

# Friends

*by* Tyler Koch

The boy stared out his window, noting the suns slow and eventual passing behind the distant mountains. He saw his face reflected in the window pane and turned away. His shadow loomed across the room, splayed on the opposite wall. He liked this time of the day. He liked to think that he was Peter Pan, a young boy chasing his shadow all the way to Never Land. One day he'd be able to fly away.

He heard the rumble of the garage door open and close, the shudder running through the house. His father was home early. The boy wondered how long the peace and quiet would last. Quietly he opened his door a crack.

"Home."

"How was work?"

"The usual."

"That's nice. Get George, will you? Dinner is almost ready."

"Weren't going to wait until I got home?"

He heard his mother's heels clack against the kitchen tile. "Looks like everything worked out just right."

His father said something the boy couldn't hear, and something metal clattered to the ground.

"I'll get it," said his mother, almost bored.

"Yes you will."

The boy heard footsteps marching up the stairs and then his door opened.

"Dinner," said his father.

The boy nodded. "Ok."

"You been a good boy while I was at work? Do everything your mother asked you to do?"

"Yes," he answered in a small voice.

His father snorted and loosened his tie. "We'll see then, won't we?"

The boy wanted to say more, tell his father that he'd been a good boy. But the moment passed and he stared at his door frame and the empty room beyond. He winced as he stood and cautiously made his way down the stairs, toward the kitchen.

"Hungry?" asked his mother.

The boy glanced around. "No."

His mother gave him a look and told him to sit down. She loaded his plate with spaghetti and meatballs and red sauce. It smelled so good the boy's mouth watered but he made sure to sit still and wait for his father to begin eating.

"Serving George first?" asked his father, walking into the kitchen, his tie removed and the top three buttons undone.

"He was ready," replied his mother.

"So now my son is served before me." His father grunted. "That's new."

"If you were ready you would have been served." His mother spoke without a trace of emotion.

"Well serve me. I'm ready now."

The three sat down to dinner. The boy didn't say anything, careful as he was not to spill the red sauce on the white tablecloth or his own clothes. He'd done that before and hoped never to do it again. His father spoke about work and his mother nodded politely at all the right moments. The boy made sure he finished his food, down to the last noodle, before setting his fork and knife on the plate. His stomach hurt.

"You still hungry?"

The boy shook his head. "No thank you."

"Don't like your mother's cooking?"

"He liked it fine. It's all gone."

"Don't like your mother's cooking?" his father repeated.

"I liked it a lot," said the boy softly.

His father snorted. "Never going to grow if you only eat one serving. Be small and weak forever." His eyes bored into the boy's. "Don't want that now, do we?"

"No." His voice barely reached his ears.

His father waved a hand indifferently and told the boy to clean up the dishes and load them in the dishwasher.

"Load them right this time."

After, the boy asked his father if he could go outside.

"What's outside?"

"I'm cold. It's warmer."

"Wouldn't be so cold if you ate more. Too damn skinny."

His father took a breath and nodded. "Fine. Go outside. You're mother and I have business to attend to anyway. Be sure to stay out of our way."

The boy nodded and walked opened the sliding glass door to his backyard. He wasn't really cold, that had been a lie.

Outside the boy saw a cuticle of sun peeking above the mountains, the beginning of night mixing and overpowering the day. He walked to the edge of the yard, standing on his tip toes to see above the taller of the bushes.

"Over here."

The boy turned his head to the sound of the voice, moving to his left, toward the bushes he could see over easily. A girl stood there his own age. She wore a yellow long sleeve shirt and pants, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Hi. Did you eat dinner?"

He nodded. "Just finished. Spaghetti and meatballs."

The young girl winced. "Red sauce."

"I was careful."

"That's good." She put out her hand ran her fingers through the leaves. "I hate pasta days."

"Me too." The boy pulled up the sleeve on his shirt. "Got a new one."

The girl leaned close and nodded appreciatively. "That's a good one. Did it hurt?"

"Yea. He used the belt."

"Ouch."

The boy tried to act tough. "It only hurt a little."

"Almost as good as this." The girl lifted up her shirt and showed the boy her stomach. His eyes grew wide.

"That's big."

She nodded. "I couldn't eat all day today."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Yea. I have to be careful not to lay on my stomach."

"Oh."

The girl lowered her shirt and smoothed out the wrinkles.

"At least it wasn't as bad as yesterday," said the boy.

She grabbed her arm instinctively and rested her hand there. "No, not as bad as yesterday. He was in a better mood today."

"My dad is too. I was afraid he wouldn't let me outside to see you."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I was cold."

The girl continued hugging herself, but nodded. "That's smart. I said I wanted to play by myself."

"My dad wouldn't believe that."

"My dad normally doesn't either."

The boy offered a smile. "I'm glad I got to see you."

"Me too." The girl smiled in return. "Hopefully we'll still be able to. My dad isn't going out of town for a couple weeks."

"That's ok. We'll try as much as we can."

"I'd like that."

The two smiled at one another.

"Do you have to go soon?"

The girl nodded. "My dad said I could only be out until the sun went down."

Both of them flicked their eyes to the mountains in the distance.

"You should go," said the boy quietly.

"I know."

She reached out her hand and touched the boy's shoulder. "We'll try for tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," confirmed the boy.

He watched her go and waved as she turned around.

"Bye," she mouthed.

"Bye," mouthed the boy.

He turned and entered his house, careful to avoid making too much noise as he went upstairs into his bedroom. That night, like so many nights, he dreamed of the girl. They sat together beneath an endless sun.

