

# NWR

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Porter Fox

## DANS LA MANIÈRE DE

for Fielding

I knew the man. Not him exactly, someone just like him. He slid his glass across the bar, nodded to Sam. Sam poured another drink and slid it back. The man used to be leaner. He was a carpenter. He had three boys. The oldest was a loner. The youngest also good with his hands. The middle son thought of nothing but himself. They drove a station wagon across Nebraska and on to Los Angeles in the fall of 1974. He found work building sets. The boys did fairly well in school, played baseball under the palms after dinner. On Saturdays their mother drove them to the public pool while he stayed at home and listened to the evangelicals on the radio.

On Sundays they went to church. He sang loudly, the boys hummed. His wife watched her sons, the candles, the saints in the windows, the other mothers. He shook the minister's hand firmly afterwards. They spoke about baseball and repairs the church needed. The mother chatted with the wives, fingering the buttons on her blouse. She fixed a cold stare on the oldest boy. He was most like her, quiet but restless, and she worried about that. She knew he loved the boy next door. She'd seen him watching the neighbor at the pool, in the park. She caught him peering across the yard as the neighbor boy built balsa wood airplanes at his desk by the window. The youngest son sat on the white church steps and folded the service program into a hat. The middle one roamed the yard, playing war games with the trees. The father paced slowly around the side of the church, inspecting the gutters with the minister. He fixed things but was lazy too. He paid me fifty dollars one summer to paint their garage. The siding was rotting and there were briars growing out of the cracks in the foundation. It took two days just to scrape.

When I was halfway through, the mother brought a glass of iced tea and a bowl of pretzels. She told me what a fine job I was doing and how I should visit more often, being right next door, show her boy how to make those balsa airplanes, spend some time with him. I said maybe and she went quickly back to the house. The next day she came again. Seriously, she said, just come by and talk to him, he likes you so much, any old day, like today, what a fine day. How fine you look painting. This color, like butter, even softer. On your arm, there. And she spun quickly like a dancer as if she was turning to go but kept turning, then faced me, took my hand and put it on her breast, inhaling quickly then turning again and running to the house. I kept painting, moving the yellow from left to right, imagining her breast, her husband, her boys, then she was there again. So many little things, she said. So many distractions. This city, the car, Sunday. My boy says you're with a girl? You like her? Where do you go? The park? What's there? What do you do with her there? With her hair? You touch her? Push down on her? You like her touch? Like this? Be gentle. Gentle here. Careful, watch the briars, down here, yes, pull it off, right off, yes, and lift up, come boy, lift up.

He finished his drink and Sam poured another. I lit a cigarette, offered him one. We smoked and watched the game together. It was the bottom of the eighth, no hope for the Mets. A couple in their evening clothes waltzed through the door and ordered martinis. He watched them, stubbed out his cigarette and shook his head. I started to say something, then stopped. The couple hushed. He glared at them, slid a five to Sam and pushed back from the bar.

There's a war on, you know, he said. The couple looked into their drinks. The woman giggled. Her friend threw back his glass and elbowed her lightly. The man thanked me for the cigarette and put on his jacket. Then he walked out of the bar and into the orange light, leaving the door open behind him.