

That morning Dad woke me up, and right away I knew something was wrong. He stood in his blue bathrobe and watched me dress. It was the first morning in my life Mother hadn't come in and bitten my ear, which was always her way of waking me up. Not a hard bite, real easy, enough to wake me up.

I said, "Where's Mother, Dad?" "Asleep," he said.

I got dressed and went downstairs. The kitchen was smoky and smelled like burned toast. Dad was cooking my breakfast. Clara was our real cook. She wasn't around.

I asked him, "Where's Clara, Dad?" "With Mother," he said.

Something was wrong in our house. I could feel it.

I couldn't eat much. Dad wasn't such a good one as a cook. The toast was too dry, and my eggs were gooey. I liked them harder. While I ate, Dad drank coffee and smoked his pipe. He hadn't shaved yet and had pajamas under his robe. Usually he'd be dressed and eat with me. Then he'd drive me seven miles to town and let me off at school. After school I'd wait in his office till four-thirty, and we'd drive home together.

He said: "You take the bus today, son. I'm staying home."

"Dad," I said, "is Mother going to have a baby today?"

He choked on some coffee and put down his cup. "Son," he said, "what is your knowledge of babies?"

"I knew all the time," I said. "Clara told me, and I saw Mother sewing all those funny little things. I knew."

"What'd Clara say?"

"Something about storks."

He grinned and drank more coffee. I didn't believe in storks. Jim Henderson was my best friend and the toughest guy in school, and he didn't believe in storks, either. Jim Henderson knew plenty. He said storks were boloney, like Santa Claus.

"Dad," I said, "I hope you don't believe in storks!"

He drank a lot of coffee.

"Not exactly. It's a tremendously complicated subject. There are a lot of versions."

"Well," I said, "what's your version, Dad?"

"Off the record, that's hard to say," he said.

"Storks and Santa Claus are bunk," I said. "Don't you think so?"

"Oh!" he said. "Santa Claus is an entirely different problem. But storks—well, yes and no. That all depends. After all, a stork is a stork. We can't deny that the bird actually exists."

I said: "Sure. But you don't honestly think they bring babies, do you?"

ILLUSTRATED BY PRUETT CARTER

He poured himself more coffee. Then he filled his pipe again. For a long time he puffed, and when he didn't answer my question, I asked him again.

He said: "Son, I prefer to get your interpretation first. If you don't believe in the stork hypothesis, where do you think babies come from?"

I hadn't thought of that. I only knew storks had nothing to do with it, because Jim Henderson had told me. Jim was an orphan. He had been everywhere and seen plenty of

she walked away on tiptoe. It scared me. All at once I wanted to cry. I yelled for Dad. He came out of the kitchen in a hurry. I leaned over the banister.

"I want to see Mother," I said.

He thought a minute and came upstairs and peeked into Mother's bedroom. "All right," he said.

I tiptoed in. Mother smiled and whispered my name. I had to clench my teeth to keep from doing anything. Her eyes were bigger than I'd ever seen them, and her forehead was wet, like sweat or something, like she was very hot, and when she took my hands they were the same

# That Wonderful Bird



"Dear Jim: When mothers have kids, is it serious? Can you have a baby without getting sick?"

*By John Fante*

things. He had come to Denver from Chicago.

I said: "I don't know. I guess they come from God."

"Right!" Dad said. "Absolutely correct! I'll give you the details later. Tonight, perhaps." He got up and looked at the clock over the refrigerator. "You'd better hurry," he said.

I went upstairs to get my books. The house seemed lonesome without Mother walking around. When I got to my door, Clara slipped out of Mother's bedroom. She was carrying a breakfast tray. Real soft she closed the door. She put her finger to her mouth for me to be quiet, and then

way. She pulled me down and kissed me hard; but it was so different. I mean, the kiss was wet and hot. I wanted to howl right out, but I didn't dare. She pushed back my hair.

"How would you like Mr. Stork to bring you a baby sister?" she whispered. She looked like something awful was hurting her.

"I don't want any baby sisters," I said. "I don't want any baby brothers, either! I don't want any kind of babies. I hate storks. I just want you, Mother!"

She kissed me again, and Dad pulled me away. He put his arm around my (Continued on page 167)