

1980

## Untitled

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His mother's voice came out of a fog overlooking a row of ink-colored waves that splintered like icicles on a jagged shoreline. He was reaching down behind one of the stone outcroppings, sopping wet from the waves, his hair matted with salt and gritty kelp. His free hand jutted out towards the sky to steady him and his left cheek was pressed hard against the cold rock, while the probing fingers of his left hand traced the outline of something vaguely human in the sand, something warm and pliable, and with one eye watched the moon drift in between the fingers of his free hand like a candle through broken glass.

"Rob," she said again. "Time to wake up."

He felt his legs twitch and one hand grip the edge of the bed like a vise. His eyes snapped wide as she let the window blind glide away from her fingertips above a thick square of sunlight. He rolled over once and shut his eyes tight. The insides of his eyelids were fading red.

"Come on, birthday boy," she chuckled, "I've got breakfast all ready. Good blueberry muffins, and sausage just like you like it, and fresh juice." Her voice varied in loudness and direction; he could tell she was walking around the room, picking up after him. "And a big stack of good hot pancakes, lots of butter and syrup." She paused. "Pancakes. What was it you called them when you were little?"

He groaned and squirmed around on his back.

"Pankies," he said.

"Pankies," she laughed. "Pankies, I remember."

He felt her tug on one bare foot and pat the edge of the bed. Her voice followed her as she moved out to the hallway toward the stairs. "Hup one. Hup two. It won't keep warm forever."

He finished the last dregs of his milk and daubed his napkin on one sticky finger. It was after nine but still too early to make sense of the bleary drive home the day before and the night out that followed. He pinched thumb and forefinger against his squinting eyes as his mother moved to the edge of the table, carefully lifting away plates. "Well, you sure don't have the appetite you used to," she observed, chuckling again. She tilted her head and scrutinized his unshaven face. "What all did you do last night, anyway?"

"Mike and Charlie, and, I don't know, a few other people. We made a night of it, Ma."

"Oh, I know you college boys, I know you." She set the dishes in the sink and called over the rush of the faucet. "Your father was a college boy when I met him." She shot a smile over one shoulder, apprehensively. "So how does it feel, anyway, to be twenty one?"

"I'm not twenty one yet. Six-thirty."

"Six twelve," she corrected "you came at six-twelve, and you screamed for half an hour. And Ricky was six twenty-one." She gave a little laugh again, the familiar chuckle that sounded as if it were wedged down deep in her throat.

**Drawing: Untitled**  
**By: Roger Weisman**

He rose from the table and moved tentatively toward the door. His fingers were clogged into his dark hair and he winced at the feeling of them, warm and probing against his scalp. On his way across the kitchen he paused at the sink and swung one arm around his mother's waist, planting a kiss on one cheek. "You still make the best, Ma," he said.

She smiled. As he reached the doorway she spoke without turning away from the soapy water. "You're going with us tonight, aren't you? Right after your father gets home; we thought we'd open some wine or something and then go; you know, you're twenty-one now, and you can drink."

"Ma..."

"Oh, I know, you already drink, I know," she laughed. "But we thought well, we'll make it official. Your father drank in college, but me, I couldn't handle it. Just Coke. I drank Coke." She chuckled.

He leaned against the doorjamb and pushed the hair away from one ear. "I thought about going in early, as a matter of fact. You know, it being our birthday and all, I thought Ricky and I could use a man-to-man. Without the folks."

She turned to him, wiping her hands with the dishtowel, somewhat alarmed. "But we always go together. He expects all of us." She shrugged. "But you go, if you want. You and he always have such fun together. And you're right, we'd just spoil it. You two are old enough now, after all." She was smiling at him with that same curious tilted-head expression she used in moments she somehow could not comprehend. He thought for a moment she wanted to move forward, to reach up to him, and for a moment he stood waiting, but at last he moved away and out of her gaze and toward the staircase. "I thought I'd stop and get a haircut on the way," he called as he moved upstairs. He heard her laugh softly from the kitchen and her voice caught up to him as he gained the landing. "My, oh my," she said loudly, "you have changed."

## II

It was unusually balmy for early spring and he rode the whole way with the top down. The constant grind of the engine reverberated across the empty highway leading toward the city, and as he passed between hillsides and under bridges the sound funneled at him from all sides. Periodically he would glance into the rear-view mirror, craning his neck to examine both sides of his head and tugging at his wind-whipped hair. "Awfully damn short," he muttered under his breath. He felt strangely self-conscious, as he guessed he always did when going to see Ricky. Ricky had always been able to observe and scrutinize others in his family with a gaze that made them all a little uneasy.

As he drove he felt his mind's eye reveal the flickering image of the morning's dream, and in vain he attempted to logically dissect it into something that would make sense, a meaning that he could attribute to something other than alcohol. It had been nearly four months since he had seen Ricky last; due to college it was rare to get home and pay a special

visit. He checked the rear-view mirror again, this time to see the brightly-wrapped package on the back seat. The symmetrical bow and sharp corners were conspicuous signs of the thirty cents extra he had spent to get it gift wrapped. He wondered if Ricky would notice. He was wary of arriving unannounced after so long, and he knew the present was an much a means of apology as celebration. He glanced at his reflection again and caught himself smiling slightly. Ricky, he knew, would not mind. He leaned back against the headrest and peered out over the rims of his sunglasses. The pavement stretched out grey and oddly naked before him, and through the warmth of the sunshine he assured himself of the smiling, warm image of his brother.

Dr. Lawrence met him in the lobby of ward B with a quick handshake and firm grip on one shoulder. "Your mother phoned to say you were on your way," he said.

"She worries."

Dr. Lawrence smiled and motioned toward his office. "I hear you're doing quite well in school these days--Dean's List, I think your mother said."

"Well, maybe. I think she exaggerated a little."

Dr. Lawrence shut the office door behind them and nodded toward the empty chair facing the desk. He pointed to the package which Rob had stuffed awkwardly under one arm. "Can I take that for you? For him, isn't it?"

"I might as well give it to him myself," Rob said.

Dr. Lawrence moved to the opposite side of the desk and sat down, the stem of his bifocals rattling against his teeth in an obvious expression of contemplation.

"First of all," he said, glancing amicably at Rob, "Happy Birthday."

Rob nodded thanks. "And second?" he said.

Dr. Lawrence tossed the glasses onto the desk top and leaned forward.

"How long, Rob, since you've seen Ricky?"

"About four months, I guess. Christmas."

"And you're going back to school right away."

Rob nodded again. "Tomorrow."

"I think maybe...you'd better forego your visit today. Ricky really hasn't been feeling too well lately."

"He's sick?"

"Well, no. I mean, physically, he's alright."

Rob felt his spine straighten against the back of the chair. "Then what?"

Dr. Lawrence leaned back and folded his hands behind his neck with his mouth open to speak. For a moment Rob thought he would tip the chair over backwards, then suddenly he swung upright and stood, hands in pockets, by the window.

Rob felt his fingers massaging the shiny paper and the thick edge of the felt bow. He looked up at Dr. Lawrence, his eyebrows in a frown. "It's his birthday," Rob said, lamely.

"I know." Dr. Lawrence's voice was cool and dark-sounding. The sun

was coming through the window behind him, blazing on the outline of his white coat.

"Ricky is worse, Rob, than when you saw him last. Much worse in fact."

Rob glanced around the room as if searching for something to say. "But it's been only four months."

"It's not a matter of time, really. And I'm not saying Ricky couldn't get better. But right now, he's not good."

"Wait a minute," Rob said, almost interrupting. "I don't get how you can say 'better' or 'worse.' This isn't a disease. You always said Ricky was permanent. No improvement, no deterioration."

"No mental deterioration, no. But psychologically, Ricky is just as susceptible to moods, or depressions, as you or I, in fact even moreso, due to his general lack of stimulation." Dr. Lawrence moved behind his desk again and raised his hands in front of him as if trying to mold his own words in the air. "It's as if," he went on, "Ricky's brain is shutting down; he's shutting his own brain down, really. This isn't unusual among institutionalized patients. Sometimes the routine, the boredom--and Ricky can get bored just like anyone else--causes the patient to withdraw, to kind of resist further development. They don't want to grow anymore."

"But what about...field trips," Rob asked. "What about movies, games..."

"They have those. Occasionally. And they help somewhat." Dr. Lawrence replaced his glasses on his nose and looked down at Rob. "Look," he went on, softly, "Ricky has done very well for himself, overall. And he's still learning, in some ways. But you have to understand--we have to understand, that among the retarded, sometimes learning the tasks we expect them to learn brings us more pleasure than it does them. All in all, Ricky's done exceptionally well. He's generally very motivated to learn." Dr. Lawrence smiled and took his glasses off. "He's our star pupil, really."

Rob felt his hands leaving wet spots on the wrapping paper and he awkwardly put the present on another seat. He heard Dr. Lawrence's voice, even lower and more resonant than before.

"He's twenty one, Rob. Many don't live half that long."

Rob's eyes were fixed on the edge of the desk, on a dark spot where the walnut top coincided with the metal frame. "He recognized me last time," Rob said aimlessly, bitterly. "I could tell."

"He may have. Ricky still retains basic motor functions. He will automatically squeeze an object put into his hands; he'll hold a large object close to him and feel its surface; he'll follow an object around the room and point to it. All those are important signs, important types of coordination."

Rob looked up into Dr. Lawrence's face. "Feeding?"

The doctor smiled slightly. "On good days," he said.

Rob remembered the excited phone calls to relatives, the impromptu party they had thrown on Ricky's behalf the day he learned to use a fork. He had told all his friends in school and Mrs. Gardner's eighth grade class had all sent cards to Ricky to congratulate him, singing praise to this

pseudo-celebrity they often heard about but would never see.

"I want to see him," Rob said. He gauged the Doctor's expression and responded accordingly. "I know. He probably won't know who I am."

### III

The nurse entered the room first; Rob heard her pulling up window shades and clearing away the morning's tray of half empty dishes, employing the customary visiting-day policy of telling Ricky that he had a visitor. She held the door open for Rob on her way out and smiled briefly. "I'll be in the nurse's station if you need me."

Rob put both hands on the package and went in. The room was not as bright as he remembered it, due to the overcast skies; their mother had requested a room facing the rear of the building so Ricky could look out onto the courtyard rather than the parking lot, and the arching cedars that had been planted the year Ricky had arrived were now tall enough to darken much of the afternoon sun. Ricky was sitting by the window, facing out, the back of his armchair toward the door. Rob began to advance slowly, softly calling Ricky's name twice. Ricky was motionless, sitting perfectly erect, with no sign of acknowledgment. Deliberately Rob stopped halfway across the room and set the package on Ricky's small wooden desk, and then marched forward to the window with purposeful enthusiasm.

"Happy Birthday," he called loudly. "Long time no see, pal! What's up?" Gregariously he gave Ricky a soft punch in the shoulder and patted one knee, then knelt before the window with a chuckling grin. "You look great! Man, it's great to see you. How long has it been? You remember, Ricky, the last time I was here?" He thought he saw Ricky nod. "We had fun, didn't we? And we'll have fun today. Mom and Dad and I will be out tonight, you know, like a party, with cake, and some ice cream--chocolate chip, you know how you're crazy over that stuff-- and I thought I'd talk them into bringing you a little wine, since we're legal now, right? What d'you think? Sound good?" He patted the knee again, still smiling. "But I thought, you know, we could use some time alone, kind of to catch up on things. Swap some stories, you know what I mean." He stood and leaned back on the window sill, legs and arms crossed. "So what's been going on in this place? Anything new? New friends? How about some new girls on the hall, maybe a few dates?" He tilted his head and flashed Ricky a sly grin. "Hey, how about that nurse?"

He stood there for nearly a minute, his head still cocked to one side, waiting for the smile to ebb away completely from his face. He felt moronic talking to Ricky that way, as if he were mocking him with delusions of normalcy. He intentionally let one arm drop to his side, to see if the quick movement would register in Ricky's eyes, bringing a glance, an eyeblink. It did not. Rob moved away from the window and back into the shadows of the room. "I brought you something," he said.

He returned to Ricky with the package held out in front of him. He set it

on Ricky's lap. "Open it," he said, searching Ricky's features for some sign of cognizance. "Okay, I'll open it."

He meticulously undid the blue ribbon and folded the paper away from a large cardboard box, which he then pulled apart with quick tugs. He removed the present and held it up for Ricky to see.

"It's a picture, Rick, painted on a rug. It's called a tapestry." His voice was lower and less powerful as he moved to the wall by Ricky's bed. He pulled off assorted snapshots and posters from the plaster and mounted Ricky's bed to hang the tapestry, withdrawing a small packet of nails from his pocket. "Remember how we went up to Nova Scotia for that fishing trip when we were ten, and you and Dad caught the swordfish and we cooked it on the beach?" He was hammering nails in with the heel of one shoe. "Remember what a great time you had, you'd run in the surf and stare out over the ocean for hours."

He hopped off the bed and stared up at the wall hanging. The breadth of the picture encompassed Ricky's bed and the lamp beside it, so that the belongings in the room were transported to the shore of an eight-foot wide seascape, complete with seagulls and the reflections of a setting sun behind frothy white clouds. It was the image of the shore by their old cottage in Nova Scotia, even if it was replicated on tapestries all over the country. Ricky was still staring expressionlessly out the window, rigid in his seat. "It's for you, Rick," Rob said, admiring the seascape. "I want you to have it."

With great effort he swung the back of Ricky's chair around so he faced the tapestry. Ricky resisted the movement sluggishly and groaned slightly. The sound made Rob remember the phone call from home his freshman year, hearing the garbled, senseless voice on the other end, his parents excitedly breaking in to tell him of Dr. Lawrence's suggestion of the possibility of speech for Ricky.

Rob turned from the picture to face his brother. He began to recollect the many instances over their mutual twenty-one years which both attached and divided them, as if some supernatural umbilical cord still connected them to a common birth despite the physical complexities which followed it. It was somehow ironic that on the anniversary of that moment they should find themselves so curiously distant. Rob stared at Ricky's face for long minutes feeling the rage of their imaginary sea he had recreated pummeling his own back, looming wide-angle blue around his head and shoulders like a halo. Ricky was glaring infinitely into its blueness, vacant, reserved, mirroring the deepening shadows of the room in his eyes. Slowly Rob felt one hand begin climbing away from his body, until it reached a faded baseball mitt hanging from the moulding above the tapestry, and in one quick blow he tore it nail and all from its perch and cast it violently against the top of the desk beside him. The crack of old leather on wood reverberated against the four hard walls like a slap. Ricky's rigid head immediately snapped toward the sound, and his stale facial expression now seemed more interpretable as confusion than vacuousness. Rob lunged forward at the sight and locked his hands hard around either arm of

Ricky's chair, so that their twin faces came up against one another like reflections in a mirror image.

"Damn it! You're in there! I know you're in there!"

Rob pushed himself away from the chair and bounded to the door where he grappled with the metal nameplate which faced out of the narrow window into the hall. He forced two fingers behind the sharp plastic covering the nameplate and ripped it out, scattering the paper behind it to the floor in pieces.

"Look at this," he shouted ignoring the fact that it was no longer readable, "Ricky Johnston! Printed beneath the doctor's name yet! Ricky! Why the hell are they calling you that? You're goddamn twenty-one years old. Christ, they haven't called me Robby since I was twelve, for God's sake!" He paused to catch his breath and realized he was sweating; the pad of one finger was dripping blood on the hospital carpet and making a stain. With slow deliberation he approached the chair once again examining the countenance of his brother. He remembered the days as a child when he would stare into the mirror and try to imitate the startling blankness Ricky would get from time to time, as if somebody had just pulled the plug on the whole system. "You're not Ricky anymore," he said quietly. "You're Rick. Ricky is a boy's name, and it's about time we started growing up." His own face had always appeared too animated, too conscious of observing itself to really pass for the authentic. In those days they had consoled themselves with the relative periods of playfulness and spontaneous activity Ricky had developed; he would gurgle excitedly and laugh with the unself-consciousness of a two-year-old, and Rob had always thought it charming, even inspiring in a way. He moved closer to see Ricky's face. It was fascinating, both because it was so like his own physically, and because it was so different in character, as if his own features had been somehow photographed in a perverted light. Ricky at twenty-one appeared childlike; the features had matured into masculine size but wore none of the characteristic blemishes and quirks that signal human exposure to an eventful life. Somehow the identical genotype they shared had provided them only with the same face; they wore very different countenances. Rob reached up and felt the bare scar in the hairs of his left eyebrow where Jackie Sullivan had swung the bat too far in Little League. Ricky's hair was darker and softer; the eyebrows were thinner and farther apart. Rob reached from his own face to Ricky's, and felt the skin smooth and textureless beneath his fingertips. "Say it Rick. Say your name. They told us you could speak, you could run, you could feed yourself." He knelt down to eye level and tried to smile. "We've waited a long time, Rick, for you to understand. We want you just the way you are. Happy, friendly. Not a vegetable. Don't give up on us, Rick. Don't give up on me." His voice dropped to nearly a whisper. "Don't give up."

After five minutes there was no sound, only breathing. The afternoon sun was beginning to pale on the horizon and slip away behind the birch trees. Ricky began to drool a little from one corner of his mouth and Rob



stood and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to catch it. As his hand neared Ricky's face he let his fingers move instead to the top of Ricky's forehead where they wrapped around the long wavy strands that were shiny and dark like his own. With one tug of his wrist he jerked Ricky's head back so that the face peered upright into his, and he heard Ricky's voice suddenly catch in his throat as his jaw sagged. Rob's own jaws clenched tight and he peeled his lips back over them, hissing at Ricky in vulgar tones he had sworn never to use around him, in brief epithets of swollen grief and bitterness that were bursting like hot sparks in his brain. His voice began to rattle and shake and he felt beads of perspiration trickle down into his eyes and sting. He heard the words rumble coarsely from his throat like a flickering snake's tongue. He shook his brother's head by his hair and spoke so loudly he could smell his own breath bouncing back off of Ricky's face.

"Tell me, Ricky. Who's the stupid one, huh? Who's the idiot?"

In the distant blue of Ricky's irises he saw the round, inverted reflection of the entire room, and the ocean behind him, and his own shining eyes staring back.

Rob let go of Ricky's hair and as the head sagged down into position he sent his fist into the soft skin just below the cheekbone, so that the head snapped to one side, flinching reflexively, and as he hit him again Rob could feel the wet shock of the waves against his naked skin, and the sudden violence of blinding light dispelling darkness, although he knew there was none. He could feel the sensation of his own body meshing with pliable flesh and then rock-hard bone, splitting against the teeth, and the sound of their skins colliding left him awake and dizzy on the beach, groping again for something he could not reach, until he physically straightened his arm up and away from his body and grabbed Ricky with the other, and as he buried his face against his brother's shoulder he felt the imagined nightmare of their own dramatic birth. He felt the scream awaken and crawl up inside him to the edge of his lips, and he felt the icy sweat of the morning flush again on his skin. His body shuddered along its full length as he held the scream back, his eyelids pressed together in wrinkled slits. He felt the awful liquid drench his body. He thought he could feel the movement of the placenta wriggle past him and splash between them on the floor, and with his fingers he felt himself groping not for forgotten shapes in the dark but instead forcing them down into the earth, back into the shadowed place it came from, denying it room, space to move, air to breathe, clutching away the oxygen until the shape moved no more, until it was frozen and stiff in the sand, and his own wriggling body was flooded with breath and brine.

He opened his eyes for a moment and felt the tears wetting his face and the soaked shoulder of Ricky's shirt. He clutched him around the neck and hid his face in his arms. His voice was a gritty whisper in his throat. "You bastard," he said.

His muscles tightened and his eyes snapped shut at the sensation of the twin patches of warmth and subtle pressure, one on either shoulder blade, that kept him safe on dry land.