

(continued from previous page)

Mr. Kelly was sitting at the table now. He had the glass in his hand. His red eyes blinked and screwed up.

—Come on now, hey?

Eric's glove touched lightly against the side of Mike's head. Mike put his glove against Eric's face, trying to push him away.

Mr. Kelly didn't say anything. Mike looked over to him: his face was all twisted up in a funny way.

Just then Eric's glove hit Mike's face. It stung his nose and made his eyes water. He tried to push Eric away again, but this time his glove caught under Eric's jaw and made the teeth come together with a loud click. Eric hit him back on the side of the head, and he hit Eric in the eye. Then they were punching each other all the time. Mike noticed for a second that Mr. Kelly was rocking round in his chair, all excited with his face still twisted up. It was just about then that Mike slipped and fell to the floor. Eric knelt beside him.

—I didn't want to hurt you, he said. I'm sorry.

—You didn't hurt me, Mike said. You don't ever hurt me.

Then they got up on their feet and started to punch each other again. Mr. Kelly's chair was making a lot of noise as he rocked around.

—Hah.

Eric hit Mike. Mike hit Eric.

—Hah.

They hit each other hard.

—Hah.

And Eric was still dancing round like Mr. Kelly had. Mike tried to dance round, too. They were hitting each other faster now. Mr. Kelly gave a kind of shout, only it was so choked up you couldn't hear what he said.

Eric punched Mike on the nose again, and his eyes got so watery it was hard to see. He hit Eric's face and got tangled up with Eric's gloves. Mr. Kelly was on his feet, jumping round shouting. You could hear what he said now.

—Kill him, kill him.

And they were hitting each other hard and Mr. Kelly was jumping round shouting and Mike looked scared and Eric hit him on the nose again, and he fell over on the floor and started to cry. Eric came down beside him and gently helped him up.

—We won't fight any more, Eric said. I don't want to hurt you.

And then they heard the other sound. They looked round and saw that Mr. Kelly wasn't jumping round shouting any more: he had fallen across the rumpled blankets of the bed, his legs out wide, his back heaving up and down as he choked and sobbed.

It was late afternoon: along the riverbank, where the boys sat, the trees played their long cool shadows out over the dark swirl of deep water. Mike had almost stopped crying now that Eric had at last removed the gloves: now they lay limp and unwanted at their feet, beside the scrapbook.

—I don't care, Mike said. I don't ever care what you say. I don't want to any more.

—You're just a silly crybaby, Eric said. Just because—

—I don't care, Mike said. I heard what he said. He was jumping round shouting it out.

—He was just pretending, Eric said. People just pretend like that. And Mr. Kelly's sick and sad.

—How do you know? Mike demanded.

—I just know, Eric said firmly.

—Anyhow, Mike said, I don't care. I'm not going to any more.

—You're scared, that's what.

—I'm not scared. I could clean up everyone in the whole world if I wanted to. But I don't want to. I don't have to if I don't want to.

—Silly, Eric murmured.

Mike rose defiantly to his feet, tears still running down his cheeks.

—I don't care what you say, he said. I don't ever care what you say.

He went to retrieve the gloves and the scrapbook. Then, quickly, before Eric could stop him, he flung them away. They fell in the river with short, quick splashes: the gloves first, then the scrapbook, its pages fluttering open as it dropped.

Eric leapt to his feet with a cry, striking out; but Mike dodged away, running, beginning to sob.

—I don't ever care, he shouted.

Eric scrambled down to the edge of the river, wading in to try and get the

gloves as they floated past. He ignored the scrapbook spread wide on the water, already soggy and ruined. He managed to reach one of the gloves. But the current had caught the others, and they were swept quickly away, too far out.

As Mike's small running figure merged with the riverbank's fading afternoon shadows and finally disappeared, the thin shrillness of his shout came drifting back:

—I don't ever care.

Standing waist-deep in the cold-flowing water, his wet clothing clinging heavily to his chilled skin, Eric looked down at the useless single glove in his hand. Then he looked to the others, bobbing and dancing their way downstream. Quickly, jerkily, he threw the glove after them—and then, turning and wading slowly back to the bank, dried a hand on his shirt, felt up to his face and discovered with surprise a lonely tear falling warmly down his cheek.

**Travel**

**SHAW SAVILL**



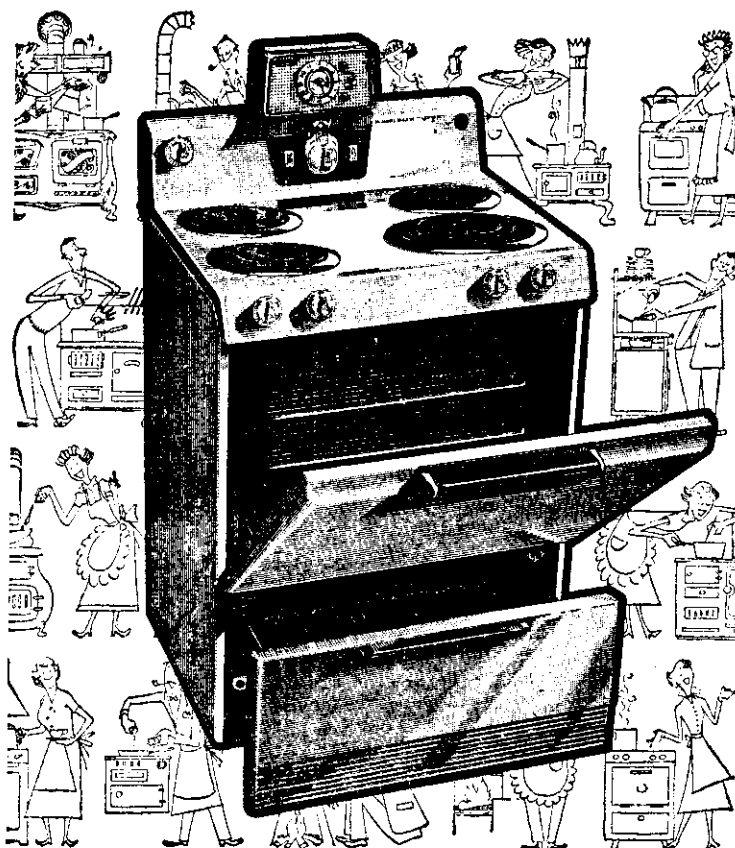
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