

MARK TARALLO

LAST SUMMER

Visiting the old house on holiday, I usually slip upstairs for a look out the back bedroom window. I see the four houses on Highridge Avenue, small east-coast houses, set close together. The brick is wine-dark and somber even in the summer sun. The houses almost appear to be crouching, covering up, holding their shapes with a vague sense of shame. All four nearly identical—two stories and an attic eave. In each eave, two small attic windows, like unblinking eyes. The houses are dwarfed by massive black oaks, with furrowed trunks that rise into a thousand branches.

The sense of defeat that these small crouching houses now suggest to me gives me the strange feeling that my childhood consisted of years of wrong impressions. That sense of defeat—which could simply be disguised guilt, leftover from disloyalty—was against the sentimental lessons which persist in my memory: Justin taught me that trees were psychedelic and the McKennas taught me that men, not women, were the true romantics. I think that the McKennas themselves, in their stoicism, were actually great romantics; they knew that silence was the highest honor to bestow on mystery. But a Hallmark card sentiment like that would be the very last thing any of them would utter.



Highridge Avenue is a small street, only two blocks long. Justin Innocente lived in the middle. He played the bass; a succession of pretty girls came to his house and rang his doorbell. Older, too cool to hang out with us, Justin only registered as a presence through music. He was enamored with sixties psychedelia, and out his bedroom window came old Pink Floyd and The Zombies, so loud you could hear it from the street. The music was perpetual summer: blissed-out echoing voices and shimmering guitar notes soaked in reverb. It was thirty years ago—I was not yet fourteen—but I

remember it as if it were last summer.

In the middle of Highridge Avenue lived the McKennas. There were seven McKenna children, six boys and a girl. I loved that, as I was an only child. All of the McKennas had nicknames except Ray. Donald was Dags, Marilyn was Mags, Bobby was Beeks, Karl was Keeks. They gave others nicknames too. My name is Ralph Stallo and they called me Kato Potato; I don't know why. Ray called me Kates for short. The McKennas were poor (well, not actually poor; lower middle class, I guess, but comparatively poor) and the inside of their house bordered on the squalid. I loved that too, as my house was clean and dull. Their mother was dead and their father was a sullen-but-harmless drunk.

Of the six boys, three (Keeks, Beeks and Ray) had hemophilia. The word impressed me; saying "Ray is a hemophiliac" made me feel important, and gave me the heady sensation of being wise, an explainer. In actuality, I knew next to nothing of the disease itself. Everything I knew could be encapsulated in one statement: once Ray started bleeding, it would be hard for him to stop. This gave him a kind of permanent fragility, but also an odd transformational power. What is more commonplace than a kid falling, and then bleeding, from an elbow abrasion or a scraped knee? But for Ray, a hemophiliac, this suggested catastrophe. He wasn't ordinary, he was better than ordinary.

A rock-true sense of right and wrong persisted with the McKennas, the most unshakable and the most unself-conscious I have ever encountered. Their disapproval of the crueler kids in the neighborhood was quiet but clear. The boys that were free from hemophilia, Dags and Billy, were athletic and wholesome-handsome and scrupulously honest, but too unfashionable to be very popular around town (they wore cheap sneakers, shunned partying, and refused to chase girls). They were stoical, unacknowledging of frivolity (except in the surreal world of their own nicknames) and kind, but they never drew attention to their own kindness. No McKenna ever mocked me, even though I was sensitive and over-excitable and kind of cowardly. I quivered sometimes and did funny things. Sometimes excitement would prove too much for me and I would jump up and down like a pogo stick and frenetically shake my hands, fluttering them like pom-poms. The McKennas would smile when I did this but they never made fun of me, and the privileged disbelief I felt at their acceptance made me shake my hands even harder.

My favorite McKenna was Ray. Ray had hemophilia, and he was the