

Dark Horses

by Erik Doughty

I'm in Joel's front yard when I dodge the third call from my divorce lawyer. I'm here for Joel; I can't seem to show up anywhere unless it's for someone else.

We watch his son, Andy, push his bike up the hill. This is the fifth time he's shown us he can ride a two-wheeler. Andy's teachers call him *special*; kids say *retard*. He has trouble speaking but can sign most of his words—for me, “Uncle.”

“They're going to hold him back,” Joel says. He hands me a Guinness.

“Again?”

In middle school, Joel was held back for dyslexia. We scrapped with the kids that called him names; gravel and blood blew from our noses. In the boys room, he asked me point-blank, “Am I really that stupid?” We washed our cuts over the same sink, and I said, “That's a stupid fucking question.”

Andy waves to us and counts three-two-one with his fingers.

“No fear, buddy. You're all that. Give ‘em hell!” Joel shouts.

Andy pushes off and swings his leg over the seat. Immediately, his helmet unclasps and falls behind. This is it for him, I think, a life of accidents unseen and ribbons for effort. For Joel, it'll be shoulder pats from overpaid administrators and sitting on his palms during parent-teacher conferences. He can't put a fist through another picture frame.

Then Andy lifts his hands off the bike and over his head.

Beer runs down Joel's chin as Andy pedals on, hanging from heaven's monkey bars.

“Yee doggie!” I yell.

Joel spikes his can.

Andy signs to us—pinches his index and thumb together and thrusts them towards the sky—“Surprise.”

We holler and dance like sports fans caught on stadium cameras.

In the evening, Joel leaves Andy with his ex-wife and we meet our buddies at Hannigan's. Nights like this, he never talks about Andy. He never mentions reading to him from a book with more pictures than words, that there are a few with which they both struggle. He never mentions feeling impotent watching his boy sit cross-legged on the diamond while the batters run around him, their knees clipping his at the turn of corners. But the moment we sit, Joel begins replaying the heroics of no-hands Andy. His voice revs and the folds in his face jive, as he exaggerates at all the right places, milks our drunken eyes, and his smug smile is the same as when he caught the foul ball at Fenway, giving it to me because I "needed a win" more than he did. When Joel finishes, the rest of us fight over who gets to buy the next round, but we hold up our glasses in silence, struggling to find something to toast to.

"To dark horses," Joel says, and we drink to end the drought in our hearts.

