

DEEP END

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It was inexcusable, Gerry Finlay thought, how the Cuthbert boy taunted Josh—and worse, how his dad let him get away with it. Lounging around the backyard pool with the other adults, Gerry felt a prickly blaze across his chest. He wanted to snatch up the long-handled skimmer tool and crack father and son in the face.

Because of some mutual connections, the Finlays had been invited to the neighboring Cuthberts' place for a barbecue. The wife a neurosurgeon, husband a corporate lawyer, the Cuthberts possessed a huge "Monaco"-shaped swimming pool—practically a lake—complete with an extensive patio and a pool house that held its own bar, bath and changing rooms. The kids had gone swimming together: Josh, eight, and his younger brother Drew, five, with the two Cuthbert kids, an eleven-year-old boy and four-year-old girl. In the pool house Josh had apparently become embarrassed while removing his trunks,

and the Cuthbert boy teased him. Coming out to the adults at poolside, Alan Cuthbert laughed to his father, “He’s shy about his dick,” and the father advised him, with an undisguised smirk, to respect his neighbor’s sensitivities. Josh meanwhile was slinking off toward the house, and that was when Gerry wanted to smash some Cuthbert craniums.

Later, Josh refused to talk about the episode. When Gerry’s wife Claire wondered if the little girl had been present, Gerry explained that boys could be bashful around other boys. He almost admitted, he’d been that kind of kid himself. Privately his anger at the Cuthberts mixed with shame that he’d been no help to Josh, a boy too much like himself, easily humiliated.

In this context, Claire’s proposal to install their own pool was offensive as well as absurd. That very week, brushing off Josh’s incident, she renewed the argument that Gerry had been sidestepping for a month now. An architect with high-powered clients, Claire had overseen extensive remodeling of their 75-year-old Queen Anne before they moved from the city five months before, and now she was ready to tackle the backyard. In a typical year, she pointed out, the kids could enjoy a pool from mid-May through September, and she would swim in the evenings, a boon on days when she was too harried to stop at the gym. Gerry himself ought to be getting more exercise, and swimming

was ideal for dealing with “that little pot belly” (which he thought no one had noticed). A pool would also be great for entertaining her clients, particularly the aspiring mansioneers—Gerry’s term for them—who saw the architect’s own living space as a demonstration of her taste and competence.

But Gerry considered swimming pools the epitome of upper-muddle-class pretentiousness. He always referred to the great bulk of the U.S. population as the “muddle” class, according to his theory that only the extremely rich and the very poor understood what was going on; and though he had belonged to this intermediate stratum his entire life, he refused to identify with it. If it was necessary to move to the woodsy suburbs to find decent public schools for the boys, okay, he’d grin and bear it, and likewise, since Claire had no time to mow the lawn and he had allergies, he’d accept a lawn service with a classy flying-leaf logo and Latino yard workers supervised by a single Anglo who barely lifted a rake. However, there was no excuse for a pool, absolutely none. He did not want to resemble the Cuthberts, especially the smirky attorney husband. Personally he did not like swimming, and after Josh’s mortification ...

Yet Claire continued to talk about “improving” their yard—which, admittedly, was an uninspiring three-quarter-acre hash of straggly trees and grass and weeds. And of course they could afford it now, since Claire had become a

partner in her firm. Gerry's position, as the communications director for a culinary school, paid only a moderate salary, but that didn't matter. Their income-tax return showed they were officially trending toward the upper muddle.

"I just can't stand the *idea*," he told Claire. "I don't want to be that type of *person*."

"Type?" she retorted. "We're all *types*, when you get down to it. And how would redoing the backyard change you as a person? Or me? Or anyone?"

In the days following the visit with the Cuthberts, Gerry's opposition hardened into indignant silence, and when Claire offered sketches of her plans, he refused to look at them. She grew peeved that he wouldn't discuss the topic like an adult. "I've been working hard on this place, you know, trying to fix it up for the whole family." She flipped her blonde bangs at him and stalked away, showing him the back of her finely molded neck, reminding him that she was a far lovelier "catch" (as his father had once put it) than a nerd like him deserved.

The standoff had prevailed for another two weeks when his mother flew in from New Mexico, causing him, as always, an inner sigh. Though he would have denied it, he'd long been mildly ashamed of his parents. It was partly that he'd absorbed enough of their value system, which he called the "classic hippie

canon,” to critique their failure to live up to it. They’d moved to Santa Fe as long-haired youths to “return to a more natural way of life,” then ended up in the comfortable suburbs as his father’s pseudo-Marxist approach to sociology (in vogue at the time) led to a full professorship. They’d preached love and respect for all humanity and then engaged in a nasty, name-calling divorce. From their little Volkswagen they’d graduated to a gas-guzzling van while Gerry and his siblings were growing up, and now each sported an expensive SUV. His mother made odd remarks about Guatemalan refugees—not racist exactly but borderline obnoxious, since she confused them with Mexicans—while his father grew a bushy brindled beard that looked like an imitation of Karl Marx’s. Gerry’s older brother and younger sister, Steve and Nance, had settled nearby, but when Gerry left for college he put thousands of miles between himself and his parents, and he had never wanted to reduce the gap. He settled into eastern Pennsylvania, feeling its thick greenery as both a relief from and a rebuke to the arid atmosphere of his upbringing.

His mother came east once a year, however, for a week or so at a time, with the excuse of seeing the boys. She got on so well with Claire that Gerry often felt like the non-blood relation. In her middle sixties, Louise was still pert and cute with her cropped silvery hair and tanned Southwest complexion.

On the first night of this visit, a Saturday, they were finishing Claire's baked manicotti (one of her special dishes for company) when the pool issue came up. Louise, seeing the house for the first time, had been complimenting both of them on the "cheerful contemporary air" they'd given the dining room and kitchen.

"The cabinets and paint colors are all Claire's choices," said Gerry. "I just wait for her to tell me what I like."

"Luckily," Claire said, "the place was never extensively remodeled before, so we didn't have to remove a lot of dreck from the 1970s or whatever." (It occurred to Gerry that "dreck from the 1970s" would have characterized his parents' taste at one time.) "But there's a lot of work still to do on the yard," Claire continued. "I want to put a pool out back, with landscaping around it—we've got so much room there and some of the old trees need to come out anyway—but Gerry's opposed to it, he has some negative concept of the 'type of person' that has a pool."

"Where I live, lots of people have pools," Louise noted, and then turned to her older grandson: "What do you think of the idea, Josh?"

The dark-haired boy seemed to shrink from the question, but his blonde brother Drew piped, "Will it have a diving board?"

"I haven't considered that," said Claire.

"An accident waiting to happen," Gerry muttered. He looked at Josh, who was studying the arrangement of green beans on his plate.

"That's ridiculous," Claire countered. "We'll follow all the safety precautions—a five-foot fence, automatic pool cover and so on."

"I meant the diving board. With young children around."

"I suppose safety is an issue," Louise pondered. "Gerry must have told you about his father's friend's son who died in a pool."

"Uh? No, he hasn't."

"What?" said Gerry.

"Noel Halliday. The men knew each other from the university. At their house on Avenida de Principe. Noel and Steve were almost the same age, and it was Steve who found the body. It was awful—we took Steve to therapy for six months after."

"Uncle Steve?" asked Drew. "He found a dead kid?"

"I don't remember that at all," said Gerry. "Was it before I was born?"

"Of course not. Steve was thirteen, so you were, what, about Josh's age. We were all there at the Hallidays—you *have* to remember it. I know we

talked to you about it. We shielded you and Nance from seeing the body and rushed you home, but eventually we had to tell you what happened.”

At the second mention of “the body,” Claire’s eyes twitched and she glanced at both of the boys. “Um, Louise,” she said, “this is a little too—”

Louise ignored the warning. “We talked about pool safety,” she carried on to Gerry. “We talked about being sad and how to deal with sadness. Your grandparents were still alive then, so I’m pretty sure, for all you kids, Noel was the first person you knew who died.”

“What happened to him?” Josh asked timidly. “Didn’t he know how to swim?”

“Oh, he was a good swimmer, all those Halliday kids were. But he was out there alone, which wasn’t permitted, all the rest of us had gone inside, and the theory was he slipped on the diving board and hit his head on the concrete, knocked himself unconscious, because there was a big bruise on his skull.”

“Wow,” said Drew.

Shaking his head, Gerry stood and began to clear plates. “I picked up a peach pie from the baking class, Mom—one of the perks of my job. Do you want dessert now or later? I do not recall anything about this what’s-his-face Halliday. Are you sure you’re not mixing up—”

“Noel was older than you, but you absolutely knew him. They lived a couple miles from us. We were over there several times. They came to our house too.”

“Naah.”

“He was floating face down when Steve found him!” Louise insisted, almost indignant. “Ask Steve!”

“Louise!” Claire piped up again. “Please!”

“Uh, Mom, you’ll give the boys nightmares,” Gerry said. “I think you’re misremembering. Josh, what’s wrong with the green beans?”

“I’m amazed you’ve blocked this out,” Louise asserted.

“Wow,” said Drew again.

Hands full of dirty plates, Gerry rolled his eyes and exited to the kitchen. “What’s the decision about dessert?” he called back. “Pie now or later?”

Nobody answered, and he left the pie on the counter. With Louise babbling out of control, it was just as well to end the meal now.

Later that evening his mother tried to probe his memory, mentioning the boy’s brother and sister who were closer to Gerry’s age. Though their names sounded vaguely familiar, he maintained there was no inkling in his brain of a Noel. He refrained from accusing Louise of having a “senior moment,” because

he detested jokes about that sort of thing and also because she was carrying on for much more than a moment. Yet he made it obvious he thought her story off-kilter.

Privately, the name Noel did have an aura to it, a kind of tacky emanation that clung to whatever it touched as the sound rolled around his mind. Was it possible he'd erased a memory? It all seemed ludicrous, but his mother went off to the guest room with a stiff, offended gait, and Gerry had a guilty tension in his stomach for not treating her with more care. If she was becoming a batty old lady, he'd have to learn techniques to handle that.

He poured himself a Scotch and got comfortably fuzzy, and then, for distraction, checked his email. A mistake, because he discovered a Friday-night message from his boss, the vice-president, specifying that the draft appeal letter for the school's capital campaign be ready by Monday at noon. Gerry had already explained that, to write a reasonable draft, he'd need details about the new wing being planned. Little such information had been given to him, and yet he was supposed to ask people for construction money? He should tell prospective donors that the new wing would be a wing, that it would have wing-

like facilities and be designed by the best wingperson in the nation? The absurdity enraged him, and he had a second Scotch before heading to the bedroom, where Claire accused him of being rude to his mother.

Thoroughly grumpy now, he had difficulty falling asleep, and toward morning he was troubled by dreams. He was Josh at the Cuthbert's, a skinny little kid shivering from the wet as he went in to change, and there were bigger kids laughing about something he didn't understand, and someone flicked a towel at his bare ass the way boys always do, and someone touched his shoulder, his belly and then he was running, and he woke up panting with his chest uncovered and the top sheet twisted around his legs. He felt he was being watched, but Claire slept face-down in her pillow. The room smelled strangely like breath mints. He put his arm around Claire and tried to sleep again.

Later in the morning he scrambled eggs for Sunday breakfast, with slivers of salmon in honor of his mom's visit, but afterwards he didn't feel like lazing about as usual to listen to National Public Radio. Rereading the VP's email, he considered hacking out a bland generic fundraising appeal, but knowing this was pointless, he got furious again at the stupidity of the school's bureaucracy. To cool off, he went out to stomp around in back.

The yard was already growing hot with a kind of fiery dryness unusual for Pennsylvania, more like New Mexico, and this oddity helped layer his frustrations atop one another: Claire's pool project—what was wrong with just trimming the trees, and maybe removing that one cherry that looked half-dead?—and Josh's embarrassment at the Cuthberts'—should he have tried harder to draw the boy out?—and his mother's outlandish story about a pool near Santa Fe, which might magnify whatever dreads Josh now felt about swimming—and the VP's impossible demand, which however insane would make Gerry's failure to fulfill it seem like willful resistance...

As he paused under a craggy oak, a spot he calculated would fall at the deep end of Claire's pool, he imagined the sort of important people they might invite over if her plans were realized. Her clients and partners. The upscale neighbors—doctors, university administrators, real estate developers, IT professionals. His boss, whose large sloped belly would resemble a porpoise stuffed into a swimsuit. He had a sudden vision of this rotund shape floundering about in the pool and drowning while he himself sipped a margarita.

The fantasy merely inflamed his anger, which with no external outlet turned back on himself. Now he pictured losing his job because he'd undermined the capital campaign. He saw Claire divorcing him as irresponsible and

obstructionist, his parents offering no sympathy because he'd caused the problem himself, his sons thriving without him; and when he turned up disheveled and drunk at Drew's wedding, he was escorted out the door by the mustachioed best man.

Under stress, Gerry was prone to this sort of morbid musing, and though he recognized its self-reinforcing nature, he found it hard to shake. Today he had no idea what had set it off, beyond the collection of minor events to which he was clearly overreacting, but it felt good to pummel himself and pity the mangled result. When he heard that his mother and Claire were taking the boys to an amusement park, he declined to join them. He drank three extra cups of coffee. He moped. Then, because it was the one thing he could do, he phoned Steve.

"Is Mom okay?" his brother wondered, alarmed at the rare call. "Did she make it to your house all right?"

After reassurances on that score, Gerry fumbled in trying to repeat his mother's bizarre story about a pool accident nearly three decades ago. But Steve knew right away what he was talking about.

"Oh yeah, the Halliday kid. When I was, like, thirteen. Conked his head and drowned. I saw him in the water, thought he was holding his breath or

something. After a minute it was too creepy, and I went in to get the grownups.”

“Where was everybody else?”

“Inside. We’d finished swimming for the night, it was getting dark, and I went back out to look for my baseball cap. You and Nance were watching TV in the playroom with the other Halliday kids. *Happy Days*, I think it was.”

“I don’t remember that at all. *Happy Days*? I’ve always hated that show. Mom said you saw a therapist?”

Steve chuckled. “Some New Age type. She kept asking how I felt about losing a friend, and I had to tell her over and over he wasn’t a friend, just the son of some people my parents knew. Actually he was a jerk, tried to act supercool, pretended he could ride a motorcycle and he’d been with girls, that sort of crap.”

“I can’t imagine how I—I mean, didn’t we ever talk about this?”

“Not all together, I don’t think, only me and the therapist. You know how it was. It’s important to *share* your feelings, they always said, but there were all those things that never got shared, like, you know ...”

“Yeah.”

For a few seconds the brothers fell into an embarrassed silence. During the divorce several discomfiting stories had emerged, such as Dad's being charged with misappropriating research funds and Mom's having a fling with an archeologist. Gerry had never suspected these matters till the breakup, and even then hadn't quite believed them.

Steve was the first to speak again. "Our family sure had its *share* of secrets," he quipped. "Huh, I made a pun!"

Gerry laughed—a little—but he was perturbed about his own lack of awareness. A sleepwalker passing through a fireworks show—that'd been him as a kid. How could he have been oblivious to so much, and then forgotten some of what he did see?

That night he made a point of apologizing to his mother. Worn out from supervising the kids on water slides, she merely nodded at him. He took it as a good sign that Josh had enjoyed the water and hadn't balked at wearing swim trunks.

In bed, lying awake after making love to Claire, whose hair smelled of chlorine, he had another odd fantasy about a pool scene. He was barbecuing steaks on a high-tech grill as guests gathered around the pool. The vice-president was there, acting obnoxious, with the others sucking up to him, until the

scene skipped ahead to the point where the VP floated face-down in the deep end. People crowded around asking what'd happened. Nobody would admit to knowing, but Gerry felt a fierce satisfaction.

On Monday morning the VP seemed to have forgotten Friday's email demand, and over the next weeks the capital campaign got off to a good start. So that bit of stress disappeared, and Claire said no more about her backyard plans; perhaps she was drawing up more sketches, investigating contractors, but Gerry didn't ask. She was busy with other projects, several mini-mansions that were moving from the planning to the construction stage. His mother had returned to New Mexico, and he tried to brush away all these concerns—the mother problem, the pool problem, etc.

What stuck with Gerry, though, was a sense that his ideas about his family, his own past, might be unreliable. As he drove the winding suburban lanes of his new neighborhood, he wondered whether, in ten years, he would have forgotten this too.

Six months passed. In January he had a chance to attend a three-day meeting in Phoenix sponsored by a national association of trade schools. The supposed purpose was to discuss positioning the schools for the future, but Gerry assumed the real aim was to give northeastern administrators a free vacation

on a sunny golf course. He didn't think the input of communications people like himself would matter, and he didn't play golf; yet he realized he could hop a short flight from Phoenix to Albuquerque, rent a car there and visit family for a couple of days. At this point he hadn't laid eyes on his siblings in several years, and he seized the opportunity. He looked forward to seeing his sister in particular.

The speeches and panels turned out to be as empty as he'd predicted, dominated by the latest management acronyms. After the concluding remarks on Saturday afternoon, he sped off on his side trip. In the thin dry air, the scrubby landscape stretched out to the horizon, ridged by stark mountains instead of the gentle hills he now called home. His body felt altered. When you returned to your childhood territory, he wondered, did your hormones change?

Nance had insisted he stay at her place, which lay conveniently within 45 minutes' drive of everyone else. She and her partner, Sylvia, had a small house with a guest room and no children to muck up their tidiness. Gerry admired Sylvia—her frankness, her short curly blonde hair and friendly blue eyes, her work shirts, jeans and worn cowboy boots that showed her slim figure to advantage—an excellent complement, he thought, to his dark, shy and rotund sister who often seemed unwilling to confront the world face to face.

Sylvia wasn't so popular with the rest of the family. Gerry's father had once uttered the word "butch," inaccurate as well as insulting, and Mom often mentioned Tom Delaney, a neighbor boy she mistakenly thought had been interested in Nance. Thus, when same-sex marriage became legal in New Mexico in late 2013, Nance and Sylvia had held a private ceremony without family members. Though Gerry felt hurt at being excluded, he understood the social calculations, and now he was eager to congratulate the women in person for the first time.

After his drive from Albuquerque he had a wonderful, gabby evening with the girls, fueled by strong weed and sweet desserts. Then on Sunday morning he set off to visit his father's condo, an errand he had to handle alone since Dr. Finlay had alienated himself from everyone else. Gerry found the old man's beard gone entirely gray and his mind focused on additional perks that the university ought to be granting him as a professor emeritus. Comparing the generations, Gerry wondered whether he seemed as irrelevant to Josh and Drew as his father was to him.

Nevertheless, he managed to talk with the old man for ninety minutes. At one point he suddenly said, surprising himself with the thought, "Dad, do you remember a family called the Hallidays?"

Staring, his father dug one skinny finger beneath the beard to scratch his cheek. "Halliday? The asshole that was head of the department? We finally maneuvered him out. Went to Buffalo, I think, to freeze his balls off."

Gerry waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. Why was he thinking about the Hallidays anyway, those people he couldn't place?

That night Steve and his wife Paula hosted a dinner, for the whole family except Dad, at their ranch house in the foothills. They had five kids ranging in age from three to fifteen, and the affair was chaos from start to finish. After the meal Sylvia joined Gerry in the media room to watch a basketball game. "I was helping clean up," she muttered, "but your mom said I should relax, it's all under control, there's too many in the kitchen already. Under control?" She chuckled. "With the three-year-old stuffing paper napkins in the dishwasher? What do I know, I'm an outsider."

"Yeah, well, I sometimes feel that way myself. Like when Mom and Claire are together. I'm sorry you and Mom don't hit it off too well, but there's a bright side in her leaving you alone. You're spared more of her complaints about supermarket clerks who don't speak proper English. That story she told was embarrassing."

“At least tonight,” Sylvia said, “she didn’t make a wistful reference to Tom Fucking Delaney and his crush on Nance. Want a beer? I think we deserve one.”

After Sylvia fetched two bottles of Corona, the two older boys came in, followed by Steve, who had the air of a genial, overburdened middle manager, which in fact matched his position in life. Strands of thinning hair floated from his scalp. Right after he plopped into an open spot on the long couch, he grunted, “Oh, I forgot, I wanted to show you.”

“What?” said Sylvia.

Steve got distracted by the TV. “Who’s leading, San Antonio?”

“That’s a foul! Charging!” yelled the fifteen-year-old.

“No,” countered Sylvia, “the defender was still moving.”

“Gerry ... I have a—here’s the replay—you’re right, Matty, that’s gotta be called, one way or the other. Gerry, if you come with me a sec, I want you to—”

Further basketball plays intervened before Steve poked Gerry’s arm, rose with a groan and led the way to a room off the hall that served as his study. “After you called, you know—last summer I mean—I remembered, when we

moved here and cleaned out the storage in the old place, I found a box of pictures Mom gave me when she was downsizing for her condo. From when we were kids? I don't know why she kept so many, but they're here in case you're interested."

Gerry was inclined to dismiss the pictures as casually as Steve seemed to, but politeness demanded he glance over his brother's shoulder as Steve fanned out a batch of prints from Dad's old 35-mm Nikon.

"Here, here's the one I remember. Look at us scrawny dudes!"

The color print, bleaching toward the edges, showed three boys facing the photographer, a tall skinny kid in the center with his arms looped around the shoulders of the shorter boys on either side. The little one on the left was Gerry, aged about eight, in corduroy jeans and a yellow knit shirt with a curling collar. He remembered that shirt, one of his favorites. On the other side he recognized his brother, five years older but not yet tall, in a muscle shirt and cut-off jeans, semi-ridiculous apparel for a kid with no claim to muscles.

"And that is—" he gestured.

"Noel Halliday. The one you said you couldn't remember? This can't have been taken too long before his accident."

Gerry rocked back on his heels. In the aging print the colors seemed artificial. Noel's pointed face was khaki-colored, his jeans almost green. His pastel-pink lips wore a wide grin, revealing a gap in his front teeth. The two brothers were also smiling for the picture but with less enthusiasm.

"Jesus. Did we know him that well?"

"Not really. He was weird. Always chewing those little mint thingies, Tic Tacs, you could smell him coming. Our dads worked together."

"Halliday was chairman of the department, I think. Dad mentioned him this afternoon."

Gerry shrank from the eyes of the boy in the print—a weird light blue, paler than the midday sky in the background yet somehow more intense. Even when other photos were shuffled on top, the tall kid continued to look out at Gerry. The odd colors had bled into the room, turning the walls from beige to mauve in the light of Steve's desk lamp.

Steve palmed through the prints and exclaimed over several others, but none showed Halliday children. "Got boxes," he sighed, indicating a closet. "Somebody oughta take the time to sort through, save 'em for the kids. Mom gave 'em to me just because I was handy."

“Uh,” Gerry said, “I don’t have time right now to sort pictures, maybe Nance?” But he ended up taking a couple of small packets “to show my kids,” including the one with Noel Halliday.

On the ride back to Nance’s house—with Nance driving, since Sylvia and Gerry had totaled four beers apiece—light snow drifted across the tarmac, and the headlights picked out stark bits of white-frosted scrub on the hillsides. “So what was that secret huddle with Steve about?” Sylvia asked, turning halfway around in the front seat.

“Huddle? Oh, nothing.” The rapid flashes of landscape made him dizzy and a bit nauseous.

“You came back and started guzzling Coronas, I had a hard time keeping up.”

“Syl, what are you talking about? Don’t harass my brother, please.”

“Some ... pictures,” Gerry muttered. “Of us as kids. My dad’s snapshots.”

“Yeah? And that drove you to Mexican beer?”

On a curve the headlights of a passing car slanted through, and he caught a flash of Sylvia’s mischievous grin. “Any good shots of my princess?” she went on.

“Please,” moaned Nance. “When I was little Mom dressed me in hippie-style beaded skirts. I looked like an elf masquerading as an Apache.”

“That I wanna see!”

“I brought a few along,” Gerry granted, squeezing his coat pocket. “Mostly of me and Steve and friends, I’ll show you later. Nance, he’s got boxes of old pictures that Mom passed on to him. He says somebody should go through and label them before we forget.”

“I don’t have time for that,” said Nance. “Or any interest in reliving my childhood.”

“Me neither,” Gerry agreed, fiddling with his coat buttons. Exhausted by beer and conversation, he looked up to see if the last exchange had distracted Sylvia, but she kept watching him.

At the house, with the alcohol toppling him forward, Gerry wobbled off to bed. Though he slept at first like a dead man, he woke when the tall kid stepped out of the photograph wearing that gap-toothed smirk, staring with the bleached blue eyes. The guest room was small, quiet, at the back of the house, yet as Gerry sat up in bed his inebriated stupor transported him to some kind of rec room with a TV flashing and the babble of other kids around. The scene gradually swelled until it surrounded him.

The tall boy was acting bossy, choosing the TV channel himself. It was *Happy Days*, with the bouncy theme song and Fonzie snapping his fingers to make girls run to him. Gerry shivered in his wet swimsuit, so he headed toward the bathroom to change, but the kid followed him, boasting about having powers like the Fonz, and when Gerry tried to close the door he wedged inside. He was laughing about something. Gerry felt a hand slap his hip, squeeze his butt, he was being taunted in some way. A nauseating scent of breath mints filled the room.

He ran out to a sliding glass door into the backyard. It was hard to budge the door, but he squeezed through and closed it, thinking he was safe. In the moonlit night he heard the crackling high desert atmosphere and the whisper of the pool, smelled the chlorine and the sage. Then a figure loomed over him and he ran around the pool, his bare feet slapping loud on the concrete. At the deep end the laughter caught up, and he was furious; he turned and lashed out, pushing, flailing. The boy caught Gerry's hands and pinned them, squeezed till it was painful. The creepy eyes glinted down at him. When the arms relaxed Gerry shoved again, with a raging strength, and the tormentor toppled back. He heard a loud crack and a splash—there was somebody in the pool. But Gerry had run into the house and slipped back into the cluster of kids watching

TV. Still quivering in his wet trunks, he stayed quiet, super quiet, hugging his knees while the theme song billowed, “Sunday, Monday, Happy Days, Tuesday, Wednesday, Happy Days.”

Now he bolted out of bed, collided with something hard, his heart racing, and when he caught his breath he decided to put on pajamas—it made no sense to sleep in a wet bathing suit. Turning in a confused circle, he discovered he was already wearing pajamas.

Right, this is Nance’s house. What just happened?

“Are you okay?” a voice asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m—”

It was his sister peeking in the door, with a watery light from the hall behind her. “I thought I heard a crash. Did you run into the dresser? I’ve been thinking it should be on the other side of the room, it’s too close to the bed.”

Embarrassed, he shooed her away, apologizing for waking her. Her round face, purplish in the dim light, looked equally embarrassed. He checked again to make sure he wasn’t naked.

“If you need a different pillow to sleep better ...”

He shook his head and she closed the door again.

For two hours he sat on the edge of the mattress, bent double with his forehead in his hands, a blanket around his shoulders, gasping at the bone-dry air. Waves of fear and anger splattered across his face. He hated being so wet and cold, though at the moment he was actually neither.

In the morning, after asking if he'd managed to sleep, Nance rushed off to her job at a bank, saying goodbye with a quick, shy hug. Sylvia, who worked at a gallery that didn't open till noon, was able to linger with him for a second cup of coffee. Unfortunately she remembered his promise about the pictures, and he had to fetch them from his coat pocket. Weary and headachy, he offered to leave them all with her.

"No," said Sylvia, "I think you want to keep them. And you said Steve has lots more."

She pulled her chair around to his side of the kitchen table and spread the snapshots in front of them. "So that's you? How old, seven, eight? And that's Steve with hair, hah! And there's your mom, what a flattering shot of her. I think the photographer still liked her then."

"Dad loved playing with his Nikon. He was very proud of it, wouldn't let anyone else touch it. That's why he's never in the picture."

When she focused on the critical image, Gerry rubbed his pulsating temples. "I don't remember that guy in the middle. I'm told he died in an accident."

"Ah. What kind of accident?"

"Swimming."

"Mmm." When she looked at him curiously, he tried to show no reaction. But the *Happy Days* theme bounced inside his skull, and his ankles chattered together under the table.

"Did Nance know this guy?" she asked.

"Um ... I guess we all did."

"I'll have to ask Steve to show me the boxes," Sylvia said. "I want to find pictures of Nance. She won't like it—she's sensitive about how your mother tried to make her a baby doll."

"She did?"

"That's how Nance sees it. After two sloppy boys, at last the perfect little girl your mom always wanted."

"I don't remember that. I mean, Nance was always kind of a favorite, but..."

Sylvia snickered, leaned back in her chair, slurped at her coffee. In a capacious old quilted bathrobe with her curly hair a jumble, she seemed the emblem of domesticity. “Me and my brother—the one in Indiana now, I hope you’ll get to meet him someday—we couldn’t possibly have grown up in the same family. Not with the different memories we have. But we’re only a year and a half apart. So it’s like there’s no true past, there’s only various ways of imagining it.”

“I seem to have missed a lot that was happening right in front of me,” Gerry confessed. The ache behind his eyes intensified. “And other stuff, apparently, I’ve blocked out.”

“Such as?”

He dropped his face, couldn’t answer. And she quickly added, “Sorry, don’t mean to pry.”

At that moment, though, an urge swelled up so fast he gulped. He squeezed out, “Last night I had this, this vision almost—I woke up and—I’m wondering if I’m losing my mind or drifting into psychosis.”

“Wow,” she said. “I don’t think you’re psychotic, but a vision? We’ve got a tradition of that around here. Are you turning into a shaman? Can I consult you about the future?”

This brought a brief chuckle, and the tightness in his chest loosened enough for him to say a few more words, and then a bunch of words. Sylvia made encouraging murmurs. In the end he described the entire scene to her, with its connection to what he'd heard from his mother and Steve about the Hallidays. He tried to stay calm as icy thorns scraped through his veins.

"Incredible! So you think this is a memory coming out?"

"It could be, I guess. If it's not, I don't know where it came from."

"Was the Halliday kid molesting you?" she demanded.

"I don't know."

"Really? What you said was—"

"You mean"—he was chilled and sweaty at the same time—"grabbing my ass?" He paused. "That part's kind of ... vivid. But maybe it was just harassment? If it happened at all."

"At that age you wouldn't understand what was going on."

"I suppose ..."

"Were there other times with him, when he—"

"No! I don't think so."

"And your parents had no clue?"

“They were worried about Steve, because he found the body in the pool. At least that’s what Mom says.”

“Mmm, this is heavy shit. Is it something you’ve been, you know, guilty about?”

“No, how could I feel guilty?—I’ve never remembered it!”

“But if one kid pushes another into the pool and he hits his head and drowns, and if there’s sexual shame mixed in, that could be really, you know, traumatic.”

“I don’t feel trauma. I’m more like ... amazed. Or horrified if my mind is so scrambled that it got blocked out. ... Or if it’s just something my brain invented, that’s *worse*, isn’t it?” He ground one wrist against the table next to his coffee cup.

Sylvia reached across and covered his hand with her own. “Look, if this keeps bothering you, maybe you should talk to a therapist. But to me, memory is overrated. My approach is remember what you need, forget the rest.”

He grunted, trying to keep his hand from twitching under hers.

A moment later, squeezing his fingers, she added, “Childhood is overrated too. It’s just the trial stage we have to pass through before we get to who we are.”

“Yeah, but it’s a trial without a verdict. Damn, my head hurts.”

While Sylvia got ready for work, he packed for his drive to the airport, and they had a pleasant goodbye in the driveway. “Call me if you want to talk some more,” she said. “On my cell. I won’t tell Nance about your vision-memory thing. We’ve all gotta deal with our personal crap.”

On the plane he managed to capture some of the sleep that had escaped him the night before. Returning east, to the cozy landscape of brown wintry hills, seemed to reset his hormones. At home he stuffed the photos in a folder left over from the conference, and pushed that to the back of a desk drawer, with no mention to his wife or kids.

He did watch Josh closely, trying to see in him the boy he himself used to be. He talked with both of his sons more often to learn what was important in their lives. Once he asked Josh, “Have you had any more trouble with that Cuthbert kid, the one that teased you? Like around the neighborhood or anything?”

“Nah. He’s a jerk. We stay away from him.”

“There’s always some kids that are jerks,” Gerry opined. “I had some experience with them myself.”

Josh's eyes flashed at this bland bit of wisdom, but not sardonically. He seemed to grant Gerry a point or two on the parenting scoreboard, and Gerry took that as a triumph.

Images from the Halliday house—if that's what they were—returned now and then, and he didn't resist them. The pallid blue eyes lost some of their scary power, and it felt oddly comforting to suppose he'd had a childhood trauma and survived it. If he had once summoned the strength to fight back against a bully—one lethal thrust—was that terrible or exalting?

Though he deliberated seeing a psychiatrist, he doubted that any greater truth could be dug up. And what would it matter? Sylvia might be right that memory was overrated.

Overall, he realized, he had little idea of what his own life was about, either his past in the high desert or his present in the rolling 'burbs with a wife and two kids. He was as muddled as the rest of the muddle class, and all he could do was drift along the surface with everyone else.

His acceptance of his state did not go as far, though, as agreeing to a pool in the backyard. He remained firm on that, and now he managed to think more rationally about it. After days of research, he offered Claire a proposal for a shallow water feature with irregular small ponds, aquatic plants, a rock garden,

little streams running through the trees and over waterfalls, a bog area, etc.— he listed the possible elements and left room for her design sense to play with them. He dropped a hint about using runoff rainwater from the house and garage.

“That’s a very interesting idea,” she mused. “You know, I think my clients would love it. The ecological aspect. There aren’t many sustainable water gardens in this area.”

In his view the substitute plan was only marginally less pretentious than a swimming pool, but he didn’t mention that. “It’s for us,” he said, “not clients. And we’d get to keep most of our trees. And I think the kids can help you plan it.”

“Of course, of course,” she said. “I’ll get to work on it.”

“You know, once we finish remodeling, I’d like to invite Nance and Sylvia to visit.”

“Sure!” Claire pecked him on the lips, and he gratefully went out to stroll around the backyard, kicking at the mounds of snow, laughing when a neighbor’s dog barked at him, pausing at the spot where the deep end would have been and taking a sharp gulp of frosty air.

Sam Gridley is the author of the novels *The Shame of What We Are* and *The Big Happiness*. His fiction and satire have appeared in more than fifty magazines and anthologies. He has received two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and neurotic dog and hangs out at the website <http://gridleyville.wordpress.com/>.