

## Into Which He Placed a Button

I felt sorry for Daniel today. For the first thirteen years of his life, he was the cool one. I can only remember envying him, as did all the boys in our class; the girls chased him. Personally, my envy was diluted by respect. Daniel was athletic, and he could make anyone laugh, and his Adam's apple protruded obnoxiously. It was possible to ignore him, that is to say put him out of mind, most of the time; I sometimes got in a fight with him, when he overasserted authority. High school changed that. Other kids were bigger.

He played on the hockey team for four years; he and I are in our last year here. He's faded into non-recognition. Sure, people can name him, but nobody talks about him—not unless they see him, and then, despite his most high efforts, they look at him with a sort of dismissal, as at an ancient unloved object in their bedroom. He was a clown, and the world outgrows a clown.

Today he had a dirty picture—a naughty picture. I saw it in his hand before we went on the bus to go home. And he wore a slight grin, the grin he used to wear in glad anticipation. I sat in the back; I watched him climb aboard, and the others were all there, and the grin was slowly cracking wider. I felt my own smile coming, knowing something funny was bound to happen. Then he produced the picture, and showed it to the others; "Lookit I got!"

"Oh, yeah," said Kevin, dropping it on the seat. "I saw this yesterday."

Daniel started to laugh nervously, and said, "Pretty good drawer, eh?"

"Yeah, I guess," outgrew Kevin. The others didn't even look at him.

Daniel didn't say a word; I saw the picture later, and I broke a smile.

When I got home, I found the cat, Butterscotch, pawing at the door and meowing a piteous meow. I opened it and he skittered in. And my brother was downstairs, with the bathroom door closed. We once kept Butterscotch's food and water in it, but we moved it because he had the habit of meowing by the door at all times, whether or not it was closed. He just wanted attention.

I poured myself a glass of milk and as it ran sideways into the vessel, I saw the cat descend the stairs and look up at the door. Absent-mindedly, as we all did for the cat, I said aloud, "To the right, Butterscotch, to the right...", so. Lo and behold—he turned to look at me, and I pointed; he altered his course and trotted off to the right. I stared in disbelief a second or two.

It felt like the first time I had ever really been understood in my life.

Thinking about this and smiling, over a cat or unappreciated picture, I heard a meow behind me again, and there was the cat, begging at my ankle. Oh, dammit! For goodness' sake, after working up my hopes like that, he just, as he so often did, failed

to understand. And then a negative feeling blotted out the self-confidence: the sense that his trust in me was misplaced, my advice only a clowning around.

I led the cat down myself, walking slowly so he'd understand. If a cat won't follow your pointing finger, you have to show him yourself. You can't just build trust like that. Do all you can and will to make people love you, to make people understand you, and they'll still falter. You'll still falter. Sure that the kitty with dubious eyes was still at my heel, I stepped into his feeding room.

The food bowl was empty.