

Blackbird

LITTLE SISTER'S CLASSICS



Blackbird

LARRY DUPLÉCHAN

ARSENAL PULP PRESS
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BLACKBIRD

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Chapter One

I dreamed I was dancing the waltz with Sal Mineo.

He was young, about the age when he did *Crime in the Streets*, which is about my age now. He was very beautiful, and about two inches shorter than me, and he smelled of Old Spice.

I remember feeling awkward, my feet unsure of which way to go. I kept saying, “But I don’t know how to waltz.”

And Sal Mineo said, “Don’t worry; just follow me.”

I woke up suddenly, as if awakened by a loud noise. My underpants were wet and sticky. And it was time to get up for school.



“Talent is beauty,” Efrem was saying, just as Todd Waterson shouldered his way through the choir room’s double doors. Which would have made a nice little cinematic segue, since Todd was not what I would call a major talent in any art form, but could have written the book on being beautiful. I thought of the juxtaposition of Efrem’s remark and Todd’s entrance in terms of film, both because I love movies and because last year, when Efrem signed my yearbook, he wrote, “May your life be a movie in which you are Orson Welles: Write it – direct it – star in it.”

I suppose I’ve almost always thought of my life as a movie, but since Efrem wrote that to me, even more so.

It was about fifteen minutes before first period, and Efrem and I were hanging around the choir room, something we did quite a bit.

Lots of people do, since the choir room is one of the nicer rooms in the entire school, and since Mr. Elmgreen doesn't seem to mind if half the student body uses it as sort of a combination clubhouse and union hall before and after school and during lunch. Efrem wasn't even in choir, but many of the people who like to frequent the choir room aren't. We were straddling a couple of chairs up on the top tier of the room, up against the cupboards where Mr. Elmgreen stores the sheet music and percussion instruments and such. Just killing some time. Efrem was reading *Valley of the Dolls* for maybe the thirtieth time – it's his all-time favorite novel. The Foley twins were crouching in opposite corners of the room, plucking out a passable version of "Dueling Banjos" on guitars. There were maybe twenty or so other kids sitting around the room, reading or talking or strumming their guitars and singing softly to themselves.

I watched Todd clump-clump his way up the first tier, then the second, headed toward the back of the room; I must admit I was only half listening to what Efrem was saying. Todd was wearing his favorite pair of hand-tooled Tony Lama lizard-skin cowboy boots, with toes so pointy you could knit booties with them. And a pair of faded old Levi's hanging so low on his hips that his hip-bones were visible between the top of his pants and the bottom of his bright yellow *HERE TODAY – GONE TO MAUI* t-shirt. He looked hotter than a wood-pit barbeque. Todd was long-legged and bow-legged; and the way he walked in those boots and those Levi's, boys and girls, you best believe that was quite an eyeful. I have on more than one occasion followed Todd Waterson around school, ending up at a class I didn't have, just watching him walk. I hate to use an expression as hackneyed as "poetry in motion," but that's exactly the expression that came to my mind every time I saw Todd walk.

(My own walk is, I fear, much more functional than decorative. Marshall Two-Hawks MacNeill once described it as "somewhere between Bette Davis and Groucho Marx. Long, quick strides, face forward, eyes straight ahead, looking like somebody with someplace to go, by golly." But that was later.)

“After all,” Efrem was saying, “time and gravity will sooner or later take its toll on even the most beautiful face and body, but talent – ”

I’d heard this one before. It’s one of Efrem’s favorite subjects, probably because Efrem is under the mistaken impression that he’s not very good-looking. Which he is. Besides, Efrem likes to use me as sort of a warm-up audience; he’s perfecting his spiels in preparation for when he gets famous, so he repeats himself quite a bit. I fully expect someday to pick up the *New York Times Book Review* and read: “Efrem Zimbalist Johnson – Talent Is Beauty.”

Efrem is a writer. I’m a singer. Anyway, I’m going to be.

Efrem Zimbalist Johnson is the closest thing to a real live Best Friend I’ve had since Martin Kirkland in the fourth grade. I feel a certain kinship toward Efrem, not the least reason being that we were both named after somebody famous. I was named after Johnnie Ray, the singer, whose biggest hit was “The Little White Cloud That Cried,” back in 1951. Efrem was named, not after the granite-faced television actor most famous for his portrayal of Inspector What’s-His-Name in “The F.B.I.,” but after *that* Efrem Zimbalist’s father, the great concert violinist. It was Efrem’s father (from whom Efrem inherited his particular brand of pale-skinned brunet looks) who named him.

“I was expected to be,” Efrem explained to me on more than one occasion, “the greatest American-born concert violinist this nation had ever seen. That was my father’s dream for me. I hope,” he would say, “I will not disappoint him too badly for becoming ... the things I have become.”

This was, of course, before what was later to become known (all too euphemistically, I’m afraid) as “the accident.” It was after the accident, after his wounds had scabbed over (the visible ones, anyway), after much of his seemingly unflappable self-assurance and basic deep-down belief in his own superiority over most other mortals had returned to him that Efrem scrawled in the inside cover of my senior

yearbook (in his inimitable ass-backwards southpaw writing):

To a Black Star (Young, Gifted, and Black – and That’s
a Fact!)

Love and kisses, Efrem.

A.K.A., the Divine Mr. J.

But I’m getting way ahead of myself again.

So Efrem is going full steam into his Talent-Is-Behauty sermonette, and Todd Waterson is toting his Ovation round-back acoustic guitar up the tiers. Todd wasn’t in choir, either – he just liked to stow his guitar up on top of the back cupboards while he was in class, and he’d come in during lunch period and park in a corner and strum. Anyway, he’s got the guitar in his right hand and his basic blue everybody’s-got-one-just-like-it backpack full of books in his left, and (I immediately notice) – he’s not wearing any underwear. And his dick is quite discernible indeed plastered up against one side of the crotch of those jeans, and his balls are sort of bunched up on the other side; and I suppose I should have looked away immediately or at least tried to tune back into what Efrem was saying, but of course I didn’t. And next thing you know I’m starting to get hard.

Which is not what you’d call a rare occurrence for me. Erection seems to be my middle name lately. I’ll pop a class-A boner while reading anything remotely sexual in a book (Efrem likes to read the juicier parts of *Valley of the Dolls* aloud, just to watch me get all hot and bothered); during just about any love scene in any movie; at the sight of a men’s underwear ad (except ones like J.C. Penney’s, where the models’ crotches have been airbrushed away); at the very thought of Skipper Harris, or (more recently) Marshall – but that comes later, as I said. And, as often as not, I’ll get hard for no real reason at all, as if my dick just wants to let me know it’s still there. And the sight of Todd Waterson’s faded denim crotch (which, as he reached the upper tier of the room where Efrem and I sat, hovered dangerously at eye

level) had me well on my way to a full-on throbbler within mere fractions of a second. After attempting with some difficulty to cross my legs, I retrieved my three-ring binder from the floor beside my chair and plopped it onto my lap.

“How’s it goin’, Johnnie Ray?” Todd flipped his hair back as he reached us. Todd’s hair was very blond and very straight and quite long in the front, so that an average of six thousand times a day his hair fell across one eye in an effect more than slightly reminiscent of Veronica Lake, and he would flip it back with a quick little backward neck motion. I generally dislike that particular habit, but on Todd it was quite sexy.

“How’s it goin’, Todd?” I had only recently come to realize that the question *How’s it goin’* is entirely rhetorical. Time was when I would go into fifteen minutes on just how it really *was* going, causing more than one person to regard me as if I had taken leave of my senses.

“How’s it goin’, Efrem?” Todd made a modified hook-shot with his Ovation, landing it onto the top of the cupboard nearest Efrem.

“How’s *what* goin’, Todd?” Efrem rolled his eyes in that way he has when addressing someone he considers far beneath him – which is one long list, believe me. Efrem didn’t like Todd very much. He said it was because Todd possessed the intellect of a staph infection, but I also think Efrem was more than a little bit jealous of Todd’s looks. As I say, Efrem doesn’t have the highest regard for his own looks, and Todd was practically a shoo-in for Best-Looking of our graduating class. Who wouldn’t be a little jealous? I was.

“You gonna audition today?” Todd asked me. Todd wasn’t in Drama either, but he hung around the Drama room, too. Even though he wasn’t particularly creative, I think he just liked to be around those of us who are. Or think we are.

“Uh-huh.”

“You’ll get a part,” he said. “No sweat.”

“Thanks. Wish I was as sure as you are.”

“Yeah.”

Yeah. Well, I never said Efrem didn't have a point – Todd wasn't exactly Mensa material. Efrem said he was only getting through high school on his pretty face, which may well have been true. Still, Todd Waterson was one extremely decorative dude. And, frankly, I've always been a sucker for good old skin-deep physical beauty. I mean, if I want scintillating conversation, I can watch *All About Eve*. Or, heaven knows, talk to Efrem.

“Well, good luck, anyhow,” Todd said, making as if to leave.

“So how's Leslie?” I asked him, just to keep the conversation going for a moment longer while I enjoyed the view. Todd had been going steady with Leslie Crandall, the only daughter of our pastor over at the Baptist church, since roughly the dawn of time.

“She's fine,” he said, just a little too quickly. I didn't quite know where it came from, but something told me Leslie wasn't exactly fine. Not fine at all. I wasn't sure if it was something in Todd's face, or his posture, or his voice, or the way he started fiddling with his pinky ring, turning it this way and that on his finger. Or what. It was just there, somehow.

That same something also told me now was not the time to pursue the matter. So I simply said, “I hope you're futzing around with that ring because you're about to give it to me.” It got a smile. That ring never left Todd's finger, that I knew of. Leslie gave it to him. It's a beautiful piece, sterling silver with a big, shiny black opal, and I coveted it so openly that it had become sort of a running gag between Todd and me.

“I'll leave it to ya in my will,” Todd said. Then he treated us to yet another vigorous hair-flip, and said, “Later, guys.”

“Later, Todd,” I said. Efrem kind of snorted. I watched Todd walk down to the doors, taking that incredible blue-denim behind with him. I'm telling you, talent or no talent, that walk was an art form unto itself.

“Well, I, for one, fail to fathom why you would even deign to

“He’s a nice guy,” Efrem said in his very Katharine Hepburn attitude he likes to use when he’s feeling particularly snotty.

“He’s a nice guy,” I said. I briefly considered adding something to the effect of, “Besides, it is my fervent desire to relieve Todd Waterson of his trousers” – but I didn’t. About thirteen times a day I’d be that close to coming right out and saying something like that to Efrem. I was almost sure he knew, anyway; most days, I would have bet dollars to doorknobs that Efrem felt the same way about guys as I did. But for some reason, I always stopped just short of turning to Efrem and spilling the beans once and for all. I don’t always make the wisest choices in life.

“He’s a *mongoloid*.”

“He’s a nice guy, Efrem, and not everybody can be the celebrated wit you are.”

“Too true,” Efrem said. “Too true.” I swear, sometimes Efrem could be the most amazing snot. After a moment, he said, “Nervous about the auditions?”

“I dunno. A little nervous, I guess.” I *was* a little nervous. God knows why. It wasn’t as if I really gave a damn about the play. And I harbored no illusions about my chances of getting cast. It was just the sort of thing that made me nervous. Auditions, midterms and finals, interviews with my guidance counsellor. Any situation where there’s any kind of pressure on, and I get this rapid little tremor right in the center of my chest, along with an uncomfortable overfull feeling, like gas. I had it right then. And I knew I’d continue to have it all day, right through the auditions. I was definitely a little nervous.

“Whatever for?” Efrem said. “You’re going to get a part. Heaven knows you’re about the only person in the whole of what is laughingly called the Drama Department with even a *modicum* of talent.”

“Thanks a lot, Efrem. You’re a real prince.” That was my favorite expression for awhile there: “You’re a real prince.” I’d just finished reading *The Catcher in the Rye* for Mr. Galvez’s English 4 class which, frankly, I wasn’t all that wild about. The book, that is. I think Holden

Caulfield was more than a bit whiny, what with all that dire teenage alienation schtick, constantly going on and on about how terribly alienated he was from everything. I mean, it's not as if *my* life has been this seventeen-year non-stop picnic in the park, but if I felt that alienated all the time, I'd just down a bottle of Sominex or fall on a samurai sword or something. It was quite dreary, if you want my opinion. It never fails to amaze me what kind of thing gets called a classic these days. Anyway, Caulfield has this habit (if you've read the book, you already know this) of saying to people (très très facetiously, of course), "You're a prince. You're a real prince." It was the only thing I really liked in the whole book.

"You're a real prince," I said to Efrem.

"You know I didn't mean it like that," he said. "I just meant you're one of the best actors in this school, for whatever that's worth, and that you really have no worries about getting a part in this overblown vaudeville skit Mr. Dead End Kid has decided to grace the stage with this semester, that's all."

Efrem likes to refer to Mr. Brock, the Drama teacher here, as Mr. Dead End Kid, because the most important thing in Brock's life (or so it seems to us) is that he used to be friends with Huntz Hall, who was in all the Dead End Kids movies back in the late thirties. Later, he was with the East Side Kids, and still later with the Bowery Boys. Huntz Hall, that is, not Mr. Brock. As far as any of us knows, Brock himself has never done anything bigger than some summer stock in the Midwest somewhere back in the fifties. He isn't even much of a drama coach, if you ask me. Efrem says those who can't do, teach; and those who can't teach, teach here.

Personally, I feel kinda sorry for old Brock. I mean, the man is sixty years old if he's a day. And sometimes I think, if I reach that age with nothing more to show for myself than having once palled around with some B-movie comedian – I mean, you should *see* the man sometimes, trying to make some meat-headed sophomore remember who Huntz Hall is ("You know! The goony one with the

baseball cap!”). You’d think he’d get the message. But no. Just give him the slightest provocation, just mention the thirties for heaven’s sake, and old Brock’ll jump right in with, “Say, did I ever tell you I knew Huntz Hall personally?” When I told him once that I’d actually *seen Dead End*, it practically made his whole life worth living. It’s kinda pitiful, I mean it.

“Let’s get real, Efrem – I haven’t got a prayer.”

“What do you mean, you haven’t got a prayer?” he said. “You were easily the best thing in *Thurber Carnival* last year. I said so, in print, as you recall.” Efrem was entertainment editor of the school paper. “You did win last year’s Thespian award, lest we forget.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “But *Thurber* was different. I did the unicorn-in-the-garden thing, and it was very cute and very, very safe. But this play is all about el-oh-vee-ee love, after all. And, being as there’s no black girls in the department, if I did get cast, I’d undoubtedly have to nuzzle some little flower of white womanhood right there on the stage. I just don’t know if this town’s quite ready for that.”

“Oh, come on,” he said, “this is nineteen seventy-four. This is hardly the Old South, you know. We’re not *that* far from L.A.”

“We’re far enough.”

Efrem shrugged. “Too true.”

Perhaps I should explain a couple of things before I go on.

First of all, this is a pretty conservative town – no two ways about that. It isn’t very big, about thirty thousand people, and even though we’re not even ninety miles from downtown L.A., it’s still a small town in a lot of ways. There are a lot of Mormons here (who, in case you don’t know any, aren’t allowed to drink or smoke or do much of anything except get married and make a lot of babies and drink more Hawaiian Punch than you would ever believe possible); and those that aren’t tend to be four-square Baptists like my mom and dad, and the Baptists are almost as bad off as the Mormons, except a few of them smoke, mostly on the sly. Which means certain things just

aren't tolerated around here. Like, for instance, the plays done by our Drama department have to be edited – censored, really. All the Gods and Jesuses and sonofabitches have to be taken out, and all the God-damns have to be changed to damn.

And there is a certain amount of racism here, too. I don't mean there's a lynching every Saturday night and KKK parades down the main drag or anything like that, but most of the black people live way out on the outskirts of town, either out on the Air Force base or near it. We don't, and neither does Cherie's family, but that's about it. Even in school, most of the black kids keep pretty much to themselves, and the white kids to themselves. So one thing and another, I thought it was safe to assume my chances of getting a part in that semester's play were about a million to one.

The play itself was called *Hooray for Love*. It was a comedy revue – a History of Love through the Ages, or so it was subtitled. There was a takeoff on Adam and Eve, a scene about Captain Smith and Pocohantas, that sort of thing. All ending up with scenes of quote love in the seventies unquote. Think of “Love, American Style” in rerun, and you've got the general idea.

We in Drama II all thought the play sucked rocks, pure and simple. We had requested *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which of course got shot down immediately. So *Hooray for Love* we got. It was written by an old friend of Mr. Brock's (not, I hasten to add, Huntz Hall). And it was chock full of little huggies and kissies and just lame-o double entendres so that one or two of our more rabid Mormon citizens were likely to get their panties in a wad over it no matter who was cast. And right off the top of my head I could think of at least two sets of parents who would pull their daughters out of Drama (and maybe even out of school) if a young man of the colored persuasion was to touch them onstage.

So, anything Efrem might have attempted to the contrary, we both knew I really *didn't* have a prayer, and, frankly, the only good reason I could think of for going to the auditions at all was that Skipper would be there.

“I’m not intending to hurt myself about this thing, Efrem. You and I both know the play bites the big one. Besides, Brock’ll probably make me student director as a consolation prize. And who knows? I might even swallow my considerable pride and do it.” I did a big shrug.

“I still say you’re wrong,” Efrem said. “So where’s Cherie? You always look so naked when you’re not wearing her.” At which point Cherie came in.

“As if on cue,” Efrem said – which was exactly what I’d been thinking. Cherie bounced up the tiers, testing the dress code in a very short blue paisley dress – rather low-cut with a yoke effect at the bosom – which really showed off her breasts and legs. Cherie has these big legs, shapely but large, and truly impressive breasts – quite a handful if a guy’s into breasts and legs. Not that she’s fat, exactly, but she is rounded, if you get my drift. Cherie Baker will never be mistaken for a guy. She stood before me, brown and sweet as a Reese’s Peanut-Butter Cup, a dimply smile on her full-moon face and a yellow rosebud extended to me in her right hand. Cherie gave me a rose almost every morning – heaven only knows where she got them – just because one day I commented on the rosebud she was carrying with her through school. Roses are my favorite flower.

Cherie was also in love with me. So she gave me a rose almost every morning. And almost every morning, it made me feel a little bit sad.

“Morning, Johnnie Ray,” Cherie said in that breathy, little-girl-lost voice of hers, a voice she seemed to have borrowed from Marilyn Monroe, a voice I was sure for the longest time just had to be a put-on. She slid into the chair nearest mine, scooting it as close to me as possible. Then she slipped her small, soft hands around my upper arm, gently at first, caressing my biceps; then she squeezed it hard for a moment, just before resting her cheek against my shoulder. All of which she accomplished in one smooth motion, while sucking in a long breath through her tiny, spaced teeth.

“Morning, Efrem,” she whispered, as much into my shoulder as at Efrem.

She did this nearly every morning, too: the taking hold of my arm, and the long, hissing breath, as if the taking of my arm – an arm just recently beginning to show the effects of Coach Newcomb’s weight-training class – were a wonderful thing for her. And every time she did, it made me feel so sad. Sad for Cherie, for having the misfortune of loving me. Because I hated to see her tossing her love away. And sad for myself a little bit – being at least as much in love with Skipper Harris as Cherie was in love with me, I knew how it felt to love in vain. And I felt a little guilty, too, for not being able to love her the way she loved me. Guilty, even though I couldn’t help it. Try as I might, the most that the touch of Cherie’s impossibly soft flesh against mine, the baby smell of her fluffy Afro against my shoulder could elicit in me was the completely irrational, totally unrealistic desire to protect her from all harm.

As if I could protect anybody from anything.

Come to think of it, the times when Cherie touched me were among the few times during the average day when it was reasonably certain that I would *not* get a hard-on.



At the time, Cherie was one of the two people who knew about me. Or, rather one of the two people whom I had told about me. I’d had to tell her; it was the only thing to do.

We met the first day she transferred here from Pittsburgh. Choir was about to start, and Cindy Metzler, the alto-section leader, approached me, steering another girl – Cherie – by the shoulders. Cindy introduced me as “our very best tenor,” which, modesty aside, I guess I was. Now that I think of it, old Cindy was probably out on a match-making mission, and I was too dumb to notice.

“I’m not actually the best tenor,” I said. “I’m just closest to the

door.” And Cherie smiled that smile of hers, full of sweetness and guilelessness and little baby teeth; and then she giggled, covering her mouth with her hand like a little girl. And she melted my heart. I think in my way I fell in love with her right then and there.

We were immediate friends. Cherie was enrolled not only in concert choir but also in the bonehead English class where I student-assisted – and in which Cherie sat behind me, often massaging my shoulders while I corrected spelling tests and sentence diagrams until Mr. Stebner said, “Cherie, I believe my assistant has work to do, and I know *you* do.” Or something similar.

I knew Cherie had a crush on me – Stevie Wonder could see that – and while I did not encourage her attentions, neither did I slap her hands away or wear a t-shirt to school with *Noli Me Tangere* tie-dyed across the front. I’d be a liar if I said the attention wasn’t nice; and in the absence of what I really wanted, the feeling of being admired, being wanted by someone as sweet as Cherie, made me feel good. It wasn’t Skipper Harris by a long shot, but it was certainly better than nothing. And when people – Efrem included – began to assume Cherie and I were an item, I did nothing to squelch the myth.

When she gave me the letter, though, I knew I couldn’t stand to string her along anymore. Not that I’d ever led her on, exactly. Still, I hadn’t felt completely honest with Cherie from the time I began to realize she wanted more than a friendship from me – which was quite early on in the relationship. But I honestly hadn’t realized how serious Cherie was until she gave me the letter.

It was right after I’d told Skipper about me, about how I felt about him – which was easily within the top two stupid-assed-est things I have ever done – and which lowered me into a deep-blue funk the likes of which the world had rarely seen, for about two weeks. It was the first time I really understood the word heartbreak, because it honestly hurt so bad in my chest I could have sworn something in there had broken right in half. And Efrem was all over me going *whatsamatter* *whatsamatter* *whatsamatter*, and I wasn’t *about* to

talk about it, but he just kept at me. But not Cherie.

She just stayed there by my side, attached to my right arm like a Band-Aid, pointedly not giving me the old wassamatta-you treatment. And then, two or three days into this deep-purple mood of mine, just before first period, Cherie hands me this big square pale-purple envelope, sealed. She kissed my face, and clip-clopped off to her first class (she was wearing a pair of those big clunky platform shoes). She had written on two pages of crisp paper the same color as the envelope; in pencil, in the erratic-looking little-kid writing I recognized from her spelling tests.

“I don’t know whats the matter,” it read, “but Id realy like to help.”

Have I mentioned that Cherie is just about the worst English student who ever lived? Consistent D’s on her tests, hasn’t a clue about punctuation. Not that she’s stupid, mind you; she simply has no written-language skills.

“Anything I can do Ill do,” the letter continued. Cherie’s particularly bad with apostrophes. “Just tell me what I can do.”

Then came the part that really killed me:

“I offer you my love,” it said, and the handwriting seemed to get even more jumpy than usual as she wrote, “I offer you my body, if that be your need.”

That’s when I knew I had to tell her.

I got myself to her English class early, and placed the letter on her desk. I had corrected the spelling and punctuation, and written on the bottom, “We have to talk.”

When I told her, her face took on a very sad look, but just for a moment. “Are you sure?” she said. She sighed a little and said, “Just my luck, huh?” Than she took my arm like she always did, almost as if nothing at all had happened. And the subject very seldom came up again.

“Excited about the auditions?” Cherie asked.

“I haven’t got a chance,” I said – it was becoming a reflex.

“Don’t say that,” she said, her voice almost raising to ordinary conversational volume.

“All right, I won’t say that.” I raised a surrendering hand. “I sure would love to get my teeth into that Romeo and Juliet scene, though.” The only thing in *Hooray for Love* that was even worth the bother was the first-act curtain scene, which was the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. I’ve always like the play, loved the Zeffirelli movie, and I would have given both my chest hairs to play that scene. “Unfortunately, that would be about the last thing they’d let me do here.”

“You don’t know that.” Cherie was about to really give me a talking to, I think, when Skipper came in – carrying his guitar, natch. In this town, everybody and his dog has a guitar; even I have one. As Skipper entered, Cherie squeezed my arm a little harder, almost a reflex.

Skipper was wearing this ancient plaid wool shirt that he wears nearly every day of his life – it has this Playboy-bunny patch sewn to the left shoulder. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the shirt completely unbuttoned, with a tank top underneath. And I wanted to kiss his neck so bad. He tossed an eyebrow-flash up to where we were sitting and smiled, showing the two slightly over-sized canine teeth that made him look like a friendly vampire whenever he smiled.

“Hey, you guys.” Skipper walked up and sat down just to one side of my feet and opened his guitar case, blissfully oblivious to the fact that it nearly wrecked me to have him so close.

“I woke up this morning with this song in my head, and I can’t get it out,” Skipper announced, ear-tuning his guitar, adjusting a couple of strings. I watched his hands plucking at the guitar strings, and I wanted to kiss his fingertips, stroke the backs of his hands. Funny thing: at one time I thought the worst thing that could happen to me would be if Skipper had decided we couldn’t be friends anymore after I told him. But sometimes it seemed like this had to be worse.

“I need for you to do this song with me,” Skipper said, inclining his head toward me, and sang, “Long ago, a young man sits, and plays

his wait-ting game.” His voice was soft and raspy, not really pretty – he’s not a singer. I harmonized on the verses, and on the choruses, I came in on the obligato, the part Joni Mitchell sings on the record.

While we did the song, the room got about as quiet as the choir room ever gets. Even the Foleys stopped dueling. And when we finished, everybody applauded. Skipper smiled that crazy alley-cat smile of his and said, “Awrite!” and slapped me on the leg. And it hurt. Not that he’d hit me hard, of course. But I so wanted him to touch me, I mean *really* touch me. Like he touched Kathleen, when she let him. These slappings and punchings, these just-us-guys sort of touchings that Skipper liked to give me, this was worse than nothing.

“Gotta go.” Skipper quickly repacked his guitar, stood up, and placed the guitar case on the cupboard next to Todd’s. “I just had to do that song,” he said. “See you at the auditions.” And he bounded down the tiers and out the door.

And I thought, *Shit*, life really sucks sometimes. And I didn’t realize I’d said “shit” out loud, except Cherie said, “What?” And I said, “Oh, nothing.” And Cherie was about to say something when the Foleys came over, looking like Howdy Doody and his twin sister; each with a Fender six-string acoustic guitar hanging from their neck, looking (as always) as if they’d each been *born* with a Fender six-string acoustic guitar hanging from their neck.

And Johnnie Foley says, “Johnnie Ray, let’s do ‘Judy Blue Eyes,’ okay?”

“It’s almost eight,” I said, “I’ve got to get to French.”

“Aw, c’mon,” Janie said in that whiny little voice of hers, “you got plenny a time.” And they kicked into the intro, and we sang. Johnnie Foley on the bottom, Janie on top, and me in the middle. We’d gotten almost all the way through when the warning bell rang, and we all lit out for class.