed crystal glasses, formed from what he called flashed glass, a layer of colored glass on top of a layer of clear. An intricate design had been cut through the outer colored layer, so the glasses shone like jewels. One was red, one blue, one yellow, one green, and the men would say what color they wanted as Jeff set the table. Brother Thomas liked to eat, so Jeff cooked some of the recipes Tony had left for him, like a chicken roasted with two pierced lemons tucked into the cavity so that the meat tasted slightly of lemon, and the juices made a sauce for rice. "The boy has a real hand for it," Brother Thomas said to the Professor. "How did you get so lucky? He certainly didn't get it from you — was his mother a good cook?"

Jeff kept his eyes on his plate and his face still as he listened to what his father would answer.

"No, she hated housework of any kind."

Nobody said anything else. Jeff turned the red glass around in his fingers.

"Let's take our coffee in and get to work," the Professor suggested.

"With pleasure. After I toast the cook." Brother Thomas raised his glass to Jeff and the Professor did the same. Jeff tried to smile at Brother Thomas, but he saw how the man's brown eyes studied him, and he did not know what the man was thinking. He did know, however, that Brother Thomas wouldn't say anything. That much he had figured out, that although Brother Thomas had a lot of ideas he kept them to himself. Jeff would have liked to hear some of them, but he didn't ask.

In the winter a flu ran through the University School, and Jeff caught it. He spent two days in bed, unable to eat, listening to the sound of his father's typewriter in the silent house. *Tickety-tick. Tickety-tick.* Outside, a gray Baltimore snow fell steadily. Jeff studied the ceiling of his room and kept alert for the first signs of nausea or diarrhea, so that he could be sure to make it to the bathroom. At mealtimes, his father came to the door and

asked if he wanted anything. “No, thank you,” Jeff said, trying to sound better than he felt, so that the Professor wouldn’t be disturbed. He hadn’t been really sick for such a long time that he had forgotten how terrible it felt.

On the third day, a Friday, he went back to school, but when he got home in the afternoon and tried to climb the stairs to get to bed, he felt so dizzy he couldn’t make his legs move. He rested on the stairs for a while, until he could get to the kitchen and sit in a chair. He was terribly thirsty so he poured himself a glass of ice water, which he guzzled down. For a couple of seconds he felt wonderful. Then he started to cough, deep racking coughs of the kind he had suppressed most of the day. Between the coughing and the dizziness, he threw up in the sink, the water he’d just drunk as well as the little lunch he had eaten. Then he felt better, so he cleaned out the sink.

Jeff made soup for supper and cheese sandwiches toasted in the broiler, and he was careful not to eat much so that he would be able to wash the dishes and get up to his bedroom without his father noticing. He kept his coughing down as much as he could. His ears rang and his body alternated between being too hot and being overrun with chills. He wondered, as he lifted his soup spoon, if his hands were shaking, because it felt as if they were; but, when he looked to check, he could see that they weren’t. In bed, he fell asleep without even taking off his clothes.

The next morning he couldn’t get out of bed. His teeth chattered and his chest ached and his hair lay cold and wet across his forehead, at his neck, all around his head. He woke himself up, coughing, then drifted off again. Late in the morning, the Professor looked into his room. When he opened the door he awoke Jeff from a shallow sleep. Jeff tried to sit up, but he didn’t want to raise his head from the pillow, because then he would feel dizzy, and when he felt dizzy he felt sick.

“I’m going to see Brother Thomas,” the Professor said. “I don’t know how long we’ll be on this passage, the syntax is strange. We’re almost out of milk and coffee,” he said. Then, about to leave, he asked, “Jeff? You look pale, or is that the light. Is there something wrong?”

Jeff had to say yes.

The Professor came in then and stood looking down at Jeff. He hesitated, then rested a hand on Jeff’s forehead. His hand felt cool and dry. “What’s your temperature?” the Professor asked. “I thought you were over that flu.”

“I’m sorry,” Jeff said.

“Where’s the thermometer?”

“We don’t have one. I’m sorry.”

The Professor left the room. The door was open, so Jeff heard him going down the stairs before he slipped back into uneasy sleep.

The next thing he heard was Brother Thomas asking him to wake up. Obediently, he opened his eyes. Brother Thomas put a thermometer into his mouth. The Professor stood tall behind him in a blue cardigan sweater. "Who's his doctor?" Brother Thomas asked. The Professor shook his head helplessly. Jeff had to take the thermometer out of his mouth to cough, but he put it right back in when he was through. The two men listened to him. "What do you mean you don't know," Brother Thomas asked the Professor. He sounded cross; Jeff hoped he wasn't going to get Brother Thomas angry at the Professor. "Jeff, do you know your doctor's name?" Jeff shook his head.

"When's the last time you saw him?" Jeff shrugged; it was too long ago, he was too tired. "It'll be on the school records," Brother Thomas said. His worried brown eyes were fixed on Jeff.

"Today's Saturday," the Professor said. "The school's closed."

"Who would remember the doctor?"

"His mother might. I guess."

"Can you get in touch with her?"

"I haven't heard from her in four years," the Professor pointed out.

"It's all right," Jeff said. He coughed again, then added, "I had flu this week. Just a relapse. I'm sorry."

Brother Thomas read the thermometer. "One hundred four. And this is still morning, Horace. Have you got any aspirin?"

The Professor looked at Jeff. "In the bathroom," Jeff told him.

"He needs a doctor," Brother Thomas said. "We can give him a couple of aspirin to bring down the fever, but he needs a doctor. His own doctor might make a house call — I don't want to take him outside in this weather."

"I could try calling her family, to see if they know where she is."

"I think you'd better do that," Brother Thomas said. His round face looked sternly at the Professor and then he hurried out to get the aspirin for Jeff. The Professor put his hand on Jeff's forehead again before going downstairs. When they had both gone, Jeff rubbed his hands over his chest, because coughing made it hurt. Brother Thomas gave him two aspirins with a glass of water, and he sank back into sleep.

There was a third man in the room when he woke up again, a youngish man. "Do you remember me?" Jeff shook his head. "Well, I wouldn't recognize you either. You've grown." He opened his bag and put a thermometer into Jeff's mouth. He took out a flashlight and looked into Jeff's eyes and ears. He read the thermometer and said, "Hmmm." He listened to Jeff's chest, front and back, with a stethoscope. He looked down Jeff's throat.

“We gave him two aspirins an hour ago,” Brother Thomas said.

The doctor nodded. He took out a pad and wrote something on it, then ripped off the page. He wrote something on the second page and ripped that off too. He handed them both to the Professor. Jeff watched.

“My name’s Baker,” the doctor said to Jeff. He sat down on the bed, beside Jeff. “You’re pretty sick, bronchial pneumonia, and you’ll need to stay in this bed for at least three days. No school for a week. Is that going to break your heart?” He smiled at Jeff. Jeff nodded to show he understood. “I want to see you in my office next Friday afternoon. Believe it or not, you’re going to feel much better by then. You’ve got some shots to catch up on, young man.”

Jeff nodded. The three men left the room. Dr. Baker started to talk while they were on the stairs, quick and questioning, but Jeff couldn’t distinguish the words.

He slept most of that day. Either the Professor or Brother Thomas came into Jeff’s room to give him spoonfuls of medicine, every two hours, and ask him if he wanted a cup of tea or some Coke. By Sunday afternoon, he did feel better. In the evening, when the sky beyond Jeff’s window was black, Brother Thomas came in with a tray, which he put down on the table beside Jeff. He told Jeff to sit up and then rearranged the pillows behind him. He put the tray across Jeff’s thighs and sat down in a chair pulled up beside the bed. It was a chair from the living room, a rocking chair, that the Professor had brought up earlier.

There was clear chicken soup on the tray and a slice of unbuttered toast and a glass of Coke. Jeff tried the soup. He wasn’t hungry, but he felt empty.

“It’s been a shock for your father, your being sick,” Brother Thomas said. His brown eyes watched Jeff. Jeff swallowed quickly so that he could apologize. “It’s good for him,” Brother Thomas said, “but it is a shock. I never even thought to ask whether he was sending you for checkups. And I’ll bet you haven’t been to a dentist either.”

“I didn’t need to,” Jeff said. He started to cough again, and Brother Thomas lifted the tray up until he had finished.

Brother Thomas *ttched* as he put the tray back down. “Well, you’re a pair of blessed innocents. And you never asked about your mother, did you?”

Jeff shook his head.

“Do you know anything about her? I don’t.”

“Her name’s Melody,” Jeff said. “She has long black hair and she’s beautiful. She has gray eyes.”

“She’s living with her family, in South Carolina. I know that much more. Your father wasn’t pleased to talk to her.” Jeff kept his face empty. “Are they divorced?”

“I don’t know,” Jeff said.

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