

Friday, 1982 — 2:30pm

The day Joy Pickleman turned eleven, a flop-haired boy in frayed jeans hooked a finger at her from across the blacktop. “C’mere,” he said, “I want to wish you a happy birthday.”

Joy turned to consider. His black tee shirt, which he claimed he tore jumping a fence on the way to school, was thick with dust from the scrum of 5th grade boys knocking each other about on the kickball field. A smudge of dirt and grass ran the length of his jawline, and she knew from sitting behind him in class that he smelled faintly of sweat and peanut butter.

Every kid in school knew he lived in a tiny house with four brothers and only one bathroom and that his mother sat on the toilet five hours every day smoking cigarettes.

He was contrary in every way to the life she knew. Even so, Joy straightened her yellow headband, checked that she hadn’t lost an earring on the monkey bars, and made her way toward him through a throng of classmates paying no mind.

“Closer. I want to whisper it to you,” said the boy.

Joy edged her thick hair from her ear. She felt the boy’s warm breath on her neck. She closed her eyes. And then she felt it. No longer his breath, but the wet pull of his lips on hers.

Joy jerked back—and punched him. “You idiot!”

She tried not to look back at his grin as she returned to her place of anonymity among the girls who gathered every afternoon to trade lip-gloss, perfect their cherry drops, and stare at boys. Only now, she sensed something fundamental had changed.

None of those girls had ever been kissed.