

One September Day

by Kevin Esser

Kevin Esser has always delighted in delineating the personalities of different kinds of boys, in part through their erotic expressions. In this story the lives of two adolescents and an “autistic” younger brother meet and intertwine on one memorable autumn day...

ZACHARY WON'T GO outside to play.

The doctors say he's autistic. They don't know what goes on inside his head; they don't know what lies hidden behind those strange grey-green eyes that seem to stare inward, always inward.

His mother is brushing his long blond hair. The thick curls glow like autumn wheat. “It's a beautiful day,” she tells him, “you should get some fresh air.”

Zachary gazes at himself in the mirror. He hears his mother's voice, but the words are only sounds, vague and without meaning. Yesterday was his birthday, and he's still thinking about the little blue candles on his cake. Ten of them. Ten candles with

ten tiny flames. They don't know he can count, but he can. He can do lots of things they don't know about.

"Maybe you can help David deliver his papers today," his mother continues. "Would you like that?"

Zachary touches his nose, as if seeing it for the first time. Then his lips, his chin. His mother smiles as she puts down the brush. "It's a pretty face, isn't it." She kisses Zachary's cheek. "My handsome little boy."

In the kitchen, David is eating his breakfast of Cheerios and raisin toast. Tomorrow will be his first day in high school. He's fourteen now, and getting too old to waste his time taking care of his stupid little brother. He has better things to do—like playing guitar, studying karate, lifting weights with Fernando.

Zachary sits at the table and takes a slice of his brother's toast. David punches his arm, grabs it back. "Get your own toast, you little brat!"

"David," his mother scolds gently, "don't be mean."

"Well, god, he's always messing around with my stuff!" Still scowling, David leaves his breakfast unfinished and goes upstairs to his room. He passes the long mirror on his closet door, then turns back to admire his reflection. He looks great, no question about it. Coppery blond hair brushed back short with no part. Sleeveless yellow T-shirt emblazoned with red Japanese calligraphy. Purple gym shorts tighter than skin on a plum.

White knee socks and red high-top sneakers. His arms and legs are smooth, suntanned, well-muscled from long hours of weightlifting. Last week he had his left ear pierced with a tiny gold crescent. He touches it with his finger, turns his head, smiles.

DAVID IS GONE.

Zachary wanders down the steps into the basement. Past the furnace, past the washing machine, into the back room where David and Fernando lift weights and practice karate. It smells of dust and mildew and sweat. Barbells rest on the concrete floor. A huge punching bag hangs from a wooden beam in the center of the room. It's dark here, just one small window near the ceiling letting in a pale seep of light.

Zachary is wearing yellow sweatpants and one of David's old khaki Boy Scout shirts, unbuttoned and hanging loose. His feet are bare and he can feel dirty grit beneath his toes.

There's a mattress against the wall, splotted with rusty brown stains and torn at the seams. Zachary flops down on his tummy and picks up a pair of black gym shorts lying crumpled on the floor. A jockstrap falls free onto the mattress. It's one of David's, unwashed and smelly.

Zachary holds it up against his nose and breathes in his brother's nutty sweet odor. A feeling like hunger fills his stomach, tingles between his legs. He drops the jockstrap and

slides his hand between the mattress and the wall, into the crack where he knows David hides his special magazine. He fishes with his fingers, finds it, pulls it out. The cover says *Good-Time Kids* and shows two boys kissing on a bed. They're not wearing any clothes. Zachary flips through the pages until he finds more pictures of the two boys. They both have long hair and dark skin just like David's friend, Fernando, who lives down the road. Zachary turns another page. One of the boys is kneeling on the bed, smiling, and his wiener is in the other boy's mouth.

Zachary stares at the picture. He likes looking at the boys, and he likes their funny games. He wishes that he could be in the picture with them.

DAVID TOSSES A PEBBLE into the creek. Fernando (also fourteen) is stretched out beside him on the slanted concrete slab. It's shady and cool here beneath the bridge, a good place to laze away long summer afternoons. The air is rank with mud and moss and fishy creek smells. Fernando is wearing camouflage pants and white gym shoes, no socks. His ankles are dirty. He's using his wadded-up "Twisted Sister" T-shirt as a pillow. His long brown hair is uncombed, messy and sweaty around his dark face. He glances at his friend. "We should get more cigarettes, man."

David tosses another pebble. It splashes with a hollow plunk into the water. "We have one left," he says, then pulls a

Marlboro from the red-and-white pack and lights it up. He and Fernando pass it back and forth. The filter becomes wet from their lips. David takes a drag, passes the cigarette back. He's resting a few inches above Fernando on the concrete slab and can watch his friend without being seen. He stares at Nando's belly, hard and flat from sit-ups, glistening with sweat; stares at the hefty lump inside Fernando's camouflage pants. He wants to touch that lump, wants to make it harder, bigger; wants to pull down Fernando's zipper and see what his dick looks like, see how it feels, how it tastes. No kiddin' around. David knows that he's gay, and it doesn't bother him. Not anymore. It scared him when he was eleven or twelve and still too young to understand his feelings. But it's OK now. He likes Nando and wants to touch him.

They've only known each other since June, when the Lopez family moved into the house across the bridge; but now they're best friends, and they meet every day to sneak cigarettes and listen to music and work out in David's basement.

Fernando takes a final drag on the cigarette, flicks it into the creek, then stands up and opens his pants. David watches from behind as Fernando's piss splashes onto the concrete and rolls away in dusty streams. Then David also stands up, stretches down the front of his purple shorts, says, "I gotta take a leak, too." He looks down just as the other boy is shaking himself off. Fernando's dick is long and pale brown and has skin covering its knob like a fleshy nipple. David glances up to discover his friend

also sneaking a downward peek. Both boys laugh softly, embarrassed, uncomfortable. Fernando zips his pants, picks up his T-shirt, then steps into the sunlight. “We need more cigarettes, man.”

David nods. “Let’s get some at the gas station.” He punches the other boy in the ribs. Fernando grins and punches him back. They clamber together up the grassy hill.

ZACHARY CAN HEAR David and Fernando in the basement. A barbell clanks as it hits the floor. Zachary’s mother ruffles his hair as she passes him in the kitchen. “Go downstairs,” she smiles, “see what the boys are up to.”

The basement is cool, musty. Zachary crosses to the back room and kneels in front of the closed wooden door. Music is roaring from inside. He presses his eye to the big keyhole, moves his head from side to side until he finds the boys. Fernando, wearing only a pair of lime-green bikini underpants, is doing sit-ups on a dirty pink rug. David, in nothing but his purple shorts, is holding Fernando’s ankles and counting. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine. On and on. Fernando grunts each time he forces himself upright. Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Fernando stops, blows out an exhausted breath. He stays on his back, arms behind his head, eyes shut. His armpit hair is matted with sweat.

David sits on his haunches watching the other boy, then pounces on him with a sudden playful growl. They roll together

on the pink rug, punching each other gently, twisting and straining in each other's arms. David is the heavier and stronger of the pair, but somehow ends up on the bottom with Fernando straddling his chest. He laughs, struggles, tries to free his arms from beneath Fernando's knees. Fernando is also laughing. He slaps gently at David's face with both hands, playing a devilish game of patty-cake, slap slap slap, making David laugh harder, louder as if being tickled.

At the keyhole, Zachary shifts his weight. Fernando is facing the door, giggling down at David. His face is hidden by his shaggy brown hair. Then something makes him jump. "Stop pokin' my ass," he laughs. "What a queer-bait!" He dribbles a gob of saliva onto David's chin.

"You jerk-off!" David squirms more violently, laughing so hard that he nearly chokes. "You're gonna pay for that, man!"

Footsteps thump on the basement stairs. Zachary jumps up and rushes behind the furnace. His mother walks past, knocks at the door, yells to David. It's time for him to deliver his newspapers. The music suddenly goes silent. The door opens and David steps out, holding his shirt and shoes and socks. His face is red and sweaty; his hair needs brushing. He follows his mother to the stairs, says, "Nando is gonna stay down here and lift weights for a while."

"That's fine," she answers over her shoulder.

Zachary waits till they're gone, then creeps from behind the furnace. He can hear Fernando breathing heavily in the back room. The door is open. He approaches slowly, steps inside. Fernando is standing with his back to the door, doing arm curls with the twenty-pound dumbbells. His bikini briefs are tight and low on his hips. His ass flexes hard each time he lifts the weights. The overhead lightbulb glares from his sweaty shoulder blades, his slim calves.

Zachary steps closer. Fernando glances behind him, sees the boy, turns with a grin. "Hey, little dude, what's up?" He does two more arm curls, then sets the dumbbells onto the floor. "You gonna pump some iron, man?"

Zachary wanders to the mattress and sits down. Fernando watches him, both hands on his hips as he pauses to catch his breath. "Don't you never talk, man?" He bends over and picks up a small white towel. "No, I guess you don't."

Zachary stares at Fernando's lanky brown body. It reminds him of the two boys kissing on the bed. He reaches behind him and pulls the magazine from its hiding place. Fernando wipes his face on the towel, then tosses it to the floor. Reaching for his pants, he notices the magazine on Zachary's lap. He whistles between his teeth, kneels on the mattress. "What the fuck is this?"

Zachary turns to his favorite picture. He can smell the older boy warm and gamey beside him. "Let me see," Fernando says

softly, taking the magazine, turning the pages slowly. “I can’t believe David looks at...” He stops suddenly, surprised by Zachary’s hand groping at his crotch.

He looks down with a startled laugh. “What you doin’, man?”

No answer, of course. Zachary is squeezing at the big thing inside Fernando’s underpants. He wants to see if it looks like the ones in the magazine. Fernando seems almost angry at first, then laughs again and shakes his head. “You’re a weird little kid,” he says. “What’s wrong, ain’t you never seen a guy’s boner before?” He hesitates, feeling nervous and self-conscious, then adds, “Here, look at this.” He sets aside the magazine, rises slightly on his knees, pulls down his underpants. His cock is sticking up hard, curved back like a pale chocolate banana against his belly. “Check it out,” he says, grinning down at himself, “that’s what a boner looks like.” He waits for a moment, not sure what to do next, then shrugs, laughs softly, shrugs again. “You can feel it if you want to. Really. Go ahead.”

Zachary reaches out and touches the big fuzzy balls hanging between Fernando’s legs. He explores higher, pets the frizzy soft pubic hair, sniffs his fingers, smiles. Then, feeling that he has to pee, he gets suddenly to his feet and hurries upstairs.

Fernando stares in silent confusion. He’s too horny and hot to stop now. He decides to jack himself off before going home; but then he remembers the magazine, and he remembers David,

and he changes his mind. He'll wait till later, till after David gets back. He looks once more at the pictures. Some skinny blond kid wearing nothing but brown sandals is sprawled in a sunny field. He's only about twelve or thirteen years old. His legs are wide open. He's holding his prick and grinning at the camera. His stomach is sprinkled with a few drops of cum. Fernando smiles to himself, shakes his head. He's embarrassed by his own feelings, embarrassed by his sudden eagerness for David's return. He never knew before that his best friend liked messing around with other guys. Just thinking about it makes his nuts ache.

More embarrassed than ever, he wonders suddenly what David's hard-on looks like.

THE TELEVISION in the living room is blaring rock videos. Zachary is lying belly-down on the floor, gazing at the screen. Earlier, Fernando went home for dinner, but now he's back with David. They walk through the room on their way to the kitchen. Fernando has changed his clothes. He's wearing a red see-through mesh T-shirt that makes his skin and nipples look pink; tight denim cut-offs faded powdery blue, almost white at the seat; ratty gym shoes untied and floppy around his dirty brown ankles. His long hair is pushed behind his ears and held back by a rising-sun kamikaze bandana.

In the kitchen, he sits at the table while David eats an impromptu dinner of canned spaghetti. They talk about their

first day of school tomorrow, about a new karate movie at the Sandburg Cinema, about the Prince concert coming to Chicago. David's mother chides him about his atrocious diet, then goes upstairs to wash her hair. David shovels more spaghetti into his mouth, leaving his chin smeared with orange greasy sauce. Fernando takes a sip of Cherry Coke, burps, looks at David. "You wanna practice some karate moves after you're done?"

"Sure," David shrugs, "that sounds decent."

"Downstairs?"

Still chewing, David glances at his friend. "Yeah, we can do it downstairs."

"These shorts are too tight, though." Fernando fingers the frayed hem of his cut-offs. "They're too tight for kickin' good."

David scoops up the last forkful of spaghetti. "Just wear your underpants." He looks up into Fernando's big black-olive eyes. "Like you always do."

Fernando forces a laugh. "I forgot to wear any. And I can't do karate naked, man."

David swallows, wipes his chin with a paper napkin. "No, I guess not." He lowers his voice. "But . . . we can close the door, so maybe it would be OK."

"I was just kiddin'."

“But it would be OK, really.” He takes a gulp of Coke to lubricate his dry throat, then shifts his eyes nervously and tries to smile. “Shit, man, it’s hard to kick with these on, too,” and he touches his own purple gym shorts.

“Yeah, they’re kinda tight, that’s for sure.” Fernando also lowers his voice. “I hate tight shorts, man, because they crush your nuts.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“It’s better just to wear nothin’ . . . when you’re workin’ out, I mean.”

“We can close the door,” David says again, “so it would be OK.”

“You gonna take off your stuff, too?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“What about your mom?”

“She won’t come down, don’t worry.”

Fernando shakes his head with a soft chuckle. “Maybe we shouldn’t. It’s kinda stupid.”

“You’re just afraid to show your little tiny pecker.”

Fernando laughs, says, “Shit, man, you’re the one with the little pecker, not me!”

“Poor Nando, has to hide his little baby tweeter.”

“Hey, dude, suck my dick!”

“I bet you’d like that,” David says.

Fernando laughs again. “And I bet you can’t even get a boner, you little faggot.”

“I bet I can, asshole.” David throws his napkin at Nando’s head. “And it would be bigger than yours, that’s for sure.”

“No way.”

“You wanna bet?”

“Yeah, come on.”

The boys stand up and head for the basement, both carrying their cans of soda. Evening sunlight burnishes David’s copper-blond hair as he passes the window. He follows Fernando down the wooden steps, staring at the knotted tail of his bandana, at the brown hair hanging straight and soft against his neck. At the bottom of the stairs, Nando turns, grins, pokes David in the stomach.

“Come on, little midget dick, don’t chicken out now!” Then he rushes toward the back room, already unzipping his shorts.

ZACHARY SPINS THE DIAL on the television, flipping past cartoons, quiz shows, newscasts, old movies. Nothing good. He turns away, shuffles into the kitchen where his mother is

washing dirty dishes. Footsteps come thudding up the basement stairs. David and Fernando appear through the door, talking and laughing and giving each other an occasional playful swat. Fernando is carrying his shirt and shoes, padding barefoot across the linoleum. David is carefully combing his hair. They detour to the refrigerator for cans of soda, then disappear into the living room.

Zachary roams downstairs, back into the familiar cool darkness. Past the furnace. Past the washing machine. Into the back room. He switches on the overhead lightbulb and looks around. The room smells funny, like hot, dirty boys. Two empty cans of Cherry Coke are on the floor. Zachary nudges them with his foot as he crosses to the mattress. He sits with his back against the wall and reaches down for the magazine. His fingers touch something strange. He pulls out a wad of soggy paper napkins. That's where the funny boy-smell is coming from, sharp and fresh.

Zachary unwads the crumpled paper. The center is filled with something wet and slippery. Lots of it. He dabs at it slowly, touches it with his tongue, wrinkles his nose at the unusual taste— strong and tart, like stale walnuts. He doesn't know what this smelly stuff is called, but the odor is familiar, like the stinky sweat between a boy's legs. Zachary knows that it must have come out of David's wiener. Or out of Fernando's. Like sticky pee. Next time, he wants to see it come out.

Next time he wants to play.