short story
3,800 words

Go Long

On the day of the accident at the pond I was several blocks away, kicking a soccer ball against a cinder block wall. In the hospital that evening I stood alone in the fluorescent hall. I didn't believe a bit of it. Was Gawk in the room behind the half-closed door? I pictured him in there eating chocolate ice cream, the TV turned up loud, Dad reading the sports and Mom hovering. I remembered I needed to pump more air into the soccer ball. I stared at the door refusing to enter.

One reason I didn't enter was that other kids all had their brothers, so why should it have happened? Each visit I avoided Gawk in the hospital bed if I could. I forgot to pump air into the soccer ball, or maybe I didn't because of Gawk's coma. I avoided Morry Kahn because he'd been there. He'd dragged him out.

Morry Kahn and Gawk made the kingpins of our neighborhood. Both of them bigger, in high school. But without Gawk anymore we shriveled into non-activity. No more tackle-the-man-

with-the-football in our backyard or Indian-head poker on the carpet in Gawk's bedroom, five or six of us circled around holding playing cards to our foreheads. No marauding from house to house to gather up for wiffle ball across the street from the Kleins' to see who could hit it over the Klein fence into the Klein pool--the only pool anywhere but nobody allowed to swim in it, only the Klein boy and Klein girl. Balls got lost in there but so what? We stole in after them. Gawk liked to pepper in hard curves that flew up and away from you, a crazy spin you could never hit. We had to yell at him to throw strikes, goddammit. He and I never acted like brothers. Some of the other kids were Stevie Kellner, Tommy and Jimmy Taube, Randy Greene, Mark Bakst, Bruce and Aaron Dembitzer. But they're not in this story.

I didn't go up the front walkway to ring Morry Kahn's doorbell. He lived across the street a few houses down, his front door hidden in darkness by a porch awning, a glass storm door you had to open first to get inside, the storm door slamming hard behind you. I waited, watching, on the sidewalk in front. After a few minutes I went away on my bike, but I came back now and then. It felt brave to stand there. I'd wait, thinking maybe he'd come out, though I didn't want to see him. The house was dark too, the trees shading it from in back.

I went home to eat dinner. It was as if Gawk was still there, with us, in his seat. The dinning table was oblong, walnut. If you dropped a spill or a splash, Mom wiped it right away. "You're not to do that," she said to me at the table, because I liked to cut my meatballs into four exact wedges on the plate.

"Why not?"

Nobody ever answered such questions, and they lingered. Mom looked more and more pale and spoke of her own private room. It was a reading room she wanted away from Dad and

me. She would paint the walls a fancy cinnamon color and put in books and an antique couch and delicate things. Of course there was Gawk's room, sitting empty. One month, two months, I kept expecting him to come down the stairs or burst through the front door, Mom saying to him wash your hands. Sitting on the opposite side of me, he would sneer; he always sneered if I was the one getting the business from our mother. When he was the one getting the business, I didn't know how to sneer.

But the summer was over. His coma body got removed from the hospital.

They put him in the ground somewhere, so I tried not to be home too much. I told my mother about this boarding school in Cumberland, Maryland, that had horses. A boy I knew was being sent there. I didn't give a damn about riding horses, I had never even been on one. I said I wanted to go to the school with the boy, Tim, and wear the uniform and ride. I wanted to go the next semester. I begged my mother. For a week I asked. Then she got so mad she threw a glass and broke it against the fridge door. I didn't know why she got mad, but seeing her after, I knew not to ask any longer about the boarding school.

Mom was tall, how Gawk had gotten his height. I was like Dad, short and stocky and pouty. When I won a sprint race at school that fall I got an award as the fastest kid. Mom’s face brightened when I showed her the plaque they’d given me, her forehead like a blank billboard. Then she said the dishwasher needed unloading, which was a job my brother or I was supposed to do. She was always running the dishwasher, and since it was only me now it was hard to keep up.

From the dinning room, I heard her begin pulling out dishes and silverware and stacking

them on the counter for me to come in and put away. I held my gold-faced plaque studying it for a message what to do. I wanted her to know I'd crossed the finish line ahead of the famous Blaine McGee, super athlete of the eighth grade. If I could show Gawk the plaque, he'd shrug, because he was Mr. Cool. Later, in the backyard, he'd tell me to go long if I was so damn fast. He'd palm the football, maybe he'd snap me on the chin, and I'd tell him to quit it. Then he'd throw it a mile in the air so that I'd have to run under it.

I put the plaque down somewhere and shoved in the dishes and went on my bike. I knew where to find Morry Kahn, and I rode hard. He had his pad and pencils and had set up his beach chair on the flattened gravel behind the high fence that blocked the highway. He kept angling his shoulders in such a way so as not to face me. It was only us under the sky just before dark. Holding onto my bike, I didn't like the way he kept angling, so I said, "Morry, kid, let's go over to the pond awhile, you and me."

At first he didn't answer, then he said I wasn't to call him kid. I kept after him and finally got him to say something.

"Why can't you be more like him?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Gawk. Who else?"

"Who's Gawk?"

"Shut-up," he said. "Don't be a goof."

It was true about his drawings, he was good; he was special, his drawings seemed to say, and he himself believed it. I wanted him to see otherwise, to see that he couldn't ignore me or angle away, because he'd been there that day.

"Let me see your picture," I said.

He pulled it closer to his chest. "You're dismissed."

I wished I'd knocked his pad out of his hands. He'd go for me then, and I'd maul him--broad-shouldered as he was and one day headed for Yale--I'd kick him on the ground with the fury of my speedy legs.

I wanted someone to say to me you go to Morry Kahn: you look him in the eye and tell him you wish Gawk was still around, tell him that he--Morry--had been there that day and that links you two, so he's not to dismiss you anymore. You tell him and hold out your hand for him to shake, and you say, "Peace, brother."

But there was no one to tell me. Dad busied himself if he wasn't away on business, or he just sat in his car parked in the driveway in the dark. Maybe Mr. Tompkins, a neighbor. One time he'd said if he'd been there Ricky (Gawk's real name) would never have tried a dive off that rock. Mr. Tompkins held a can of beer at the barbecue and spoke from the heart. His mustache drooped around the corners of his lips. He'd fought in Nam and had a chest that made you think of a piano. But he and Mrs. Tompkins lived on the next block and had no kids and made limited appearances, and, anyway, he wouldn't be the one to tell me either.

Upstairs at home, I lifted my bare feet above the pillow on my bed, bracing my heels against the wall below the United States map I had tacked up. I sometimes thought of that map as my door, or as a window to open; for instance, Gawk would be there, saying Mom dressed me like a fairy; or maybe, in his room, he'd use his foot to boost me completely off his desk chair,

and he'd put me out like I was a dog. I'd have the map to look at then.

The colorful states rocked back and forth above my pillow. There were all the capitals to one day visit. At the bottom tip of California, there was a wild strip of yellow that was called Baja and dipped into the ocean like the clip of a pen. This secret coast was a thousand miles long. All would be new when I got there. I'd ride a horse along the trails, up into the hot desert mountains, and I'd squint at the tiny scalloped waves below.

I kept the window open as long as I could. It got closed the evening I left my bike home. I went across the street to the darkness beneath the awning and rang the bell and waited. I'd been inside before, in the basement for pool, but I'd never gone in only me. I'd always follow Gawk in. It was Morry Kahn's mother who opened the door. I got hit by an odor I didn't remember or hadn't noticed before, a stink in my nostrils like weird food boiling, seaweed or something. She called to him saying a visitor. He appeared upstairs on the landing in his white socks, gazing upon me below. His hand clung to the banister like any second he'd shoot back into his room.

"It's you again," he said, but his mother told him to invite me up, which I wished she hadn't. I hadn't planned on the Morry Kahn mother. Even as she stood beside me I couldn't tell you what she looked like. Probably I'd never noticed her my whole life. Morry Kahn did this shoulder-hitch thing to show me all right. But I should have said, "No thanks." I should've walked out, only I didn't think of it.

It worried me to go up those stairs. I'd never achieved his room before. Not that it would have anything about it, only that it was his. He had all his stuff dumped out. Inline skates and weights, and an electric guitar on the carpet. On the crumpled sheets of his bed was a taped-up hockey stick and glossy sports mags, and clothes everywhere, and taking up his desk a pair of

oversized headphones and his laptop, and coffee mugs, the kind with corny messages on them. His closet was open and inside on a shelf right there a red glass bong.

The desk chair waited turned out for him to sit back in, though he didn't, so I made a bold move--but he cut me off before I could plop myself down. I halted awkward at his chest and got his presence, a different presence from other times. From fooling around on someone's lawn, say, trying to stick penknives. Or on goal line stands in Gawk's bedroom, one of us the halfback carrying the ball trying to break through for the score, which was across Gawk's bed to his headboard, and the rest of us divided into blockers and tacklers, and all us mauling together like homos. But now Morry Kahn's presence had no welcome in it. Like a door that got stuck.

"Got something on you mind?"

"Not really," I said.

His socks looked brand new. No worn-out pair for Morry Kahn, like every pair in my drawer at home. Morry Kahn had privilege, his older sister long gone, away to college or married, and Morry Kahn the treasure at home. His mother listened to public radio. I heard it on downstairs in the kitchen. She and my mother had never made friends.

"Get a lot of use out of that?" I asked.

He looked where I meant at the bong, and he closed the closet door and a smirk broke on his face. Morry Kahn had hamster in him, skinny lips and black eyes. But something else, too. A heartlessness, which made him a kind of hero to us all. It was what had pulled Gawk in.

"Don't worry," I said. "I don't want any of your crappy pot."

"You're taking up my time."

"Good."

But he wouldn't quit guarding his room. I wished he'd type away on the laptop or flop his rump somewhere on the floor or on his bed. But I was the little brother and that still stood, Gawk or no Gawk.

"Show me one of your drawings," I said.

Morry Kahn's eyes went to the pillow on his bed, the drawing pad tossed on top of it, opened to a charcoal sketch I couldn't make out.

"What's it of?"

"Nothing. Just a drawing."

"Of what?"

"Pussy."

"Shut-up," I said, nervous around any talk of pussy.

The smirk came back. "Your brother took a hit every now and again."

"Off the bong?" I got onto my knees to inspect some CDs scattered on the carpet; I had certain rights and didn't have to ask.

"Why're you such a drip?" he said, his socks right near my face.

I tossed a baseball cleat not where I'd found it, but further into the pile, apart from its partner cleat. "Because I'm me."

The socks retreated, not interested. I sat back on the carpet like old pals killing time. I could easily snatch the pad, but only a little brother would do such a thing. I figured since I'd made it into his room that was something. Nor could he tell me to get lost, not with his mother downstairs. Also because it was nothing he could say to me. Instead he used the treatment he'd always used: his back to me. Typing at last, his fingers the speed of light.

"How far could Gawk throw a football, anyway?" I asked, wondering aloud. I went back on my elbows, taking up more space, staking my claim. "Gawk," I said. "Whoever invented that name?" I knew who: Morry Kahn.

The fingers paused, as if to say, "You still here?"

"C'mon," I said, raising my voice a notch. "Cut this shit. Let's go up to the pond."

His toes held the floor, his heels up, cocked like triggers in the socks. But he only took up the keyboard again, his strokes rattling away.

"Don't be a pussy," I said, using the word. "I want to see the mud. We'll throw in rocks."

The fingers stopped once more. His neckline in back had a perfect trim of blond hair. He swiveled around. "We're not going to the pond."

"Not even for Gawk?"

If anybody could tell me Morry Kahn can go to hell, Gawk could. But probably Gawk would take Morry Kahn's side out of some principle of friendship or big-brother spite.

I didn't go back home. Our street angled down to where it dead-ended at the bottom, just past a sewer grate. The path beyond went through the thin woods for about a quarter of a mile. I didn't feel scared to walk there. There was the pond with all the boulders piled at the back of it. I squinted my eyes to just see outlines in the dark, and in my head I sent a message. *Morry Kahn meet me here*. I sent drawings of my own too. Me tripping him onto the ground. Me in long black boots like in the Civil War and Morry Kahn's head under one sharp heel pushing it into the mud. Next I sent a message to Gawk: *Don't do it, don't be an idiot.* I squatted at the edge of the black circle of water that had swallowed him. Across from me, the narrow side trail he would have

used led along the rocks to the top of the boulders. I pictured him standing above on that overlook and Morry Kahn in the water below, calling up to him. *Dive, pussy. Go for it.* And knowing it was stupid too, because he would know what Gawk didn't. Or maybe Morry Kahn had shouted, *You'll break your neck,* and that had challenged Gawk. He didn't jump the way other kids did. He *went* for it.

I stuck my hand in, back and forth in the water, the mud swirling up, the thick silt from the shallow bottom. It would have fanned out in a cloudburst around him where he'd knifed in. Those last few seconds though, just before he'd flung himself down, he must have taken a moment; he must have stood up there peering into the water below, the way I'd taken to peering into that sewer grate, the one at the bottom of our street, peering into the blackness between the iron bars, wondering where he'd gone.

I stood up to leave. On the way home I'd have to pass Morry Kahn's house. If he would meet me here we'd sit side-by-side, facing toward the boulders, our knees sticking up and our hands dangling between them. We'd chew gum or we'd spit. He'd show me the drag marks, where he'd pulled Gawk out. I looked for them now to see if they were still there. I wondered who had called the ambulance. And how had I gotten to the hospital? I couldn't remember. But of course. My mother and father had driven me. I'd brought the soccer ball but left it in the car.

On my horse I rode into a long ravine of the desert mountain. A narrow trail and the water nowhere in sight, the trail forking into many trails but no way to know which one to follow. The one I followed took me into Dad's liquor closet downstairs, to porn sites off Gawk's old desktop. I hoarded candy in my bottom drawer. My hair got oily, acne on my chin. I took up smoking, too.

Me and a kid, Brooks, in an alcove off the middle school grounds. I wasn't sprinting in the meets anymore and read in my room to pass the time, books that weren't a part of school. Spy novels, mysteries. To rein myself in, I answered a question when asked at dinner and cleared the table as I was supposed to, and I got passable grades in school. I avoided the pond, and I avoided Morry Kahn because he'd been there that day. We smoked Marlboro Red, me and Brooks, and one day he developed a scheme for us to shoplift games and CDs.

When we got caught, my mother came to the store in the mall to speak to the manager. A draft chilled me in the hall outside the office while she talked to the manager inside and signed the papers. I hadn't even wanted the games and CDs, it'd been Brooks' idea. The next day, when I saw him at school, we sealed a pact with a soul shake in the hallway. But I didn't care about any pact with Brooks. I began to stand out front on the sidewalk again.

Morry Kahn had his ankles crossed, his windbreaker neatly over the back of the beach chair like on a hanger. I called him chicken because he wouldn't go to the pond, and he said something right to my face.

"Gawk never beat the crap out of you enough, did he?"

"Don't talk about Gawk," I said.

"He didn't do his job."

"Yeah, but you're too chicken."

He tossed his pad aside onto the dusty gravel. "Better go home. Go finish your homework before I change my mind."

"Your drawings probably suck."

We both looked at the pad. He leaned forward, like a fight coming.

"C'mon, Morry, kid," I said. "Dismiss me."

"You're embarrassing yourself." He held the arms of the chair, as if to hold himself there. "You're not even worth it," he said, relaxing back. "We all know it, too. It shouldn't have been Gawk."

"I said don't talk about him."

Morry Kahn tightened those hamster lips. "Everybody says it. Out of the two of you, he was the good one. So what's that make you?"

Nearby a pigeon pecked at the dirt. Other pigeons, too.

"Go home and figure it out."

"Probably you pushed him," I said. "Nobody else was there."

The tight lips meant that no one, and certainly not me, could say such a thing to him. He had the advantage, had always had it, and he knew it. He leaned forward again. "And maybe you'd like that beating. Would that do it? Is that what you want from me?"

"I don't want anything from you."

"Then you shouldn't bother me anymore."

"Why not?"

Morry Kahn lifted up his chin to speak to me. He had hamster in him, sure, but he had the blond hair, too. He was gifted, I knew, and he would go forth. One day a beauty would say to him how hard it must have been for him. How brave to drag out the body.

"Why do you want to go there with me? What for? You don't even know, do you?" He spoke to me like an adult would. "*Do you*?"

I felt my eyes tear up, but I resisted wiping them.

"I'm sorry about your brother, okay? Isn't that all you need from me?"

I wanted to tell Morry Kahn how I'd avoided the hospital room. Out of the two of us I was the chicken.

"Why don't you just go your way and I'll go mine."

"Because," I said.

"Because what?"

But I couldn't answer. Riding back home on my bike, I decided not to go upstairs onto my bed this time. In the backyard, where once we held our football games, I hid in a tiny cave the bushes by the side of the house made. I curled in there and made a last-ditch vow to always feel this crummy, to always do bad.