

How Gary Met Melisa

Jennie Hackman Memorial Award

for Short Fiction, 1st Prize

Applewood, and he had acquired, by some peculiar means unknown to him, a limitless abundance of energy and optimism that naturally and easily allowed him to exist in a constant state of the most exuberant, unbounded happiness; that being a curious condition almost exclusively observed in young boys, and very rarely found in the lives of older, wiser men. Being uninclined, as most boys are, to dwell on or even take notice of such things as the causes or ideas that defined his circumstances, condition, and purposes, he instead focused the majority of his faculties on the far more important tasks of climbing any tree that had an air of not having been climbed before and greatly disturbing the insect, fish, and frog populations of several square miles around with hearty and sometimes heartless forays into their territory. Questions regarding the nature of his happiness, the aim and value of tree-climbing, and the ethics involved in the hunting and forceful (if temporary), imprisonment of amphibians never occurred to him, and most probably would have made very little impression, if anyone had seen fit to bring them to his attention. Gary contented himself with more practical questions: which trees were highest and most likely to feel like castles at the top? Or, where were the most bugs and would they eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, if given the opportunity? In short, he was very much a boy.

Gary, it would appear at first glance, lived with his family (that is, his father, mother, and baby sister), in a spacious two-story house with peeling paint and a tendency to be found leaning a few inches further to the left after particularly violent storms. Though on closer inspection, you would find that his residence (defined and measured in time allocated, personal attachment, and relegation of labor), existed at various points throughout several miles of thickly tangled woodlands and scattered rolling green hills that surrounded and permeated the town. Although home, and the familiar closeness of his room, held a unique comfort, these particular, shifting locations comprised the horizons, projects, and memories forming young Gary's world, with school a cramped, unnecessary step in between. When, in accordance with state and federal law, Gary was freed from

the restrictions and expectations of the aforementioned institution (where his happiness was only slightly impaired by the strange, macabre tendency of the teachers to allot punishments for things including: the building of legendary, impregnable fortresses out of desks and bookcases or the exploring of air vents in search of the lost treasures of history), he would make his way with all possible speed to the trees. He'd stay out until sunset and lose himself there—sometimes be lost in a literal, somewhat frightening sense.

The Applewood residence was one of peculiar activity. Mr. Applewood worked, sometimes, and earnestly involved himself and his wife in spectacularly complex, wonderfully optimistic, but always failed projects, when he was not working. Mrs. Applewood, being of a similar disposition and philosophical background to her husband (as it related to pecuniary matters and the opportunities afforded by modern society) also possessed some small measure of restraint and common sense. She was in the habit of encouraging her husband more than might be considered wise in the early stages of an endeavor, then slowly and gently, as expenses and ideas mounted, attempting to cool the ardor of the inevitably crestfallen Mr. Applewood. These wildly magnificent sallies (and equally wild and dismal collapses) all colored by an unbreakable good nature and optimism in both elder Applewoods, defined the household through the years and kept the family constantly at the very edge of financial ruin. The entire situation was made even more hopeless by the fact that Mr. Applewood loved Mrs. Applewood dearly, and she loved him not a whit less, and the entire family adored the youngest Miss Applewood, who, through no fault of her own, assured the final doom and continued failures of her parents by being an unspeakable joy and imbuing them with an unshakeable faith in the essential goodness and beauty in the world.

Another circumstance that kept up the activity and interest in the lives of the Applewoods was the particular feelings of their relations, all of whom hated and despised the couple and their singular method of living. It was sometimes speculated between the couple that Mrs. Applewood's relations were the more mean-spirited and vicious lot, though the comparison was so near, and Mr. Applewood's family were, by all appearances, so entirely dedicated to not being outdone in spitefulness and disrepute of Mrs. Applewood. So, the matter was never resolved, and both parties had pretty good claim to being the most dearly abhorred. Mostly, contact between the Applewood residence and their relatives was restricted to an occasional letter from the parents of Mr. Applewood detailing a new way he might have not disappointed them back in college or the loud, unpleasant phone calls involving Mrs. Applewood and whoever's birthday happened to occur while the baby was sleeping. The last time a family reunion had

taken place was some years ago, when Gary had been but a baby himself, and involved Mrs. Applewood's family, some large quantity of champagne, an incredibly disagreeable and dishonorable ping-pong match, and the contents of a high-school yearbook. The invitation to next year's party was solemnly burned, and several birthdays were inexplicably forgotten, despite the sound slumber of all babies involved.

Gary, having a boundless faith in his parents (which remained unaffected by the vast changes and contradictions in the fundamental truths they professed to him on a daily basis) was able to cheerfully offer his help wherever it was needed and believe in every new scheme with the same absolute assurance that he carried with him for the previous project all the way to its dramatic and costly grave. Still, he spent as much time possible out in the woods, a place that was incomparable and unrivaled in all his experience in its ability to provide the copious amounts of bugs to catch, branches to swing on, and riverbanks to explore...all that was necessary for sustaining life, or at least life worth living.

This story begins on one such riverbank: the edge of a pretty, gurgling little brook that ran its merry course in a forgetful way a quarter mile from the east edge of town. It became, at different points, a microcosm of rapids and waterfalls, dashing over and splashing against rocks and partially collapsed beaver dams, the water clear and sparkling. In other places, it was a slow and somber progression of swampland through high, swaying reeds and under the gently sorrowful branches of weeping willows, where frogs and other aquatic creatures had acquired the deplorably mistaken impression that they would be hidden and protected from even the most zealous hunters.

On this day (a pleasant little spring afternoon that had a hint of summer heat and laziness in it) Gary was occupying himself with the task of proving every possible frog bitterly wrong in its assumptions regarding the safety of the murky sections of the stream and the perseverance and facility of young boys such as himself. There had been quite a commotion raised at home before he had left for school, and Gary was anticipating news to the effect that a patent had been denied, discovered to already be in existence, or possibly some part of civil law had been found conflicting with some essential element of Mr. Applewood's design. The current idea and proposition set forth and advocated by Mr. Applewood was for the construction and sale of small hang-gliders that could be used by boys or young men leaping from the tops of certain high trees or water towers, and while the proposal had been greeted with unrestricted enthusiasm by Gary and many other boys his age,

Mr. Applewood had been much less successful when expounding the merits of the contraption to members of the adult and parental community. He received an even colder response, if that were possible, from government officials at the United States Patent Office.

Calculating a minimum of several days at home being used, not entirely unwillingly, to test prototypes and speak out on the absolute wonder and safety of his father's invention, Gary nonetheless wished to remind the local amphibian populace of his continued presence and lordship over their domain. Having over the past hour or so secured unprecedented victory in a series of lengthy campaigns and daring raids that penetrated and overthrew every possible fortification and stronghold in the frog kingdom, Gary rested in the shade of a hoary tree a few yards from the band, satisfied that he would not be disrespected or forgotten by them even if his absence were to last several weeks. He meditated on the exquisite emotional and spiritual fulfillment that was the reward of a conquering tyrant.

He was surprised and greatly discomfited by the sudden appearance of a girl wearing dirty blue jeans, a torn ribbon fluttering from her hair, from the trees. She was inexplicably standing on the bank opposite him before Gary's tired eyes and lazy wits could fully comprehend her presence.

"What are you doing here?" said Gary, after he had recovered his composure. He spoke in a voice that made it clear he had a great deal of concern for the intrusion on his property, belonging to him by dint of the blood and sweat he had shed there.

"What's it to you?" was the reply, spoken with less respect than Gary thought appropriate and necessary, given the circumstances—she disdained to let her gaze rest on him or acknowledge his existence, much less his predominance, in any way—and her attention remained very much occupied in various ways with various objects that Gary could not quite locate. Rising warily from his relaxed position, and moving to be between the girl and his captives in the shoeboxes, he held his tongue for a moment, and observed her while pondering his next move.

She was about his age, and about his height, too, with shoulder-length blonde hair that might have shimmered in the sunlight, if it wasn't for a great deal of dirt, leaves, and twigs that was spread liberally through it, giving the impression that she had the remains of a tattered, disused haystack about her ears, and not the curly locks or tresses that might be expected on the head of a young girl. Her face was round, with a small, smudged nose and pouting lips—being very fair and pretty despite her dirty outlook. Her current

expression of lively indifference and contempt was directed vaguely at the surrounding foliage, but clearly in reference to Gary. She wore a plain white t-shirt that looked to have absorbed the abuse of a good many days in the forest and wasn't exactly sure how many more days it could endure before becoming indecent. Her pair of jeans gave the same impression, but with a more rugged air, as if they were proud—every rip and stain were battle scars to be exhibited and honored.

Gary, no ideas immediately forming as to a means for timely expulsion of the unwanted guest from his realm, defaulted to reasonable argument a method he felt somewhat beneath him, but, in another way, quite merciful, benevolent, and illustrative of his great wisdom and justice, he being the party in possession of superiority.

“I was here first.”

“So?”

It took Gary a moment to recover from this unexpected and entirely unanswerable rebuttal. With disbelief and rising resentment, he watched the girl begin to stroll, the epitome of casual disrespect, up and down in front of the water, kicking at rocks and clods of dirt in a very unconcerned way, her eyes bent on the ground in front of her and an extremely prickling half-smile on her face.

“Who are you?” Gary, now poised on the edge of his side of the bank, spoke with frustration as his territory, earned with such great sacrifice and effort, was being annexed so suddenly and unceremoniously by this girl.

“None of your beeswax.” She spoke without looking up, bent and picked up a stick, and emphasized her words with several hard thwacks to the nearest bush, which, to Gary, was indistinguishable from her making a physical attack on his very heart and soul.

“Stop!” The words burst from his chest, a cry of deepest betrayal. They stood for a moment frozen, on opposing sides of the stream, each facing the other with acute feelings of resentment and hatred in his (and her) breast, both casting off any slight pretense of civility, and glaring with pure animosity and expressions of deepest loathing at his (and her) enemy. The sun grew suddenly dim, and the wind, with a last whisper, subsided into absolute stillness, both seemingly indifferent to the climactic scene playing out at the riverbank, which, judging by the bearing and expressions of those involved, could be nothing less than a contest to decide the very existence of light and air, and the shape of the world itself.

Being disturbed from a state of uncommon relaxation and indulgence, and so recently gratified in his mastery of the frogs, Gary had been stunned and, truth be told, wounded by the strange

girl's easy dismissal and scorn. He was very much used to being respected in the woods, a place where insects and animals (with the exception of birds, and some few elusive land creatures) could be made to feel his influence. Other children, on the occasions they joined him for purpose of amusements not possible by one boy alone, deferred to his experience and knowledge almost without exception. He had been deeply confused at first by this unexpected behavior in the girl, but, as he had time to recover and her manner became even more confident and the extent of her unworthiness and ignoble spirit became clear, his bewilderment had formed into a towering rage, a righteous zeal to defend and avenge, a great whirlwind of unspeakable passions that drove him mad with the desire and desperate need to expel this succubus from the forest and punish her for her unbelievable impudence.

The suspense and tension exploded cataclysmically into violent action and noise as Gary let out a blood-boiling battle-cry issued from deep within his being. He sprang with reckless fury into the shallow water of the dividing stream and charged the opposite bank, the passion and ferocity of his movements suggesting nothing less than the unrelenting determination and intention of bringing swift death to she who had so defied him. The Defier, her movements equally unhesitating and purposeful, leapt to meet him.

The battle was brief and violent. After a moment of silent but intense struggle, both combatants stepped back to regard his (and her) adversary with an air of grudging respect.

"You're not like other girls," said Gary, breathing heavily.

"I know," said she, with no small measure of pride, meeting his gaze with bright shining eyes.

"You have to tell me your name now."

"It's Melisa." Using the sleeve of her shirt, she tried to wipe some of the mud off her face and ended up obscuring it almost completely.

Gary considered this for a moment and took the opportunity to let fall from his hand a rather sizeable clump of hair he had uprooted from Melisa's head.

"I'm Gary."

She smiled. Gary, wondering, opened his mouth to propose a truce and ask Melisa what she was doing in his particular section of the woods, but his attention was suddenly and entirely captured by the subtle yet audible croak of a lonely frog a little ways downstream. He was now sprinting and splashing, not sparing a moment's thought for Melisa or anyone else, towards the place where the sound had emanated from. Seeing the tiny frog launching, emerging from a thicket, and soaring awkwardly to plop into the

water only a half-dozen paces in front of him caused Gary's already roused spirit to ascend to new heights of ecstatic excitement. He was prepared to leap when a sudden movement at the periphery of his vision caused him to stop dead and stare, dumbfounded.

He saw Melisa run, catlike, for a moment to the dangerous edge of the high dirt and mud alongside the stream before throwing herself with complete abandonment and reckless disregard out and over a tall growth of reeds to strike the water in front of Gary with a terrific splash and noise.

There was a moment of the most petrified silence imaginable, during which Gary was unable to see due to a large amount of water and mud thrown into his face; though he was equally incapable of lifting a hand for the purpose of clearing his vision.

The mud dripped away, and Gary blinked. Melisa stood before him. She was almost unrecognizable, covered in mud. But Gary could see her shining eyes and boasting smile through the caked grime and muck and from her tightly clasped hands, held gently in front of her, issued a stream of the most frightened and forlorn croaks Gary had ever heard.

Thus began the particular and unique friendship that is the focus of this story. The remainder of that day they spent up and down the stream, Gary leading Melisa on a tour of his common haunts and hideouts, and she, looking on with some measure of admiration but not quite approval, holding her head high, loathe to admit to his superior knowledge and experience but secretly impressed. He, in turn, was surprised at her understanding and ability. She rose high in his esteem when, after reaching a point where it was necessary to cross the stream, and the deep, wide, and swift flowing water made a direct foray impossible, she deftly and unhesitatingly skipped over a series of partly submerged rocks that Gary had not even noticed, to arrive at the far bank unscathed.

At length, and after much adventure, the sun began to hang low and red in the sky, and the two companions were compelled to begin the journey home, for fear of worrying their mothers and being subjected to other violent emotions that always accompany worry, at least in the hearts of parents. They stood at the edge of the trees, parallel to the little stream, very tired, wet, and dirty, and facing each other. Gary, hesitating, indicated with his hand a direction vaguely behind him, and addressed Melisa in these words:

"My house is over there."

"Well...I live back there," said Melisa, copying his gesture, but in the opposite direction.

"What'd you think of this spot?" inquired Gary casually, passing his gaze over the stream and the areas they had explored in

an appraising, unimpressed sort of way, and kicking the grass as if it didn't quite measure up to the quality he was used to in grasses. Melisa, after again counterfeiting his motions, looked back to meet his gaze and nodded favorably.

"It's all right."

"Yeah, I guess," said Gary, pleased but trying to hide it. "It's not bad."

"I liked the frog pond," Melisa observed wistfully. "Too bad we had to let them all go."

"Really?" answered Gary, pondering the very new idea of subjecting his captives to any heavier sentence than a few hours, "We can catch 'em all again, you know. They never go anywhere."

"The same ones?"

"I caught this big grey and brown one every day for a week, once."

"What happened to him?" asked Melisa, looking off and yawning with feigned indifference but in reality very much curious and affected.

"I stepped on him, the last time," said Gary, sadly, and dropping his eyes to the ground, observed a moment of silence for the worthy frog. Melisa nodded, as if to concede that this was how things often went, confirmed the necessary sorrow, and joined Gary in his respectful observance.

"I have to go home," said Gary, breaking the silence after a moment. "My parents will be mad."

"Yeah, me too." Melisa shifted from one foot to the other, and glanced concernedly over her shoulder. "My mom will be mad."

"We should be friends, though." Gary spoke these last words with considerable gravity, looking Melisa directly in the eye and frowning in the manner that an ambassador would propose an unprecedented and controversial nuclear treaty to the ambassador of a hostile country.

"If you want," she replied casually hoping very much that he did and that her necessarily disinterested response failed to convince him that she didn't.

"Yes," said Gary, serious and oblivious.

"OK," said Melisa, beaming inwardly but making sure to again yawn in a very rude and condescending manner, for the sake of outward appearances. "Bye then."

"Bye." Gary grinned and turned to trudge back into the forest towards home. Melisa, after quickly crossing the stream in the direction of her own home and making sure that Gary was well out of sight in the trees behind her, began skipping in the most frightfully girlish way and smiling brightly as she did.

It was dusk, and Gary had no desire to linger in the forest now that he was alone. Nightfall brought about a fundamental change in the woodland which he was not at all fond of, and made him actually afraid of the places that were, during daylight hours, his second home. The bark and branches of trees faded with the sun, leaving nothing but towering, vague, irregular, jutting structures that bore little resemblance to the friendly giants he admired and explored in the light. The many calls of the various birds melded to form one repeated, haunting call: a joyless and mysterious noise that Gary knew to be produced by owls, but in his imagination was the sorrowful lament of some lost and lonely soul. Whether man or beast he couldn't guess. At night, his feet seemed to disturb the silence in a very conspicuous way, rustling leaves or breaking twigs and his imagination again formed the image of sleeping plants and animals, waking slowly, angry to have their rest disturbed by one who was a stranger, at least by birth, to their realm. For these reasons, and with these images and ideas prominent in his mind, young Gary hurried through the forest, not looking about or slowing his pace for any bird or bug.

Quite soon, well before dark, he reached the edge of town and the quiet little roads that seemed almost as natural as the forest. They wound their way through and past each other, smiled on by a great variety of cozy, comfortable houses and shops, and peppered with an assortment of vehicles parked haphazardly on lawns and driveways: rusty pick-up trucks sheltered under trees, sports convertibles smiling slyly from half-open garages, and children's bicycles leaned precariously against fences and porches. Gary, in great spirits, made his way along the cracked sidewalks, being sure to skip over every line, for the sake of his mother, and thought about Melisa and the events of that afternoon.

She was, he reflected, a peculiar specimen of her sex. Being instinctually cautious of, disgusted by, fascinated with, and angry at girls, Gary was somewhat surprised to find that one of them could be so much fun...to the point of being a friend. The only fun he had ever known to be got from girls was in making them cry, a curious fact he had garnered second-hand from a schoolmate whose name was Drake Goodfellow, and who had a reputation for experience in such things. Melisa, however, had shown no signs of crying and had, in fact, been the pinnacle of bravery and manliness, proven beyond doubt by her fearless crossing of the river and her smashing of a snail with a rock, while not betraying the slightest sign of squeamishness. Gary, under the weight of all these facts, was forced to admit, somewhat ashamedly, that he liked a girl. He wondered with some trepidation whether she would, at some point,

ask him to play house or dress dolls with her, and whether he would at that point be required by the unquestionable rules of boyhood to make her cry, although the entire scenario seemed very unlikely when juxtaposed with what he had seen and knew of Melisa.

With these doubts (but with much larger quantities of hope and happiness for his new friend), Gary found himself arriving back at his own home, a mile or so from the point where he and Melisa had parted. The sun was just sinking behind the trees and Gary, realizing the extent of ache and weariness in his body and the sheer volume of caked dirt and bits of plants that coated his clothes and skin and matted his hair, found himself wanting nothing more than a long bath and a soft bed. He walked the stairs of the rickety porch with drooping eyes while glowing images of warm water and soft pillows danced seductively in his imagination. Reaching the front door and pulling it open with difficulty, thoughts of rest were instantly erased from his mind as he looked with astonishment on a scene that was singularly inexplicable.

On one side of the room, several wooden chairs of conflicting size and design were stacked upon one another, put together to form a precarious tower that stood at a height nearly reaching the ceiling. The construction suggested a complete lack of forethought or experience in the stacker. The stacker, (that is, Gary's father), was perched at the top of this dangerous artifact, crouched low to avoid hitting his head against the ceiling and wearing on his back what appeared to be the skeletal, unfinished prototype of a hang-glider. His expression was one of unbelievable excitement and reckless enthusiasm, a mad grin on his face and eyes shining intensely, looking as if he wanted nothing more than for someone to tell him there was a thing in the world he couldn't do so he could waste no time in doing it and then laugh good-naturedly in the faces of all involved. Beneath him and a little to the side stood his worthy spouse, holding a bundle in her arms. Her gaze flicked every so often to a small crib that was nestled next to a couch within arm's reach behind her, and then back up to her husband, her manner and stance one of readiness, as if she were preparing at a moment's notice to drop the baby and dash to catch Mr. Applewood in her arms—the eventual necessity of this action seeming more and more likely with each passing moment, as the tower shook and creaked. Her eyes were steady; she showed no sign of alarm or fear, looked as if she knew her duty quite well, and was prepared to carry it out with the utmost professionalism. On the other side of the room opposite the tower stood a little balding man in a suit, who was completely paralyzed in alarm and incomprehension, watching wide-eyed and silent what he could only suppose were the last tragic moments of Mr. Applewood's life.

At the sound of the door opening, the attention of the room shifted to Gary, who, before he could speak or make any motion, was addressed by the ecstatic Mr. Applewood with these words:

“Gary! You’re late! I was hoping you’d be home earlier!”

After making this statement, Gary’s father, by way of a little hop, abdicated his position on top of the tower, which collapsed immediately in a great crashing shower of cheap wooden furniture behind him. Landing, he was forced to dive to one side in order to avoid a sound battering and possible burial by the avalanche (Mrs. Applewood being obliged to do the same, and only narrowly escaped serious injury from a large, high-backed oaken chair that put a sizeable dent in the wall). Regaining his feet, Mr. Applewood enthusiastically took his son’s hand and led him in front of the thunderstruck little man at the far side of the room.

“Mr. Dodsley, this is my son, who I was telling you about!”

Mr. Dodsley, being utterly incapable of speech, did not reply.

“And this, Gary,” said Mr. Applewood, unfazed, “is Mr. Dodsley, of the Department of Parks and Recreation.”

Mr. Dodsley, at length and with some effort, was able to look down and meet Gary’s somewhat confused gaze. He looked like he wanted very much to say something, and might even have regained the physical power of speech, but was at complete loss as to what he would say. His eyes lingered on the drying mud and filth that seemed to be caked at every point on the boy’s body, and the dead foliage sprouting in clumps from his hair. Slowly, he raised his eyes again to rest on Mr. Applewood, still in stunned disbelief and terror. Mr. Applewood smiled back at him in the friendliest possible manner, and after letting the silence continue uncomfortably for several moments, spoke:

“Well if you don’t mind...I’ll grab the other glider, and we’ll go up on the roof.”

After pausing a second expectantly, he turned, interpreting continued silence to mean Mr. Dodsley had no objections, but in turning, the wing of the unfinished glider that was still attached to his back swung around rather hard and knocked Mr. Dodsley violently in the side of the head, laying him out full length on the ground.

There was an absolute explosion of apologies and expressions of concern as both elder Applewoods knelt over the prone man and attempted to discern and dress his injury, Mr. Applewood professing the extent of his carelessness and unimpeachable lack of intent or desire to ever hit Mr. Dodsley and endeavoring to reveal and impress on everyone the inherent humor of the situation, once it was discovered that no serious harm was done. Mrs. Applewood,

having pressed the slumbering Miss Applewood distractedly into Gary's arms, fetched an ice-bag from the kitchen, and applied it to the blossoming bruise on the temple of Mr. Dodsley, with many protestations that the swelling would go down almost at once. Mr. Dodsley, having been very befuddled, and in a state of much confusion and uncertainty before receiving a heavy blow to the head, was now, after receiving one, quite insensible, and submitted to the ministrations of Mr. and Mrs. Applewood without protest and indeed, without any clear idea of what was going on.

After several minutes of activity, during which Gary stood by holding his sister and observing the goings-on with a mixture of apprehension and excitement, Mr. Dodsley was able to stand and, despite many pointed observations from Mr. Applewood to the effect that resting on the roof in the fresh air might improve his injury (and while he was there it could do no harm to watch a quick demonstration of the new glider design), he stumbled as quickly as he could out the front door to his car and drove away without speaking a single word, leaving the four Applewoods to stand in the doorway and watch in disappointment as the lights vanished around the corner.

"That...I don't think he understood," spoke Mr. Applewood, meditatively, as he closed the door, and detached the glider from his back.

"I don't think he was ready, dear, to be honest," answered Mrs. Applewood, "even before you knocked him down."

"Yes...you're right, of course, dear." Mr. Applewood's spirit seemed to sink as he brooded on recent events. "Did I come on a little too strong, in the beginning?"

"I think so, dear."

"You know how excited I get, dear."

"Yes, I do."

"I would have flown right off those chairs and probably put my head through the TV, if the glider was finished." Mr. Applewood contemplated this possibility in a wistful sort of way, stroking his chin with one hand, eyeballing the distance between where his tower had stood and where the television sat against the wall, as if to more vividly conjure the scenario in his mind.

There was a short silence, as both Mr. and Mrs. Applewood seemed to be recalling details of the interview with Mr. Dodsley, and slowly, coming to the same conclusion. Mrs. Applewood was the one to verbalize it.

"I don't think it's very likely we'll get any offers from them, dear."

"No...I believe you're right, dear," replied Mr. Applewood gloomily, his tone becoming more and more depressed as he spoke.

“That permit, though...and maybe even funding...it was all we needed, to take off (so to speak), to get into the big leagues! With a little more time, I'd have fixed this size ratio thing, and we could be making real test flights, maybe even in the national park, and started the marketing phase! With their endorsement and help, everyone would see; those snotty parents would come around, and realize how safe it is; I mean, boys climb trees all the time, and being able to fly instead of fall...and I'll bet the patent would go through, too! But now...that permit...some money...” Here, just as Mr. Applewood was reaching the furthest depth of despair and reproach, his head hung low, biting his tightly clenched fist in frustration, eyes burning, he suddenly snapped his fingers, raised his head, and leapt bodily in the air.

“To hell with them!” Mr. Applewood exclaimed in a sudden, acute ecstasy of righteous and angry rebellion as he landed and planted his feet firmly apart, facing the couch and near wall with an air of wild defiance, as if they were the jagged ramparts of an enemy fortress that could not help but crumble at the thunderous sounding of his trumpet. He turned to cast a roguish and flashing glance on his wife and spoke with heartfelt conviction. “We'll make it every time and be happier than all of them! Nothing has changed! Nothing ever will, and we'll be together, through all of everything! We won't ever stop!”

The mild Mrs. Applewood, it appeared, was entirely crumbled herself by these words and leapt into her husband's arms with tears in her eyes.

“Never!” she cried.

“Always!” he returned, and they tumbled together onto the couch.

Gary, quite forgotten in the corner, held his little sister and was content, if somewhat embarrassed, as a silent observer in this short and passionate exchange between his parents. He noticed again how pretty his mother was: with her short curtain of brown hair that bounced and shook so coyly when she moved and the way his father's eyes always stared with such happy ferocity at things, and only softened when confronted with the gentle gaze of his better half.

From the couch, Mrs. Applewood was startled by the sudden remembrance and recognition of her children in the room and leaving her husband clutching a pillow on the couch, ran to Gary, snatching the baby from his arms and speaking with concern as she brushed uselessly at his soiled clothes and stained skin in an absolute fury, working twice as hard and fast to make up for her somewhat embarrassing oversight, as mothers often do when they are guilty of such lapses in love and care.

“Gary! My Lord! I didn't even notice! You're absolutely filthy!”

Where have you been all day?"

"In the woods," Gary replied truthfully, his mind on other things. "Mom...who was that? Is he all right? Is he mad at us?"

"No, he's nothing," said Mrs. Applewood, attempting to pull an uncommonly large and jagged bur off the front of Gary's shirt, "Just another man, Gary. You don't have to worry about anything. I don't understand how you can get so dirty, so easily, though."

"Will I...will I still get to try out the glider, though?" Gary spoke hesitantly, being very anxious on that account and very aware of how rarely chances to leap and fly from high places, at least with the permission of one's parents, came along in life.

"Absolutely!" shouted Mr. Applewood from the couch, still in the manner of a zealous revolutionary.

Very much satisfied with this answer, and with the results and events of the day in general, Gary suffered himself to be scolded, fed, bathed, and put to bed by his mother, while his father, very far removed from any cooling or rethinking of his earlier passionate words, tinkered with the unfinished glider, drew up grand new designs on large sheets of yellow paper, and shouted at low-level government and corporate employees on the phone.

Lying in bed, Gary thought about very little. He was a boy—that having been detailed and described over the last several pages—and as such, he took no particular stance and held no strong opinion on the occurrences of that day, or any day, taking it all in stride. If he was not satisfied completely with all outcomes, he was quite hopeful and expectant that all wrongs would be righted by the morrow, or at the very latest, the day after that. His mind was full of things like butterflies and dragons, deep holes and firecrackers, and the movements of ants, which left precious little room for doing things like conjecturing, doubting, believing, disbelieving, or attempting to make sense of people or phenomena. Even at the conclusion of bitter days, where rain, illness, or injury kept him from the forest or when the strange restrictions of school were particularly harsh and unsettling, he might cry but he would always fall asleep with the unshakeable belief that the next day would be better—exceptionally, especially wonderful and marvelous, actually, to account for the shortcomings of the previous one. Without effort and through the most honest and natural means imaginable, Gary lived quite happily as a boy and grew older very slowly and maybe a little unwillingly.

On this particular night, however, a little before weariness and comfort dulled his senses into pleasant slumber, Gary spared a moment of consciousness to recall to his mind his adventures with Melisa, especially the peculiar smile she had worn after her

successful capturing of the frog. Even the contemplation of those unique events affected him very little, except, maybe, for a gentle, stirring feeling, quite possibly unrelated, but very singular and specific that made him, if it were possible, even more hopeful for the yet-unknown adventures of the next day.