

FOREPLAY

By Jonathan Dorf

(Late afternoon. The Doe family kitchen. The sound of a car pulling into a driveway. Johnny sits at the table and plays with a pair of toy soldiers. The soldiers battle, with Johnny making occasional sound effects. One soldier shoots the other one. The wounded soldier falls. Pause.)

JOHN

Johnny, Jay—I'm home!

(Enter John, carrying a small suitcase and wearing an overcoat, from the kitchen.)

Hey sport. Shooting the enemy?

(John points at the toy soldier. Beat. John waves his suitcase at Johnny.)

See how light my suitcase is? Feel it. Go ahead.

(Johnny picks up the suitcase.)

See how light it is?

(Johnny tentatively waggles it.)

Go ahead. You can shake it.

(Johnny gives it a good shake.)

Empty. Absolutely empty. Sold the whole stock. You know why, Johnny? You know why? Apparently, people are feeling unprotected. That is very good news for me and my suitcase.

(John takes a newspaper from inside his coat, takes off the coat and sits in a chair. He reads the newspaper.)

What did you learn in school today?

JOHNNY

(reciting)

Oedipal rhymes with edible. George Washington is the father of our country. She sells sawed-offs by the seashore. Dinosaurs are extinct. Look both ways before crossing. Two plus two equals four. The meek shall inherit the earth. April showers bring May flowers. Mayflowers bring pilgrims. The Yankees are even money

against the Twins in Vegas. The times, they are a changin'. These are the ten things I learned in school today. By Johnny Doe.

JOHN

Did you say the meek shall inherit the earth?

JOHNNY

Uh-huh.

JOHN

Is that any way to answer Daddy?

JOHNNY

Yes, Daddy. We learned the meek shall inherit the earth.

JOHN

I'm glad they're teaching values in school again.

JOHNNY

(beat)

Was Billy Fireman meek?

JOHN

Who?

JOHNNY

That's what Mr. Wright said.

JOHN

Your teacher.

JOHNNY

Uh-huh.

JOHN

Johnny!

JOHNNY

Yes, Daddy.

JOHN

Why did Mr. Wright say Billy Fireman was meek?

JOHNNY

'Cause he inherited the earth. Mr. Wright says that when you die, you inherit the earth. That's what inheriting the earth means.

JOHN

Billy Fireman died?

(beat)

Oh, that was the boy who had the accident.

JOHNNY

(shakes his head)

He didn't *have* the accident. Rachel Parker *had* the accident. Billy Fireman *was* the accident.

JOHN

I see. Yes, that was very sad.

(beat, face still buried in the newspaper)

Does thinking about Billy Fireman make you sad, Johnny?
You look sad.

JOHNNY

Something happened today.

JOHN

Something sad?

JOHNNY

I think so.

JOHN

Well, what was it?

JOHNNY

I don't remember.

JOHN

You should have written it down.

(Johnny nods.)

Maybe what's bothering you is what happened to Billy Fireman.

(lowers his newspaper)

I'm lowering my newspaper.

(puts it on the floor)

See. You have my undivided attention.

JOHNNY

Why?

JOHN

So we can have a talk. I want you to tell me what happened to Billy Fireman.

JOHNNY

Why?

JOHN

You'll feel better.

JOHNNY

But that was last week. The thing I can't remember was today.

JOHN

And it bothers you that you can't remember.

(beat)

Sometimes it's better not to remember, if a thing's bad enough.

JOHNNY

I want to remember.

JOHN

I see.

(brief pause)

Sometimes, if you get your mind off it, the thing you're trying to remember will come back when you least expect it.

JOHNNY

Really?

JOHN

(nods)

So let's talk about Billy instead.

JOHNNY

(beat)

It was on the playground. Billy wanted to copy Rachel Parker's homework.

JOHN

And you were with him?

JOHNNY

(shakes his head)

I didn't even like him. I was playing on the merry-go-round.

JOHN

Aren't you getting a little old for that?

JOHNNY

I like to get it going real fast and make the other kids puke.

JOHN

Oh.

(beat)

So you push?

(Johnny nods.)

So you were pushing the merry-go-round, which is close by?

JOHNNY

Yes. Is "yeah" OK?

JOHN

You'd like to say "yeah" instead of "yes"?

JOHNNY

If that's OK.

JOHN

Sometimes or all the time?

JOHNNY

Just sometimes. I could say "yes" the other times.

JOHN

(tries to be chummy)

Yeah. I think you could do that.

(beat)

So you were pushing the merry-go-round . . . you didn't ride on the merry-go-round . . .

JOHNNY

(tries it out)

Nah?

JOHN

Like "yeah." The opposite of "yeah." Good for you. So you didn't ride?

JOHNNY

Nah.

JOHN

And then . . .

JOHNNY

I heard a shot.

JOHN

She shot him.

(Johnny nods.)

And that's it?

(Johnny nods.)

JOHNNY

Not counting the ambulances and stuff.

JOHN

Do you remember the thing you forgot yet?

(Johnny shakes his head.)

Doesn't surprise me at all. It takes more than talking about something else for ten seconds to get your mind off what you're trying to remember. How could you get your mind off it? You barely told me about what happened to Billy. One second, he's alive. The next, he's dead.

JOHNNY

That's what happened.

JOHN

Do they teach you in school about telling an anecdote?

JOHNNY

What's an anecdote?

JOHN

A story.

JOHNNY

They tell us stories.

JOHN

What stories do they tell?

JOHNNY

There was one about loaves and fishes.

JOHN

Bible stories. Good. Glad to hear it. Do you like those stories?

JOHNNY

Yeah. I guess.

JOHN

And do you know why you like them?

(Johnny shrugs.)

Because they're good stories. With a beginning, a middle, and an end.

JOHNNY

(thinks)

In the beginning, Billy wanted Rachel's homework. In the middle, she shot him. In the end, he died.

JOHN

That's fine, son, but a good story needs to be longer than that.

JOHNNY

Why? I thought it just has to have a beginning, a middle and an end.

JOHN

(not so nice)

Do you want to remember this thing or not?

(Johnny looks about to cry.)

I'm sorry, Johnny. Sorry. You're right. It does just have to have a beginning, a middle and an end. But the thing is, you can't get to the middle right after you tell the beginning.

JOHNNY

I don't understand.

JOHN

OK. In the beginning of your story, you want to tell us who's in it.

JOHNNY

Billy and Rachel.

JOHN

Now what else about Billy?

JOHNNY

He didn't do his homework.

(catches on)

And he had to turn it in right after recess!

JOHN

Good! That's the idea!

JOHNNY

And Mr. Wright doesn't like Billy very much!

JOHN

Didn't. Didn't like.

JOHNNY

And Mr. Wright didn't like Billy very much.

JOHN

So if Billy didn't turn his homework in, Mr. Wright might want to shoot Billy himself!

(brief, uncomfortable pause)

Now what about Rachel?

JOHNNY

She's got boobs.

JOHN

Johnny!

JOHNNY

She let Billy feel them. So Billy thought if she let him feel her boobs, she'd let him copy her homework.

JOHN

I stand corrected. That's good storytelling. Good detail. What else about Rachel?

JOHNNY

She's eleven. She stayed back a year. And she had a gun—
(scolding himself)

duh—she had a gun in her bookbag.

JOHN

Good. You're adding color to the story. We've arrived at the middle.

JOHNNY

He went up to her.

JOHN

And he said . . .

JOHNNY

Can I copy your homework?

JOHN

I feel like I know these children. Do I know these children?

JOHNNY

(shakes his head)

So Billy asks—

JOHN

And she says no?

JOHNNY

Daddy! Let me tell it!

JOHN

Sorry.

JOHNNY

He says, "Can I copy your homework?" And she says, "No."

JOHN

No? Just like that?

JOHNNY

Oh—first she says, "what will you give me for it?"

JOHN

For the homework.

JOHNNY

Yeah. So he says, "how's about my rabbit's foot?"

JOHN

She tells him no?

JOHNNY

He gave her the rabbit's foot last week so he could feel her boobs.

JOHN

He tried to give her something that was already hers?

(Johnny nods.)

The kid's a con artist. He had it coming. So then what does he try?

JOHNNY

He'll do her homework for a week. Only everybody knows he never does *his* homework.

JOHN

So she says no?

(Johnny nods agreement.)

See the way this story is building?

JOHNNY

What's building?

JOHN

Getting more interesting; the last part is the best part.

(Johnny nods.)

When does she take out the gun?

JOHNNY

I'm getting to that part.

JOHN

Sorry. You've got me on the edge of my seat.

(leaning forward)

See. You're telling such a good story I'm on the edge of my seat.

JOHNNY

We're still in the middle.

JOHN

Don't leave me hanging, Johnny.

JOHNNY

So recess is just about over. The little kids are lining up already.

JOHN

Did you make any of them puke?

JOHNNY

Just one. But he puked all over his pants. Anyway, the little kids are lining up to go in.

JOHN

Billy doesn't have much time to get the homework.

JOHNNY

Daddy, are you gonna' let me tell this?

JOHN

Sorry. Keep going.

JOHNNY

Billy says, "If you give me your homework, you can feel my willy." I'm saying "willy," but that's not the word Billy used.

JOHN

I appreciate your sensitivity.

JOHNNY

My what?

JOHN

Your not saying the word Billy used in front of me.

(Johnny nods.)

So then she shot him?

JOHNNY

Daddy!

(John makes a "zipped lips" sign.)

Then the whistle blew for the older kids to come in from recess. Then Rachel says, "I don't do things like that." But Billy says she does. So Rachel takes out the gun.

JOHN

Her father's?

JOHNNY

Uh-huh.

(sharp look from John)

Yes.

JOHN

I do know *Sam* Parker. Has quite a collection, numerically speaking. Good man.

JOHNNY

(with some distaste)

It was a Saturday night special.

JOHN

I don't like your tone.

JOHNNY

But you always say Saturday night specials are for poor people.

JOHN

I said *I* don't sell them to my customers. For business reasons.

(beat)

When I sell a rifle, my customer needs to accessorize.

JOHNNY

Accessawhat?

JOHN

Accessorize. It means the customer can't just buy the rifle. He needs accessories: a scope, perhaps—extra money for your father. Maybe a bayonet—an authentic one is very expensive. Some collectors even want a silencer. I also think rifles are nicer looking than some of those handguns or sawed-off shotguns, but that's not why I do it.

JOHNNY

I'm sorry for the tone of voice I used.

JOHN

Come give me a hug.

(Johnny gets up and hugs his father, maybe sits on his lap.)

JOHNNY

I still can't remember.

JOHN

It'll come to you. So are we through with the middle now?

JOHNNY

I guess.

JOHN

That just leaves the end.

JOHNNY

She pulled out the Saturday night special.

JOHN

Yes?

JOHNNY

She said "take it back, or I'll shoot you." He said go ahead. He didn't think it was loaded. So she fired. She said "bang." 'Cause she didn't know it was loaded either. So she think it's gonna' make a "click" sound. That's why she said "bang." 'Cause if she didn't say "bang," then all there'd be was a click.

JOHN

Was she surprised?

JOHNNY

She wet her pants. That was really gross. And she dropped the gun right in the pee.

(beat)

Is the story over now?

JOHN

(nods)

You did a good job.

JOHNNY

Do I remember the thing I forgot now?

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