

The house looked strange. It was completely empty now, and the door was flung wide open, like something wild had just escaped from it. Like it was the empty, two-story tomb of some runaway zombie.

Mom called out to me, "Take the bag, Paul. I want to have one last look around."

I said, "I just did. I didn't see anything."

"Well, maybe you didn't look everywhere. I'll just be a minute."

"I looked everywhere."

"Wait for me out by the car, please. We can't have the new owners thinking we left a mess behind."

I picked up the garbage bag and hauled it out to the curb. We'd already packed up our sleeping bags, suitcases, and two folding chairs—all neatly wedged into the back of Mom's Volvo wagon. Now only this ten-gallon, self-tying, lemon-scented garbage bag remained, and we planned to toss it into the Dumpster behind the 7-Eleven. But first Mom had to make sure that I didn't overlook anything. She was worried that the people who bought our house, people who we've never met, would find a McDonald's swizzle stick and think less of us.

Once we dump this garbage bag, that will be it. That will be the last evidence that the Fisher family ever lived in Houston. Dad and my brother, Erik, are already gone. They've been living

in Florida for a week now, with the sleeping bags, suitcases, and chairs that they stuffed into Dad's Range Rover. The rest of our furniture left yesterday, professionally packed by two guys who came to really hate Mom. By now it should be over halfway to our new address—a place called Lake Windsor Downs in Tangierine County, Florida.

I set the garbage bag down and leaned against the station wagon, staring east, directly into the rising sun. I'm not supposed to do that because my glasses are so thick. My brother, Erik, once told me that if I ever look directly into the sun with these glasses, my eyeballs will burst into flame, like dry leaves under a magnifying glass.

I don't believe that. But I turned back around anyway, and I looked west down our street at the receding line of black mailboxes. Something about them fascinated me. I leaned my chin against the top of the station wagon and continued to stare. An old familiar feeling came over me, like I had forgotten something. What was it? What did I need to remember?

Somewhere behind me a car engine started up, and a scene came back to me:

I remembered a black metal mailbox, on a black metal pole. I was riding my bike home at dinnertime, heading east down this street, with the sun setting behind me. I heard a loud roar like an animal's, like a predator snarling. I swiveled my head around, still pedaling, and looked back. All I could see was the red sun, huge now, setting right over the middle of the street. I couldn't see anything else. But I could hear the roar, even louder now, and I recognized it: the roar of an engine revved up to full throttle.

I tilted up my sports goggles to unfog them. Then I turned back and saw it—a black car—just an outline at first, then clear and detailed. It came right out of the sun. I saw a man hanging

out of the passenger window, hanging way out. He had something pulled over his face, some kind of ski mask, and he was holding a long metal baseball bat in both hands, like a murder weapon.

Then the gears ground, the tires squealed, and the car leaped forward at an impossible speed. I swiveled back, terrified, and pedaled as hard as I could. I heard the roar of the car closing in on me, louder and louder, like it had smelled its prey. I shot a glance into my bike mirror, and there it was—half a block behind, then ten yards, then one yard. The man in the ski mask leaned farther out the window. He pulled the bat back and up. Then he brought it forward in a mighty swing, right at my head. I dove to the right, landing on my face in the grass, just as the baseball bat smashed into the mailbox, exploding it right off its pole. Voices inside the car screamed—animal-fury screams—as the crushed black metal clattered across the street. I scrambled back up. I left my bike there, its wheels spinning, and ran for home. I ran in absolute terror, listening for the sound of the car squealing back around to come after me again. I burst through the front door, crying hysterically. My goggles were twisted back around my head. I spun around and around looking for Mom. Then Mom and Dad were both in front of me, holding on to my shoulders, trying to calm me down, trying to understand the word that I was saying over and over.

It was "Erik." I was saying "Erik."

Dad finally understood. He looked right into my eyes and asked, "What do you mean by 'Erik'? Erik what, Paul?"

I stammered out, "Erik. He tried to kill me."

Mom and Dad let go of my shoulders and stepped back. They looked at each other, puzzled. Then Dad raised his arm up and pointed to the right, into the dining room. There was Erik.

He was sitting at the dining-room table. He was doing his homework.

Dad eyeballed me for a few seconds, then he went out front to look for my bike.

Erik called over, "There he goes. Blaming me again."

Mom took me into the kitchen and got me a glass of water. She ran her finger under the strap of my goggles and slipped them off. Then she said, "Honey, you know how it is with your eyesight. You know you can't see very well." And that was that.

But I *can* see. I can see everything. I can see things that Mom and Dad can't. Or won't.

Mom's voice broke into my remembrance. "Paul?"

My chin was still pressed against the car. She was standing next to me. "Paul? Are you with us?" I leaned back as she beeped the auto alarm and opened the tailgate. "You're remembering all the good times you had here. Aren't you?"

I shook my head to clear it. I reached to pick up the garbage bag. My arms felt weak. I muttered, "I was remembering. I was remembering something that happened."

She held up a white cigarette butt and said, "You don't know anything about this, do you?"

"No."

"I found it in the garage, behind the water heater."

I opened up the garbage bag enough for her to slip it inside. I said, "Good work, Mom." She walked quickly back up to the house, laid her keys inside the foyer, and pulled the door firmly closed.

And that was that. The keys were locked in. The zombie was locked out. And we were on our way.

PART 1

Friday, August 18

For Mom the move from Texas to Florida was a military operation, like the many moves she had made as a child. We had our orders. We had our supplies. We had a timetable. If it had been necessary to do so, we would have driven the eight hundred miles from our old house to our new house straight through, without stopping at all. We would have refueled the Volvo while hurtling along at seventy-five miles per hour next to a moving convoy-refueling truck.

Fortunately this wasn't necessary. Mom had calculated that we could leave at 6:00 a.m. central daylight time, stop three times at twenty minutes per stop, and still arrive at our destination at 9:00 p.m. eastern daylight time.

I guess that's challenging if you're the driver. It's pretty boring if you're just sitting there, so I slept on and off until, in the early evening, we turned off Interstate 10 somewhere in western Florida.

This scenery was not what I had expected at all, and I stared out the window, fascinated by it. We passed mile after mile of green fields overflowing with tomatoes and onions and watermelons. I suddenly had this crazy feeling like I wanted to bolt from the car and run through the fields until I couldn't run anymore. I said to Mom, "This is Florida? This is what it looks like?" Mom laughed. "Yeah. What did you think it looked like?"

¹¹ I don't know. A beach with a fifty-story condo on it."

¹² Well, it looks like that, too. Florida's a huge place. We'll be

living in an area that's more like this one. There are still a lot of farms around."

"What do they grow? I bet they grow tangerines."
"No. Not too many. Not anymore. This is too far north for citrus trees. Every few years they get a deep freeze that wipes them all out. Most of the citrus growers here have sold off their land to developers."

"Yeah? And what do the developers do with it?"
"Well... they develop it. They plan communities with nice houses, and schools, and industrial parks. They create jobs—construction jobs, teaching jobs, civil engineering jobs—like your father's."

But once we got farther south and crossed into Tangerine County, we *did* start to see groves of citrus trees, and they were an amazing sight. They were perfect. Thousands upon thousands of trees in the red glow of sundown, perfectly shaped and perfectly aligned, vertically and horizontally, like squares in a million-square grid.

Mom pointed. "Look. Here comes the first industrial park." I looked up ahead and saw the highway curve off, left and right, into spiral exit ramps, like rams' horns. Low white buildings with black windows stretched out in both directions. They were all identical.

Mom said, "There's our exit. Right up there."
I looked ahead another quarter mile and saw another pair of spiral ramps, but I couldn't see much else. A fine brown dust was now blowing across the highway, drifting like snow against the shoulders and swirling up into the air.
We turned off Route 27, spiraled around the rams' horns, and headed east. Suddenly the fine brown dirt became mixed with thick black smoke.

Mom said, "Good heavens! Look at that."

I looked to where she was pointing, up to the left, out in a field, and my heart sank. The black smoke was pouring from a huge bonfire of trees. Citrus trees.

I said, "Why are they doing that? Why are they just burning them up?"

"To clear the land."

"Well, why don't they build houses out of them? Or homeless shelters? Or something?"

Mom shook her head. "I don't think they can build with them. I don't think those trees have any use other than for fruit." She smiled. "You never hear people bragging that their dining-room set is solid grapefruit, do you?"

I didn't smile back.

Mom pointed to the right and said, "There's another one." Sure enough. Same size; same flames licking up the sides; same smoke billowing out. It was like a Texas football bonfire, but nobody was dancing around it, and nobody was celebrating anything.

Then, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, we crossed over from this wasteland into a place carpeted with green grass, with trees along both sides of the road and flower beds running down the middle of a median strip. We could see the roofs of big, expensive houses peeking up over the landscaping.

Mom said, "This is where the developments begin. This one is called the Manors of Coventry. Aren't they beautiful? *Coventry* is a little farther in."

We went past the Villas at Versailles, which, if anything, looked even more expensive. Then we saw a high gray wall and a series of wrought-iron letters that spelled out LAKE WINDSOR *WINDSOR*. We passed iron gates and a pond of some kind. Then we made a couple of turns and pulled into a wide driveway.
Mom announced, "This is it. This is our house."

It was big—two stories high—and very white, with aqua trim, like a Miami Dolphins football helmet. A new wooden fence ran around both sides to the back, where it met up with that high gray wall. The wall, apparently, surrounded the entire development.

The garage door opened up with a smooth mechanical hum. Dad was standing in there with his arms open. He called out, "Perfect timing, you two. The pizzas got here five minutes ago."

Mom and I climbed out of the car, stiff and hungry. Dad came outside, clicking the garage door closed. He put an arm around each of us and guided us toward the front, saying, "Let's do this the right way. Huh? Let's go in the visitors' door."

Dad led us through the front door into a tiled foyer two stories high. We turned to the left and passed through an enormous great room with furniture and boxes piled all around it. We ended up in an area off the kitchen that had a small, round table and four chairs. Erik was sitting in one of the chairs. He waved casually to Mom. He ignored me.

Mom waved back at him, but she was looking at the boxes stacked in the kitchen. She said to Dad, "These boxes are marked DINING ROOM."

Dad said, "Uh-huh."

"Uh-huh. Well, I marked DINING ROOM on them so the movers would put them in the dining room."

"OK. Erik'll put them over there." He looked at me and added, "Erik and Paul."

Mom asked, "Did the movers break anything?"
"No. They didn't break a thing. They were real pros. Nice guys, too."

Mom and I each grabbed a chair. Erik opened a pizza box,

pulled out a slice, and started stuffing it into his mouth.
Mom said, "How about waiting for the rest of us, Erik?"

He gave her a tomatoey grin. Dad passed out paper plates, napkins, and cans of soda. Once Dad sat down, the rest of us started to eat.

Everybody's mouth was full for a minute; then Mom said to Dad, "So? What have you been doing?"

Dad wiped his mouth. "Work. Trying to get organized up there. Trying to get in to see Old Charley Burns." He looked at me. "He's a real character. You'll have to meet him. Spends half his life at the stock-car races. He's crazy about stock-car racing."

Mom said, "You mean he's really not there? You can't get in to see him because he's not there?"

"Right. He's really not there. He's up at Darlington, or at Talladega, or at Daytona."

Mom was concerned. "And that's OK?"

"I don't know that it's OK, but that's the way it is. He's the boss. He makes his own hours. He told me I can make my own hours, too." He looked over at Erik. "That'll be good for us. I'll be able to go to football practice every day."

I thought to myself, *OK, here we are. How long did it take Dad to get to his favorite topic, the Erik Fisher Football Dream? I'd heard it all before. Too many times. And I was about to hear it again.* I tried to head him off by asking him something, anything, but he was too fast for me. "It's a great opportunity for you boys, too. Erik will get the exposure he needs in the press. The *Tangerine Times* is crazy about high school football. And we're just down the road from the University of Florida—you know, the Gators? In fact, Old Charley is a big Gators fan. And Florida State and the University of Miami aren't far away. These big-time Florida schools like to draft Florida boys for their teams."

That was that. Dad was now off into the Erik Fisher Football Dream. As soon as I got an opening I said, "May I be excused? I'd like to go find my bedroom."

Dad said, "Sure thing. You're at the top of the stairs, to the right. Erik's down at the other end. And you have two guest rooms in between. You guys should never hear each other."

I retraced my steps through the great room, went up the stairs, and turned right. I had to squeeze into my bedroom past a stack of boxes. I switched on the light and saw one that had PAUL'S SHEETS written on it, so I opened it and made up my bed. Then I found my computer carton and set it up on the desk. When I got around to putting my clothes away in the dresser, I came across a box that said ERIC'S TROPHIES. I felt a surge of anger, Mom's anger, at the moving guys for doing that.

I picked it up and carried it out to the top of the stairs. Erik was standing down in the foyer. He had the front door cracked open. He was talking to a group of kids—at least two girls and one guy—telling them that he would see them later.

I put the box down quietly and hurried back into my room. I turned on the computer, got into my private journal, and wrote until about eleven o'clock. Then I lay down on the bed and fell asleep—but I woke up almost immediately. Someone was running down the hall. It was Erik. I heard him run down the stairs, go out the front door, and pull away in a loud car. I couldn't get back to sleep. My mind started racing like an engine. I started thinking about our old house. Then I started thinking about a zombie, a pissed-off zombie. Dragging one foot behind him. Keeping to the right. Taking his time. Slowly, surely, stalking his way down Interstate 10.

Saturday, August 19

I woke up in the dark to the sound of an explosion. I groped around for my regular glasses—unable to find them in this new bedroom, upstairs in this new house. Then my glasses

suddenly appeared on the nightstand, illuminated by a flash of lightning.

I'd no sooner pulled them on when another explosion made the windows rattle and the walls shake. The lightning once again filled the room, painful and surprising, like the flash of a camera in my face. I waited for more explosions to follow, but none did, and I fell back asleep.

I woke up again at seven, still wearing my glasses. I walked down the stairs, unbolted the front door, and stepped out into the morning air. It wasn't what I expected. The air had a gray tint to it, and a damp, foul smell like an ashtray.

Smoke, I thought. Something around here is on fire.

I walked back inside and turned left, toward the sound of a television. Mom was sitting on a stool at the high counter that separates the kitchen from the rest of the great room.

"Mom, I think something's on fire around here."

"What? Where?"

"Step out front and take a look. And smell the air."

Mom slid off the stool and hurried out the front door. She made it exactly as far as I had when the smoke stopped her in her tracks.

"Where's it coming from?" she cried, shuffling backward in her bedroom slippers. She stared at the top of the house, looking for flames.

"I don't know. I'll check around back." I pulled my T-shirt up to cover my mouth and nose and ran off into the blowing gray smoke. I circled completely around our new house, but I couldn't see the source of the fire.

Mom was on her way back inside. "I'm calling the Fire Department."

"What about Dad and Erik? Should I wake them up?"

"They're up already. They're up and out. They went to Gainesville to look at the football stadium."

"Gainesville?"

"That's where the University of Florida is, honey."

"Oh. I guess we don't need to save them, then," I said as I started to feel the walls for heat. "You know, it could be the electric wiring inside the walls. It could smolder for a while in there and then burst into flame."

"It could?" Mom replied in horror. She snatched up the portable phone and dialed 911, talking as she followed my hands progress along the wall of the great room.

"The builder of this development certainly should have known how to wire a—Hello! Yes, I want the Fire Department." Mom felt the wall with her free hand. "Yes! There's a fire at . . . Oh, Paul! What's our address? Lake Windsor Downs!

What is it? Run outside and find the house number!"

I sprinted out, read the black numbers over the garage, sprinted back in, and shouted, "1225!"

But Mom had already dug out a contract and was reading into the phone, "1225 Kensington Gardens Drive, Lake Windsor Downs. What? Where is it? It's in Tangerine! It's just outside of Tangerine!" Mom listened for another ten seconds, turning red. Then, at the end of her patience, she yelled into the phone, "What more do you need to know? It's the place with the smoke pouring out of it. Get somebody out here!" She listened again, said, "Yes, please hurry," and hung up.

We resumed our search of the house and waited for the approaching wall of the fire engines. Twenty minutes later Mom picked up the phone to call the Fire Department again as I peered out the front window.

"Wait, Mom!" I shouted. "I see them. They're on the other side of the development."

Mom and I ran outside and watched an old red fire engine cruising slowly up and down the streets.

The fire engine turned in our direction. We waved and hollered and managed to attract the driver's attention. When the engine rolled up in front of our house and the driver got out, we saw that he was alone. He didn't look to be much older than Erik. He had on knee-high black-and-yellow boots, a pair of cutoff shorts, and a white shirt that had TANGERINE VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT—WAYNE written over the breast pocket. He waved to us and smiled brightly. "Y'all the ones who called about the fire?"

Mom turned and pointed at our house. "Yes! Yes, right here."

The young man didn't move. "Where's the fire at, ma'am?" Mom directed her voice at him like a laser beam. "You get in there and answer that question for yourself, young man. I called you twenty minutes ago. Is our house about to burst into flames while we're standing out here?"

"Any of your walls or doors feel hot, ma'am?"

"No."

"Then I'd say you don't need to worry. You don't got a fire. Just a bunch of smoke."

"Smoke? Smoke from where?"

Without a moment's hesitation, the young man's left arm shot up and pointed to the open field just beyond the wall at the end of our street. "Right out there. It's the muck fire."

"It's the what?"

"Muck fire, ma'am. That field probably got hit by lightning last night. Stirred up the muck fire."

"Last night? So . . . how long is this fire going to burn?"

The young man laughed out loud and threw up his hands. "It's been burning for as long as I can remember."

Mom's mouth dropped. She stared at him in disbelief as he continued cheerfully, "Muck fires don't go out. They're burning all the time. Burning right there under the ground, all the time. Sometimes the rain'll damp them down, but they're still smoldering. Y'all ever hear of lignite?"

Mom and I shook our heads dumbly. Wayne continued, "Well, that field's full of lignite. Lignite is, like, one step before coal. There's hundreds of miles of it under here."

Mom turned to me with a look of pure puzzlement. "Well, I'm sure your father was never told about any of this. I'm sure the Homeowners' Association will want to know about this."

"Oh, they know about it, ma'am. Lots of people call us when they first move in here. We wind up having to explain it to them."

I watched Mom struggling to understand this. "You explain it to them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And then what do they do?"
The young man laughed again. "They learn to live with it, I guess. When the wind's up like this, they gotta stay inside, keep the windows closed."

"You're saying that there's no way of stopping this fire?"
He shook his head. "Late summer like this, if you want to stop the muck fire you got to stop the lightning from striking."

They ain't figured out how to do that yet."
Watching this, I suddenly had to admire this Wayne fellow. He was relentlessly cheerful, even in the face of Mom's rising anger. I knew she wanted to grab him by the ear and march him down to that field to put out that muck fire once and for all. But she couldn't. She couldn't do anything except turn to me once again and vow to bring this "muck fire situation" to the attention of the Homeowners' Association.

"Y'all have a nice day?" Wayne called. Mom and I turned together to look at him. With a happy wave he climbed back into the fire engine and pulled noisily away.

Saturday, August 19, later

Dad and Erik were gone all day. Our house never did burst into flames, but the thermometer on the patio, hanging there in the direct sun, did climb to over a hundred degrees.

A vicious thunderstorm hit in the late afternoon and knocked out our power for about ten seconds. That was just long enough to make Mom and me have to go around the entire house resetting all of the alarm clocks, VCRs, computers, and stereos.

After supper I opened the garage door and walked my bike out toward the street. The air was hot and damp, but there was no smell of smoke. The wind was blowing west now, toward the Gulf of Mexico.

You can actually see the wind here. It whips around full of white construction sand, the sand that covers the streets and the unsold lots. The same white-sugar sand that whipped through our development in Houston and the one before that, in Huntsville.

I turned left and pedaled against the sand toward the front of the development. Our street is about half filled with houses now. The development has grown from the west side to the east side, and we're on the last street before the east wall. Every empty lot on our street has a Sold sign on it, though, so Lake Windsor Downs will soon be complete.

I stopped at the model homes area—four houses surrounded by the same white picket fence—and pulled off my glasses to clean them. Lake Windsor Downs offers four choices

to home buyers, each named after a British royal family: the Lancaster, the York, the Stuart, and the Tudor. Mom absolutely loves that. I'm sure that's why we live here instead of in the Estates at East Hampton, or the Manors of Coventry, or the Villas at Versailles. Mom will soon be describing people like this: "They're the two-story Lancaster with the teal trim," or "They're the white Tudor with the red tile roof."

I replaced my glasses and started off again, riding parallel to that high gray wall. I stopped for a few minutes to watch two guys unloading thick squares of muddy sod from a flatbed truck. They plopped the squares down over the white-sugar sand, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When they pulled away a new white Stuart had a new green lawn around it.

I pedaled up to the iron gates. They open onto a two-lane entranceway with a cement island in the middle. There's a fancy little guardhouse on the island, like something the kings and queens in history would have built to keep out the serfs, or the Vandals, or whoever. It isn't keeping anybody out now. It's empty inside, but I could see a dirty ashtray and a wastebasket full of soda cans.

Just inside the entranceway is a big pond: Lake Windsor, I suppose. I started around it on my bike. It's a perfectly round blue lake with a border of grass between the water and the road. I thought I heard a splash in the water, but I couldn't see anything moving. I rode completely around the lake in one minute and then headed toward home.

As soon as I turned onto our street, I saw a black Jeep Cherokee parked in our driveway. A heavyset man in shorts was talking to Mom. She was pointing at the top of our house and smiling. When I pulled up next to them, she was saying, "So naturally I thought I'd see flames shooting out of the roof!"

The heavyset man turned toward me, nodding his head in sympathy. "Yeah. When that muck fire kicks up, it can be a real sinkaroo. Hello, young man."

"Hello, sir."

"Paul" Mom said, "this is Mr. Costello. He's the president of the Homeowners' Association. This is my son Paul."

I said, "Pleased to meet you."

Mom added, "He lives in the brown-and-beige Tudor on the west side."

I shook Mr. Costello's outstretched hand and said, "I was just up at the lake. Just now."

"Is that right?" He smiled. "Did you see any of the koi?"

"The what?"

"The fish! Koi. Japanese carp. They look like giant goldfish."

"No. No, I thought I heard something, but I didn't see any fish."

"You get up there early in the morning and check out those koi. They're really something to see. We had them flown in from Atlanta. Stocked the lake full of them."

Mom asked, "The lake? Is that Lake Windsor?"

Mr. Costello laughed. "I guess it is now. It's not an official lake. It's man-made. Any new development like this has to have a retention pond for storm runoff. We decided to make the lake a centerpiece, a showpiece, for our community. We stocked it with the koi and added plenty of green space around it for strolling or even picnicking." He reached over and squeezed my elbow. "No fishing, though, OK? Those koi are high-priced fish."

Just then Dad and Erik turned the corner and pulled into the driveway. As usual when Erik appears, the attention switched from me to him. Dad and Mom started to tell Mr. Costello

about what a great football player Erik is, but Mr. Costello was ready for them. He has a football-playing son of his own, and he hopped into his Jeep Cherokee to go get him.

They all wound up in the great room, near the fireplace. I sat on a stool near the kitchen. Mr. Costello's son is named Mike. Mike and his father talked about the football program at Lake Windsor High with a great deal of pride. Mr. Costello pointed out, "We've only had the program for ten years, and we've already surpassed the program at Tangerine High. No big-school football players are coming out of Tangerine High anymore. The Lake Windsor Seagulls are now the dominant team in three counties. They're rewriting all the county record books."

Dad said, "What position do you play, Mike?" Mike Costello spoke very well, like one of those football guys who make United Way commercials. "Coach Warner and Dad and I made a decision last year. Coach had enough line men, but he had no backup at quarterback. He's been working with me, and now I'm number-two quarterback on the depth chart."

Mike's father turned to Mom and explained, "That means he's the backup to Antoine Thomas."

But no one in my family needs to be told what "number two on the depth chart" means. If Mom had chosen to, she could have explained to Mr. Costello what it *really* means. As backup quarterback, his son Mike would be handling the snaps and holding the ball for the placekicker—in this case, Erik Fisher, a placekicker who can hit with deadly accuracy from fifty yards. If Mom had chosen to, she could have explained to him that Mike Costello's backside would be featured in the local paper often as he held the ball for this new placekicking sensation. But she didn't.

Mike was very friendly. He told Erik that he "had heard about him already from the coach" and that he "was looking forward to working with him."

Erik smiled and said, "So Coach Warner told you that you'll be my holder?"

Mike answered, "Coach wants me in there as the holder so we can have the option—either we can kick the ball, or we can fake the kick and have me roll out and run or pass."

Erik was still smiling, but he said, "Coach Warner knows what I can do. He can send anybody out there to pretend to kick a field goal. When I go out there, it'll be for real."

Mike shrugged and said, "That'll be the coach's call. Won't it?" Erik locked eyes with him for a second, then backed off.

"Yes, of course it will."

I thought to myself, *Way to go, Mike*. But I had to admit Erik was right. I've heard Coach Warner talk to Dad enough to know he's counting on Erik to be an impact player, a star. I guess part of that stardom will come at Mike's expense. I can see Mike Costello's future. I can see the *Tangerine Times* photos of the sensational senior placekicker Erik Fisher and his anonymous holder. (Dad has the clippings from Houston of the sensational junior placekicker Erik Fisher and his anonymous holder, a kid whose name totally escapes me now.) There will be no football glory in Mike Costello's future. But does Mike, or his father, really care? They certainly don't care the way Dad and Erik do.

Dad told them that he graduated from Ohio State. But he added that he always regretted not being big enough to play football there. Mike's dad told us that he graduated from FSU, and from FSU's School of Law. He didn't add that he regretted anything.