

THE DEAD KID

by Darrell Schweitzer

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of the novels *The Shattered Goddess* and *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, as well as numerous short stories, which have been collected in *Transients*, *Nightscares*, *Refugees from an Imaginary Country*, and *Necromancies and Netherworlds*. Well-known as an editor and critic, he co-edited the magazine *Weird Tales* for several years, and is currently co-editing anthologies with Martin H. Greenberg for DAW Books, such as *The Secret History of Vampires*.

Schweitzer says one of the inspirations for “The Dead Kid” was the true story of the “Boy in the Box,” whose corpse was found in a woods in northeast Philadelphia in 1957. The case remains unsolved, and there are police detectives who have obsessed over it throughout their entire careers and into their retirement. “They don’t even know his name,” Schweitzer says. “He is a complete mystery.”

Schweitzer joked that given the mystery surrounding this case, the zombie tale he imagined is as good an explanation as any. Turns out that an informant—who is deeply unreliable—said that the boy’s name was Jonathan... just like in this story.

So perhaps he has the real answer after all.

I

It’s been a lot of years, but I think I’m still afraid of Luke Bradley, because of what he showed me.

I knew him in the first grade, and he was a tough guy even then, the sort of kid who would sit on a tack and insist it didn’t hurt, and then make *you* sit on the same tack (which definitely *did* hurt) because you were afraid of what he’d do if you didn’t. Once he found a bald-faced hornet nest on tree branch, broke it off, and ran yelling down the street, waving the branch around and around until finally the nest fell off and the hornets came out like a *cloud*. Nobody knew what happened after that because the rest of us had run away.

We didn’t see Luke in school for a couple days afterwards, so I suppose he got stung rather badly. When he did show up he was his old self and beat up three other boys in one afternoon. Two of them needed stitches.

When I was about eight, the word went around the neighborhood that Luke Bradley had been eaten by a werewolf. “Come on,” said Tommy Hitchens, Luke’s current sidekick. “I’ll show you what’s left of him. Up in a tree.”

I didn’t believe any werewolf would have been a match for Luke Bradley, but I went. When Tommy pointed out the alleged remains of the corpse up in the tree, I could tell even from a distance that I was looking at a t-shirt and a pair of blue-jeans stuffed with newspapers.

I said so and Tommy flattened me with a deft right hook, which broke my nose, and my glasses.

The next day, Luke was in school as usual, though I had a splint on my nose. When he saw me, he called me a “pussy” and kicked me in the balls.

Already he was huge, probably a couple of years older than the rest of the class. Though he never admitted it, everybody knew he’d been held back in every grade at least once, even kindergarten.

But he wasn’t stupid. He was *crazy*. That was the fascination of hanging out with him, even if you could get hurt in his company. He did *wild* things that no one else dared even think about. There was the stunt with the hornet nest, or the time he picked up fresh dogshit in both his bare hands and claimed he was going to *eat* it right in front of us before everybody got grossed out and ran because we were afraid he was going to make *us* eat it. Maybe he really did. He was just someone for whom the rules, *all* the rules, simply did not apply. That he was usually in detention, and had been picked up by the police several times only added to his mystique.

And in the summer when I was twelve, Luke Bradley showed me the dead kid.

Things had progressed quite a bit since then. No one quite believed all the stories of Luke’s exploits, though he would beat the crap out of you if you questioned them to his face. Had he really stolen a car? Did he really hang onto the outside of a P&W light-rail train and ride all the way into Philadelphia without getting caught?

Nobody knew, but when he said to me and to my ten-year-old brother Albert, “Hey you two scuzzes”—*scuzz* being his favorite word of the moment—“there’s a *dead kid* in Cabbage Creek Woods. Wanna see?” it wasn’t really a question.

Albert tried to turn away, and said, “David, I don’t think we should,” but I knew what was good for us.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure we want to see.”

Luke was already more than a head taller than either of us and fifty pounds heavier. He was cultivating the “hood” image from some hand-me-down memory of James Dean or Elvis, with his hair up in a greasy swirl and a black leather jacket worn even on hot days when he kept his shirt unbuttoned so he could show off that he already had chest hair.

A cigarette dangled from his lips. He blew smoke in my face. I strained not to cough.

“Well come on, then,” he said. “It’s really cool.”

So we followed him, along with a kid called Animal, and another called

Spike—the beginnings of Luke’s “gang,” with which he said he was going to make himself famous one day. My little brother tagged after us, reluctantly at first, but then as fascinated as I was to be initiated into this innermost, forbidden secret of the older, badder set.

Luke had quite a sense of showmanship. He led us under bushes, crawling through natural tunnels under vines and dead trees where, when we were smaller, we’d had our own secret hideouts, as, I suppose, all children do. Luke and his crowd were getting too big for that sort of thing, but they went crashing through the underbrush like bears. I was small and skinny enough. David was young enough. In fact it was all we could do to keep up.

With a great flourish, Luke raised a vine curtain and we emerged into the now half-abandoned Radnor Golf Course. It was an early Saturday morning. Mist was still rising from the poorly tended greens. I saw one golfer, far away. Otherwise we had the world to ourselves.

We ran across the golf course, then across Lancaster Pike, then up the hill and back into the woods on the other side.

I only thought for a minute, *Hey wait a minute, we’re going to see a corpse, a kid like us, only dead...* but, as I said, for Luke Bradley or even with him, all rules were suspended, and I knew better than try to ask what the kid died of, because we’d see soon enough.

In the woods again, by secret and hidden ways, we came to the old “fort,” which had probably been occupied by generations of boys by then, though of course right now it “belonged” to the Luke Bradley Gang.

I don’t know who built the fort or why. It was a rectangle of raised earth and piled stone, with logs laid across for a roof, and vines growing thickly over the whole thing so that from a distance it just looked like a hillock or knoll. That was part of its secret. You had to know it was there.

And only Luke could let you in.

He raised another curtain of vines, and with a sweep of his hand and a bow said, “Welcome to my house, you assholes.”

Spike and Animal laughed while Albert and I got down on our hands and knees and crawled inside.

Immediately I almost gagged on the awful smell, like rotten garbage and worse. Albert started to cough. I thought he was going to throw up. But before I could say or do anything, Luke and his two henchmen had come in after us, and we all crowded around a pit in the middle of the dirt floor which didn’t used to be there. Now there was a four-foot drop, a roughly square cavity, and in the middle of that, a cardboard box which was clearly the source of the unbelievable stench.

Luke got out a flashlight, then reached down and opened the box.

“It’s a dead kid. I found him in the woods in this box. He’s mine.”

I couldn’t help but look. It was indeed a dead kid, an emaciated, pale thing, naked but for what might have been the remains of filthy underpants, lying on its side in a fetal position, little clawlike hands bunched up under its chin.

“A dead kid,” said Luke. “Really cool.”

Then Albert really was throwing up and screaming at the same time, and scrambling to get *out* of there, only Animal and then Spike had him by the back of his shirt the way you pick up a kitten by the scruff of its neck, and they passed him back to Luke, who held his head in his hands and forced him down into that pit, saying, “Now look at it you fucking pussy faggot, this because it’s really cool.”

Albert was sobbing and sniffing when Luke let him go, but he didn’t try to run, nor did I, even when Luke got a stick and poked the dead kid with it.

“This is the best part,” he said.

We didn’t run away then because we *had* to watch just to convince ourselves that we weren’t crazy, because of what we were seeing.

Luke poked and the dead kid *moved*, spasming at first, then grabbing at the stick feebly, and finally crawling around inside the box like a slow, clumsy animal, just barely able to turn, scratching at the cardboard with bony fingertips.

“What *is* he?” I had to ask.

“A *zombie*,” said Luke.

“Aren’t zombies supposed to be black?”

“You mean like a nigger?” That was another of Luke’s favorite words this year. He called everybody “nigger” no matter what color they were.

“Well, you know. Voodoo. In Haiti and all that.”

As we spoke the dead kid reared up and almost got out of the box. Luke poked him in the forehead with his stick and knocked him down.

“I suppose if we let him *rot* long enough he’ll be black enough even for *you*.”

The dead kid stared up at us and made a bleating sound. The worst thing of all was that he didn’t have any eyes, only huge sockets and an oozy mess inside them.

Albert was sobbing for his mommy by then, and after a while of poking and prodding the dead kid, Luke and his friends got tired of this sport. Luke turned to me and said, “You can go now, but you know if you or your piss-pants brother tell about this, I’ll kill you both and put you in there for the dead kid to *eat*.”

II

I can’t remember much of what Albert and I did for the rest of that day. We ran through the woods, tripped, fell flat on our faces in a stream. Then later we were walking along the old railroad embankment turning over ties to look for snakes, and all the while Albert was babbling on about the dead kid and how we had to do something. I just let him talk until he got it all out of him, and when we went home for dinner and were very quiet when Mom and our stepdad Steve tried to find out what we had been doing all day.

“Just playing,” I said. “In the woods.”

“It’s good for them to be outdoors,” Steve said to Mom. “Too many kids spent all their time in front of the TV watching *unwholesome* junk these days. I’m glad our kids are *normal*.”

But Albert ended up screaming in his sleep for weeks and wetting his bed, and things were anything but normal that summer. He was the one with the obvious problems. He was the one who ended up going to a “specialist,” and whatever he

said in therapy must not have been believed, because the police didn't go tearing up Cabbage Creek Woods, Luke Bradley and his neanderthals were not arrested, and I was more or less left alone.

In fact, I had more unsupervised time than usual. And I used it to work out problems of my own, like I hated school and I hated Stepdad Steve for the sanctimonious prig he was. I decided, with the full wisdom of my twelve years and some months, that if I was to survive in this rough, tough, evil world, I was going to have to become tough myself, *bad*, and very likely evil.

I decided that Luke Bradley had the answers.

So I sought him out. It wasn't hard. He had a knack for being in the right place at the right time when you're ready to sell your soul, just like the Devil.

I met him in town, in front of the Wayne Toy Town, where I used to go to buy model kits and stuff. I still liked building models, and doing scientific puzzles, though I would never admit it to Luke Bradley.

So I just froze when I saw him there.

"Well, well," he said. "If it ain't the little pussy scuzz." He blew smoke from the perennial cigarette.

"Hello, Luke," I said. I nodded to his companions, who included Spike, Animal, and a virtually hairless, pale gorilla who went by the unlikely name of Corky. As I spoke, I slipped my latest purchase into my shoulder bag and hoped he didn't notice.

Corky grabbed me by the back of the neck and said, "Whaddaya want me to do with him?"

But before Luke could respond, I said, "Hey, have you still got the dead kid at the fort?"

They all hesitated. They weren't expecting that.

"Well he's *cool*," I said. "I want to see him again."

"Okay," said Luke.

We didn't have any other way to get there, so we walked, about an hour, to Cabbage Creek Woods. Luke dispensed with ceremony. We just crawled into the fort and gathered around the pit.

The smell, if anything, was worse.

This time, the dead kid was already moving around inside the box. When Luke opened the cardboard flaps, the dead kid stood up, with his horrible, pus-filled eye-sockets staring. He made that bleating, groaning sound again. He clawed at the edge of the box.

"Really cool," I forced myself to say, swallowing hard.

"I can make him do tricks," said Luke. "Watch this."

I watched as he shoved his finger *through* the skin under the dead kid's chin and lifted him up like a hooked fish out of the pit. The dead kid scrambled over the edge of the box, then crouched down on the dirt floor at the edge of the pit, staring into space.

Luke passed his hand slowly in front of the dead kid's face. He snapped his fingers. The dead kid didn't respond. Luke smacked him on the side of the head.

The dead kid whimpered a little, and made that bleating sound.

“Everybody outside,” Luke said.

So we all crawled out, and then Luke reached back inside with a stick and touched the dead kid, who came out too, clinging to the stick, trying to chew on it, but not quite coordinated enough, so that he just snapped his teeth in the air and rubbed the side of his face along the stick.

I could see him clearly now. He really *was* rotten, with bone sticking out at his knees and elbows, only scraggly patches of dark hair left on his head, every rib showing in hideous relief on his bare back, and *holes* through his skin between some of them.

“Look!” said Luke. “Look at him dance!” He swirled the stick around and around, and the dead kid clung to it, staggering around in a circle.

Corky spoke up. “Ya think if’n he gets dizzy he’ll puke?”

Luke yanked the stick out of the dead kid’s hands, then hit him hard with it across the back with a *thwack!* The dead kid dropped to all fours and just stayed there, his head hanging down.

“Can’t puke. Got no guts left!” They all laughed at that. I didn’t quite get the joke.

But despite everything, I *tried* to get the joke, despite even the incongruity that I really was, like it or not, a more or less “normal” kid and right now I had a model kit for a plastic Fokker Triplane in my schoolbag. I still wanted to measure up to Luke Bradley, for all I was more afraid of him than I had ever been. I figured you had to be afraid of what you did and who you hung out with if you were going to be really *bad*. You did what Luke did. That was what transgression was all about.

So I unzipped my fly and pissed on the dead kid. He made that bleating sound. The others chuckled nervously. Luke grinned.

“Pretty cool, Davey, my boy. Pretty cool.”

Then Luke started to play the role of wise elder brother. He put his arm around my shoulders. He took me a little ways apart from the others and said, “I like you. I think you got something special in there.” He rapped on my head with his knuckles, hard, but I didn’t flinch away.

Then he led me back to the others and said, “I think we’re gonna make David here a member of the gang.”

So we all sat down in the clearing with the dead kid in our circle, as if he were one of the gang too. Luke got out an old briefcase from inside the fort and produced some very crumpled nudie magazines and passed them around and we all looked at the pictures. He even made a big, funny show of opening out a foldout for the dead kid to admire.

He smoked and passed cigarettes out to all of us. I’d never had one before and it made me feel sick, but Luke told me to hold the smoke in, then breathe it out slowly.

I was amazed and appalled when, right in front of everyone, he unzipped his pants and started to jerk off. The others did it too, making a point of trying to squirt on the dead kid.

Luke looked at me. “Come on, join in with the other gentlemen.” The other “gentlemen” brayed like jackasses.

I couldn’t move then. I really wanted to be like them, but I knew I wasn’t going to measure up. All I could hope for now was to put up a good front so maybe they’d decide I wasn’t a pussy after all and maybe let me go after they beat me up a little bit. I could hope for that much.

But Luke had other ideas. He put his hand on the back of my neck. It could have been a friendly gesture, or if he squeezed, he could have snapped my head off for all I could have done anything about it.

“Now David,” he said, “I don’t care if you’ve even *got* a dick, any more than I care if *he* does.” He jerked his thumb at the dead kid. “But if you want to join our gang, if you want to be cool, you have to meet certain standards.”

He flicked a switchblade open right in front of my face. I thought he was going to cut my nose with it, but with a sudden motion he slashed the dead kid’s nose right off. It flew into the air. Corky caught it, then threw it away in mindless disgust.

The dead kid whimpered. His face was a black, oozing mess.

Then Luke took hold of my right hand and slashed the back of it. I let out a yell, and tried to stop the bleeding with my other hand.

“No,” Luke said. “Let him lick it. He needs a little blood now and then to keep him healthy.”

I screamed then, and sobbed, and whimpered the way Albert had that first time, but Luke held onto me with a grip so strong that *I* was the one who wriggled like a fish on a line, and he held my cut hand out to the dead kid.

I couldn’t look, but something soft and wet touched my hand, and I could only think, Oh God, what kind of infection or disease am I going to get from this?

“Okay David,” Luke said then. “You’re doing just fine, but there is one more test. You have to *spend the whole night* in the fort with the dead kid. We’ve all done it. Now it’s your turn.”

They didn’t wait for my answer, but, laughing, hauled me back inside the fort. Then Luke had the dead kid hooked under the chin again, and lowered him down into his box in the pit.

The others crawled back outside. Before he left, Luke turned to me, “You have to stay here until tomorrow morning. You know what I’ll do to you if you pussy out.”

So I spent the rest of the afternoon, and the evening, inside that fort with the dead kid scratching around in his box. It was already dark in the fort. I couldn’t tell what time it was. I couldn’t think very clearly at all. I wondered if anyone was looking for me. I lay very still. I didn’t want to be found, especially not by the dead kid, who, for all I knew, could crawl out of the box and the pit if he really wanted to and maybe rip my throat out and drink my blood.

My hand hurt horribly. It seemed to be swelling. I was sure it was already rotten. The air was thick and foul.

But I stayed where I was, because I was afraid, because I was weak with nausea, but also, incredibly, because somehow, somewhere, deep down inside myself I

still wanted to show how *tough* I was, to be like Luke Bradley, to be as amazing and crazy as he was. I knew that I *wasn't* cut out for this, and that's why I wanted it—to be *bad*, so no one would ever beat me up again and if I hated my stepdad or my teachers I could just tell them to go fuck off, as Luke would do.

Hours passed, and still the dead kid circled around and around inside his cardboard box, sliding against the sides. He made that bleating, coughing sound, as if he were trying to talk and didn't have any tongue left. For a time I thought there was almost some sense in it, some pattern. He was *clicking* like a cricket. This went on for hours. Maybe I even slept for a while, and fell into a kind of dream in which I was sinking slowly down into incredibly foul-smelling muck and there were thousands of bald-faced hornets swarming over me, all of them with little Luke Bradley faces saying, "Cool... really cool..." until their voices blended together and became a buzzing, then became wind in the trees, then the roar of a P&W light-rail train rushing off toward Philadelphia; and the dead kid and I were hanging onto the outside of the car, swinging wildly. My arm hit a pole and snapped right off, and black ooze was pouring out of my shoulder, and the hornets swarmed over me, eating me up bit by bit.

Once, I am certain, the dead kid *did* reach up and touch me, very gently, running his dry, sharp fingertip down the side of my cheek, cutting me, then withdrawing with a little bit of blood and tears on his fingertip, to drink.

But, strangest of all, I wasn't afraid of him then. It came to me, then, that we too had more in common than not. We were both afraid and in pain and lost in the dark.

III

Then somehow it was morning. The sunlight blinded me when Luke opened the vine curtain over the door.

"Hey. You were really brave. I'm impressed, Davey."

I let him lead me out of the fort, taking comfort in his chum/big-brother manner. But I was too much in shock to say anything.

"You passed the test. You're one of us," he said. "Welcome to the gang. Now there is one last thing for you to do. Not a test. You've passed all the tests. It's just something we do to celebrate."

His goons had gathered once more in the clearing outside the fort.

One of them was holding a can of gasoline.

I stood there, swaying, about to faint, unable to figure out what the gasoline was for.

Luke brought the dead kid outside.

Corky poured gasoline over the dead kid, who just bleated a little and waved his hands in the air.

Luke handed me a cigarette lighter. He flicked it until there was a flame.

"Go on," he said. "It'll be cool."

But I couldn't. I was too scared, too sick. I just dropped to my knees, then onto all fours and started puking.

So Luke lit the dead kid on fire and the others hooted and clapped as the dead kid went up like a torch, staggering and dancing around the clearing, trailing black, oily smoke. Then he fell down and seemed to shrivel up into a pile of blackened, smoldering sticks.

Luke forced me over to where the dead kid had fallen and made me touch what was left with my swollen hand.

And the dead kid *moved*. He made that bleating sound. He whimpered.

“You see? You can’t kill him because he’s already dead.”

They were all laughing, but I just puked again, and finally Luke hauled me to my feet by both shoulders, turned me around, and shoved me away staggering into the woods.

“Come back when you stop throwing up,” he said.

IV

Somehow I found my way home, and when I did, Mom just stared at me in horror and said, “My God, what’s that awful smell?” But Stepdad Steve shook me and demanded to know where I had been and what I’d been doing? Did I know the police were looking for me? Did I care? (No, and no.) He took me into the bathroom, washed and bandaged my hand, then held me so I couldn’t turn away and said, “Have you been taking drugs?”

That was so stupid I started to laugh, and he *smacked* me across the face, something he rarely did, but this time, I think, he was determined to beat the truth out of me, and Mommy, dearest Mommy didn’t raise a finger to stop him as he laid on with his hand, then his belt, and I was shrieking my head off.

All they got out of me was the admission that I had been with Luke Bradley and his friends.

“I *don’t* want you to associate with *those* boys any further. They’re unwholesome.”

He didn’t know a tenth of it, and I started to laugh again, like I was drunk or something, and he was about to hit me again when Mom finally made him stop.

She told me to change my clothes and take a bath and then go to my room. I wasn’t allowed out except for meals and to go to the bathroom.

That was fine with me. I didn’t *want* to come out. I wanted to bury myself in there, to be quiet and dead, like the dead kid in his box.

But when I fell asleep, I was screaming in a dream, and I woke up screaming, in the dark, because it was night again.

Mom looked in briefly, but didn’t say anything. The expression on her face was more of disgust than concern, as if she really wanted to say, *Serves him damn right but, Oh God, another crazy kid we’ll have to send to the so, so expensive psychiatrist and I’d rather spend the money on a new mink coat or a car or something.*

It was my kid brother Albert who snuck over to my bed and whispered, “It’s the dead kid, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“The dead kid. He talks to me in my dreams. He’s told me all about himself.

He's lost. His father's a magician, who is still trying to find him. There was a war between magicians, or something, and that's how he got lost."

"Huh? Is this something you read in a comic book?"

"No! It's the dead kid. You know what we have to do, David. We have to go save him."

I have to give my brother credit for bringing about my moral redemption as surely as if he'd handed me my sanity back on a silver platter and said, *Go on, don't be a pussy. Take it.*

Because he was right. We had to save the dead kid.

Maybe the dead kid talked to Albert in his dreams, but he didn't tell me anything. Why should he?

Still, I'd gotten the message.

So, that night, very late, Albert and I got dressed and slipped out the window of our room, dropping onto the lawn. *He wasn't afraid*, not a little bit. He led me, by the ritual route, under the arching bushes, through the tunnels of vines to all our secret places, as if we had to be *there* first to gain some special strength for the task at hand.

Under the bushes, in the darkness, we paused to scratch secret signs in the dirt.

Then we scurried across the golf course, across the highway, into Cabbage Creek Woods.

We came to the fort by the light of a full moon now flickering through swaying branches. It was a windy night. The woods were alive with sounds of wood creaking and snapping, of animals calling back and forth, and night-birds cawing. Somewhere, very close at hand, an owl cried out.

Albert got down on all fours in the doorway of the fort, poked his head in, and said, "Hey, dead kid! Are you in there?"

He backed out, and waited. There was a rustling sound, but the dead kid didn't come out. So we both crawled in and saw why. There wasn't much left of him. He was just a bundle of black sticks, his head like a charred pumpkin balanced precariously on top. All he could do was sit up weakly and peer over the side of the box.

So we had to lift him out of the pit, box and all.

"Come on," Albert said to him. "We want to show you some stuff."

We carried the dead kid between us. We took him back across the golf course, under the bushes, to our special places. We showed him the secret signs. Then we took him into town. We showed him the storefronts, Wayne Toy Town where I bought models, where there were always neat displays of miniature battlefields or of monsters in the windows. We showed him where the pet store was and the ice cream store, and where you got comic books.

Albert sat down on the merry-go-round in the playground, holding the dead kid's box securely beside him. I pushed them around slowly. Metal creaked.

We stood in front of our school for a while, and Albert and the dead kid were *holding hands*, but it seemed natural and right.

Then we went away in the bright moonlight, through the empty streets. No one said anything, because whatever the dead kid could say or hear wasn't in words anyway. I couldn't hear it. I think Albert could.

In the end the dead kid scrambled out of his box. Somehow he had regained enough strength to walk. Somehow, he was beginning to heal. In the end, he wanted to show *us* something.

He led us back across the golf course but away from Cabbage Creek Woods. We crossed the football field at Radnor High School, then went across the street, up in back of Wyeth Labs and across the high bridge over the P&W tracks. I was afraid the dead kid would slip on the metal stairs and fall, but he went more steadily than we did. (Albert and I were both a little afraid of heights.)

He led us across another field, into woods again, then through an opening where a stream flowed beneath the Pennsylvania Railroad embankment. We waded ankle-deep in the chilly water and came, at last, to the old Grant Estate, a huge ruin of a Victorian house which every kid knew was haunted, which our parents told us to stay away from because it was dangerous. (There were so many stories about kids murdered by tramps or falling through floors.) But now it wasn't a ruin at all, no broken windows, no holes in the roof. Every window blazed with light.

From a high window in a tower, a man in black gazed down at us.

The dead kid looked up at him, then began to run.

I hurried after him. Now it was Albert (who had better sense) who hung back. I caught hold of the dead kid's arm, as if to stop him, and I felt possessive for a moment, as if I *owned* him the way Luke Bradley had owned him.

"Hey dead kid," I said. "Where are you going?"

He turned to me, and by some trick of the moonlight he seemed to have a face, pale, round, with dark eyes; and he said to me in that bleating, croaking voice of his, actually forming words for once, "My name is Jonathan."

That was the only thing he ever said to me. He never talked to me in dreams.

He went to the front of the house. The door opened. The light within seemed to swallow him. He turned back, briefly, and looked at us. I don't think he was just a bundle of sticks anymore.

Then he was gone and all the lights blinked out, and it was dawn. My brother and I stood before a ruined mansion in the morning twilight. Birds were singing raucously.

"We'd better get home," Albert said, "or we'll get in trouble."

"Yeah," I said.

V

That autumn, I began junior high school. Because I hadn't been very successful as a bad boy, and my grades were still a lot higher, I wasn't in any of Luke Bradley's classes. But he caught up with me in the locker room after school, several weeks into the term. All he said was, "I know what you did," and beat me so badly that he broke several of my ribs and one arm, and smashed in the whole side of my face, and cracked the socket around my right eye. He stuffed me into a locker and left

me there to die, and I spent the whole night in the darkness, in great pain, amid horrible smells, calling out for the dead kid to come and save me as I'd saved him. I made bleating, clicking sounds.

But he didn't come. The janitor found me in the morning. The smell was merely that I'd crapped in my pants.

I spent several weeks in the hospital, and afterwards Stepdad Steve and Mom decided to move out of the state. They put both me and Albert in a prep school.

It was only after I got out of college that I went back to Radnor Township in Pennsylvania, where I'd grown up. Everything was changed. There was a Sears headquarters where the golf course used to be. Our old house had vanished beneath an apartment parking lot. Most of Cabbage Creek Woods had been cut down to make room for an Altman's department store, and the Grant Estate was gone too, to make room for an office complex.

I didn't go into the remaining woods to see if the fort was still there.

I imagine it is. I imagine other kids own it now.

Later someone told me that Luke Bradley (who turned out to have really been three years older than me) had been expelled from high school, committed several robberies in the company of his three goons, and then all of them were killed in a shootout with the police.

What Luke Bradley inadvertently showed me was that I could have been with the gang all the way to their violent and pointless end, if Albert and the dead kid, whose name was Jonathan, hadn't saved me.