

Last Kiss

MOM AND DAD always kissed us good night before we went to bed. Mom kissed my right cheek, Dad my left. After that, I got under the covers and it was an easy glide to sleep.

These kisses were a regular part of the bedtime routine, like brushing my teeth, having the nightly bowl of cereal, or hearing a story before lights-out. It felt like having air to breathe or a

blanket to keep me warm—*automatic*—and I never gave it a second thought.

One night I finished my bedtime bowl of cereal and went to Mom.

"Sleep tight," she murmured, kissing me on the cheek.

"Night, Mom."

I found Dad sitting at the desk in his office.

"I'm going to bed," I told him.

"Well, good night." To my great surprise, he reached out and shook my hand. At first I just stood there, confused. Finally I took his hand and shook it the way I'd seen men shake hands.

"Sleep tight," he said. Then he turned away from me and went back to his paperwork.

Feeling more surprised than hurt, I headed off to bed. Next night I gave it another shot. After eating my bowl of cereal I went to Mom. She kissed me and gave me a big hug. That built up my courage before I went to my dad. I found him out on the driveway. He was packing the trunk of his car, getting ready to go on a business trip.

"Hey," he said, straightening up. "Bedtime?"

"Yeah." I moved toward him.

"Good night." He wrapped his arms around me and gave me a bear hug.

"Night." My voice was muffled against his chest. He released me and went back to packing the car. For a few seconds I didn't move. The night was warm. Fireflies were out, floating on the evening breeze. They made me think of the jellyfish Dad and I saw one night about a year before when we were on a dock at the beach. I noticed lights flickering in the dark water, and was amazed to find out that they were living animals.

"How can they light up like that?" I had asked my dad.

"They make their own light," he explained. "Like fireflies."

"How do jellyfish move?" I asked him. "Do they have fins?"

"No," Dad said.

"But what if they want to see their friends?" I asked. "How do they get there?"

RALPH FLETCHER

"They drift in the tide," Dad explained. "If they're lucky, the tide will help them drift to where they want to go."

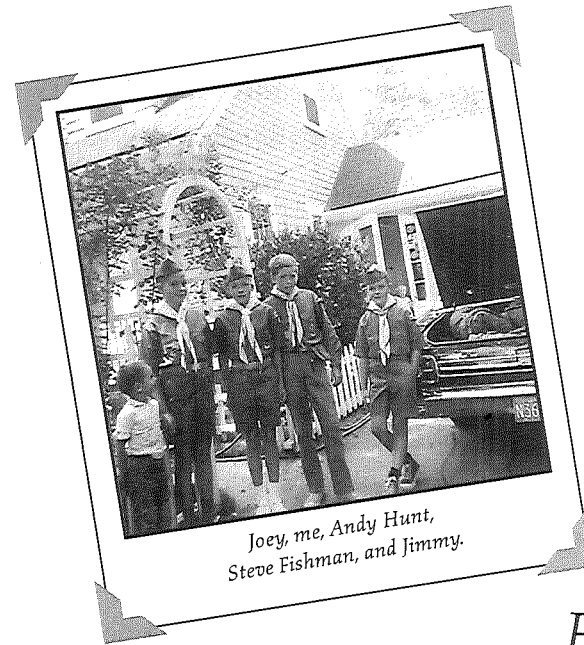
"What if they want to see their friends but they're not lucky?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Then I guess they drift away from each other."

Two more times I went to Dad for a good-night kiss. No luck. Finally I gave up. Mom still kissed me good night on my right cheek, but somehow it didn't feel the same. Her kisses didn't have the safe, solid feeling they'd had before.

I laid in bed trying to figure it out. Even though I was confused, one thing seemed clear—my father and I had drifted away from each other in a small but important way, a way that I couldn't explain, not even to myself.



Joey, me, Andy Hunt,
Steve Fishman, and Jimmy.

Friends

Age 10

ANDY HUNT LIVED next door. I loved the way his eyes crinkled up when he heard something funny. When Andy laughed, the whole world lit up, like the sun coming from behind a cloud. His black hair hung straight down, and he'd shake water out of it, like a wet dog, after we went swimming. Every day I knocked on his back door or he knocked on mine. If he wasn't home I'd wait for