

5TH PLACE  
FIFTY-FIFTY FICTION AWARDS\*

DIDI WOOD

---

## REMEDIES

**S**IMON'S DAYS ARE ALL THE SAME. He tells them apart by watching the middle-school kids at the bus stop across the street – different clothes, different day. There are as many as six kids out there each morning. Next year some of them will go to the high school and wait at a different bus stop, or they'll catch a ride with friends. Either way, he won't see them anymore.

He went to grade school with some of them: Jimmy Walsh, with his greasy black hair and even greasier denim jacket; Bobby Simonelli, who has what looks like a small, soft ball that he kicks repeatedly into the air; and Rachel Vickers, whose braid swings like a pendulum across her back. He knew them, but that was before his father left and his mother decided he was too ill to stay in school.

He wonders what they thought when he disappeared – that he had moved? Was kidnapped? Died? He remembers the thrill of speculating about such things himself. *You see that house? Well, this kid who lived there, he went crazy and they had to ...* More likely they just forgot about him. They never glance at the house, never notice him at the window, watching them.

"Come away from there," his mother says, "it's so drafty." He moves back to the sofa, and she closes the curtains and tucks the blankets around him again. On the tray she has two bottles, murky brown glass with stained, handwritten labels. Remedies, she calls them. She concocts

them herself, in a big pot in the kitchen, boiling and steeping until the windows weep with condensation. Most are bitter and he tries to swallow quickly, without tasting. Some make him sleepy, some make his heart pound faster, and after some he's on his knees in the bathroom, retching into the toilet, while she strokes his hair and mutters, "Poor lamb," shaking her head over the folly of doctors, who never know what they're talking about.

That's his day: kids out the window playing games he'll never learn, remedies, and rest-rest-rest on the sofa, sweating under too many blankets.

The nights are different now.

He waits for her to go to bed, listens for the creak of the mattress as she settles in. Then he waits another ten minutes. Sometimes he falls asleep, but usually he doesn't; usually he has rested so much during the day that sleep is impossible. He lies in the dark until he's sure that she's asleep. Then he springs out of bed.

First he opens the window and gulps the cool night air, filling his starving lungs. Then he begins the circuit around his small room, first at a trot, then faster as he warms up. Over the chair, onto the bed, under the curtains, over the bedside table – around and around, until he's sprinting and the sweat streams like tears from his body. He has learned to do it silently; if she knew what he was about, she'd give him a spoonful of something to make him sleep. He moves like a cat, and she never wakes. He does sit-ups with his ankles under the bed, he does push-ups, he lifts the bed by its frame, over and over.

In the morning, he's exhausted and his pajamas are damp with sweat. His mother clucks over what a rough night he must have had. She comes at him with the spoon. The days are starting to change now, too. He can hold most of the remedies in his mouth for as long as an hour, his eyes watering, trying not to gag before he can spit it out somewhere.

He feels stronger. She looks worried; she searches her books for new potions. He holds her bitter love in his mouth, and in his mind he holds the words of the doctor who said there was nothing wrong with him, and he wills the long, long days to end.