So Close

Someone told me Joyce liked me. I don't remember who.

She looked back from across the room and smiled. I gave her the finger. The guys laughed and slapped my shoulder. I don't know why I did it.

The teacher knocked something off her desk and told us to settle down.

Joyce turned back to her friends. I could hear her telling them what I'd done. They all laughed. She didn't seem angry.

The day went on. Cafeteria. Study hall. Another class. I kept thinking about it.

After the bell I found her at her locker.

I said, Joyce, I'm sorry about earlier.

She said, What do you mean.

I said, You know what I mean.

She looked at me a second. Then she said it was fine.

I said it wasn't fine.

She put her hand on my arm then. We stood there. Down the hall someone had propped open a door and you could smell fresh-cut grass.

I said I didn't want to leave.

She said, So don't.

We stood there a little longer. I didn't know what was going to happen next. I'm not sure I needed to.

Paul's Year

There was a time in his growing-up years, one brief stretch of a couple of months, when Paul Logan was Danny's very best friend. Then something happened in Paul's life—Danny never knew what—some trouble he couldn't handle. To this day, no one seemed to know what it was.

But there was a time, midway through junior year, when all seemed well in the world.

Paul was everything Danny wanted to be. Smart, an A-and-B student, while Danny struggled. A splendid athlete, promoted to varsity as a junior when hardly any juniors made that jump. Good-looking and rugged, while Danny was a scrawny junior-varsity hanger-on.

Most of all, and best of all, Paul was down to earth—kind and encouraging, when most of the varsity players wouldn't give a schlep like Danny the time of day.

The afternoon that mattered most started in the most unremarkable way: a class speech.

Danny had spent weeks buried in old census records, and what he found had genuinely surprised him. In 1790, when the first U.S. census was taken, nearly ninety percent of Americans lived on farms—and those farms were mostly self-sustaining, families growing what they needed and little more.

By 1840, that same ninety percent were still farming, but everything underneath had shifted. John Deere's steel plow had cut through prairie soil that older blades couldn't touch. McCormick's reaper let one farmer do the work of many. The Erie Canal and the first railroads gave crops a way out of the county and into real markets. Credit had started to flow.

Farming, in the span of two generations, had quietly stopped being a way of feeding your own family and become a business.

Danny stood up and made his case, nervous the whole time, sure he was talking too fast. The classroom felt warm, chalk dust hanging in the air, Miss Wright's red pen tapping lightly against her grade book as he spoke.

Afterward, Paul commented:

"You're so good in speech," he said. "That was a great talk, a really interesting argument. You were a natural up there."

Danny would remember the compliment far longer than he'd remember the speech itself. It wasn't the grade, or even being right about the farmers. It was that Paul—golden, effortless Paul—had noticed him at all, and had meant it.

They quietly talked the rest of the period as Miss Wright went over her notes. Paul seemed distracted, tapping his pencil, glancing toward the window as if something outside was weighing on him. Danny didn't think much of it at the time.

Both soon noticed Carol Kellogg sitting by herself across the room, one of the prettiest girls in the junior class.

"Why don't you go over and talk to her?" Danny urged.

But Paul was hesitant.

"I can't," he said. "She's far too popular. What would I say?"

This surprised Danny. Paul was one of the class leaders, in his mind, and should have been a natural.

"No one else is talking to her either," he said, thinking for the first time that maybe he wasn't the only one who lacked nerve.

And surprising himself, he got up and crossed the room.

Carol saw him coming and actually smiled. He sat down beside her, and she immediately brought up his speech and how much she enjoyed it, adding enough detail to tell him she wasn't just making conversation.

He steered the talk to Paul and mentioned his down-to-earth friendliness.

"He really likes you," he offered.

"Why doesn't he talk for himself, then?" she asked.

"Guys like us are used to girls our age going out with older boys. With cars."

"That's silly," she said.

"Would you go out with a guy if you had to ride a bus?"

"It depends on the boy," she said.

"Would you go out with me?"

For the second time in the last two minutes, he surprised himself.

"Where to?"

“The movies. This Friday.”

“Yes,” she said, jotting down her address and phone number. “Seven o’clock?”

He joined Paul after class and told him about the date. Paul was impressed, though Danny noticed he didn’t smile quite as easily as usual.

The rest of the school year went far beyond Danny’s expectations. He made the varsity baseball team and had a good year. Paul had a great year and was named all-conference.

Danny took Carol to the junior-senior prom.

Paul didn’t go.

He dropped out of summer-league baseball, quit school in his senior year, and enlisted in the Marines without telling anyone the reason. When Danny saw him around town that fall, Paul looked leaner, quieter, as if he were carrying something he couldn’t set down.

After basic training, he came home on leave and was killed in a car accident.

Danny had one of the best years of his life, and seemed to find himself.

And for some reason Danny never knew, Paul lost his.

Years later, Danny would remember that afternoon in Miss Wright’s classroom—the chalk dust, the warm air, and Paul’s voice saying he was a natural. He would remember it more clearly than anything else from that year, except the fact that Paul never got another one.