

A CHARACTER SKETCH

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Tommy lumbered up on the high kitchen chair, dropping his books with a thud on the gleaming counter. His mother glared at him from behind the telephone receiver. He grinned myopically and fumbled in his pocket for the carefully-folded square of paper. He had looked at it four times on the school bus; it had a big red "A" in one corner and a shiny cornucopia sticker on the other. He was proud of the shiny cornucopia because in the fall his teacher put cornucopia stickers on the good spelling papers. She put pumpkins on the bad ones.

He shoved the paper at his mother, pointing to the bright sticker. She nodded, raising her voice absent-mindedly as if to shut him and his spelling paper out of her thoughts. He wadded up his prize into a crumpled ball and shoved it back in his pocket.

"Sunday night? . . . Sure! I'll have to get a babysitter," she said, pausing to smile at Tommy with her perfectly-lipsticked mouth. He guessed she was talking to the fat man from church or maybe one of the PTA ladies. She was always on the phone, anyway. He scrambled down from the chair in an awkward jumble of limbs, jammed his hands in his back pockets, and shuffled around the kitchen, whistling. He could whistle a lot better last summer when he didn't have any front teeth. His mother tapped her small, polished nails on the coffee table. She wanted him to be quiet; she usually pointed, or waved, or snapped her fingers, but she never stopped talking. His whistle died and he pretended to cough.

Tommy opened the refrigerator door and stared at a shining bowl of pudding. Reaching forward, he wiggled two fingers in the smooth, yellow surface, watching with fascination as it quivered.

"I'm gonna tell Dad," his brother George said in a scary, sing-song voice. He'd walked quietly into the kitchen and was looming over the refrigerator door.

Tommy stared at the big blue "N" on George's high school jacket and pulled his fingers out of the bowl. He licked them slowly. George hit his hand lightly, but Tommy's fingernail scratched his lip and it hurt.

"I'm gonna tell," his brother said again, firmly closing the refrigerator door. Tommy barely had time to scoot under George's arm and out of the path of the moving door. He started to wander away.

"Hey, come back here." His brother tugged at his arm. "Why don't you eat something, Lumpo?"

Lumpo? He didn't know why his brother called him Lumpo. Once he'd cried and his mother made George stop it. At least she *thought* she'd made him stop. George used to sit at the dinner table leering at Tommy and chanting "Lumpo" under his breath. His parents never heard. They always sat together at the end and talked about his daddy's business in quiet, serious tones.

Tommy stuck out his chest now, teetering precariously off-balance. George grinned.

"I'm gonna eat. I'm gonna get real big and then I can play football."

"It'd take an act of Congress to make you bigger, Lumpo. They don't let bony cadaver types play football."

"Cataf . . . huh?" Tommy sputtered, staring up at his brother. George was laughing at his own joke. It must be very funny.

"Say it, don't spray it," his brother said, wiping imaginary spit from his jacket with a look of disgust. He leaned over, very low, and breathed "De-e-e-a-d bodies!"

Tommy jumped and ran into the living room. He sneaked a quick look over his shoulder to see if George would chase him, but George had already opened the refrigerator and was staring at the pudding with a stupid expression.

Tommy wandered back to his bedroom, absently knocking against each closet door as he walked down the hallway. He looked out his window across the street where some boys were playing football. Tommy hid behind the curtain, certain that the boys could see him and were laughing at his big glasses. He closed his eyes, fighting back tears. On the fuzzy blackness of his eyelids he could see the boys, taunting him like they had before.

"He's on your side."

"No way. We had to take him last week. He's on your side."

Tommy had stood there, alone in the middle of the wide driveway. He seemed to be getting smaller and smaller.

"I'm the first to choose and I choose not to have him!" one of the boys yelled.

Tommy stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do. The voices seemed far away. He wished he might shrink away and disappear. Finally he ran home, the flecked pavement jumbling together in a blur of tears.

Tommy closed the curtains and sat down on his bed. He picked up the tiny metal cage and peered at the small animal in the semi-darkness.

It was eating and ignored him. Tommy poked his thumb through the bars, wagging it. The mouse turned from his food tray and scampered across the cage. Tommy bounced on his bed, throwing the cage up and down, up and down. He couldn't see the mouse anymore in the white flurry of shredded paper. The cage fell to the floor with a thump, and Tommy watched it suspiciously for a moment. The paper moved. Tommy bent over and jerked open the cage, pulling out the tiny animal. He held it in both his hands, feeling big and protective.

"You'll talk to me, Spottie, won't you? You'll talk to Tommy."

His hand felt wet, and Tommy saw that the scared mouse had left a dropping in his palm. He ignored the dropping and squeezed the mouse, tighter and tighter and tighter. The mouse squealed a little. Tommy closed his eyes and squeezed even more, gritting his teeth. His fingernails dug into the flesh of his palm. He felt strong.