

Sean Ironman

Canal

Mrs. Stafford says our classroom used to be a swamp. Thirty or forty years ago there were only sawgrass marshes and mangroves up above the water on tangled fat roots looking like giant broccoli. Black cottonmouths slithered through seagrass. White ibis stood on their orange straw legs in the shallow end near the shore and searched for yummy frogs. The whole place was this big water jungle for animals and plants to enjoy the Florida sun. Mom would've never lived here back then no matter how much she hates winter. Unless we're at the beach Mom says she lives in the twentieth century and air conditioning was invented for a reason. On Saturdays she takes me, Timmy, and Kerrie to Coral Square Mall and we look for Grandma's bright-red hair near the fountain. Grandma gives us each a pack of M&M's and Mom puts them in her purse and says after lunch. We walk from one end of the mall to the other and the light hurts my eyes and my head hurts. By the time we get home Mom says not to go outside because she's going to start dinner soon. On Sundays we go to the mall without Grandma. We pile into the van and Mom dances her fingers on the wheel and asks which mall we'll get lucky at today. Sometimes we go down to Miami but Mom says she worked too hard to hand her money over to someone who came here on a raft. Mostly we stick close to home. We got so many malls Mom is never bored. There's Broward, Sawgrass, Fashion Square, Pompano, Coral Ridge, Pembroke Pines, Boca, Westfield, The Galleria, and sometimes we even go back to Coral Square. The one with the best sales is the one for us. If our father has to work instead of spend time with his family it might as well be for a reason. That's what Mom tells the sales lady at Burdines when she writes a check. School's during the week but at least that gets out at two. Mom gets home at ten after five and for those three hours in between we're with Dad. He picks us up from school and asks if we want to go down to the canal. He says it like there's only one instead of hundreds. I miss *The Woody Woodpecker Show* but Dad says that's been on since he was a kid and I can catch it next time. If Mom told Dad to trim the hedges and mow the lawn he says to tell our mother it

looked like it would rain. He points at a puffy cloud alone in the sky and says now we won't be lying. In the car Dad asks for fresh air and we crank down the windows. Mom's van has power windows. I ask Dad when he's getting power windows and he squeezes my arm and asks if it's broken and says it seems fine to him. In our neighborhood Dad weaves from side to side and it feels like we're on a ride at Magic Kingdom and we laugh but he has to stop once we're out on the real road because if he gets arrested we'll have to walk home. We get our errands done first so we won't have to worry about them later. Errands usually mean going to the credit union. The credit union is in an orange shopping center that looks like all those other orange shopping centers. Shopping centers are either orange or yellow or pink and half the stores are the same. A bagel shop, a pizza parlor, a pawn shop, a checking/cashing store, a barber, and either a Publix or a Winn-Dixie. While Dad's in line we sit near the gumball machine and look for quarters. When he's done he puts money in his wallet and says if we don't tell our mother he took out cash he'll stop at Dunkin' Donuts on the ride home. Out back is a canal and if we don't slow Dad down too much we get to go. If you don't pay attention to the power lines the place looks like the Florida Mrs. Stafford talks about. No traffic. No people. Only grass and trees and water. Dad says it all had to go somewhere once people moved in. Anoles scatter as we walk up. Some won't move out of your way though. That stupid lizard will just bob its head and if you get close it starts breathing hard or something and its red throat puffs out. Dad says they're used to people now and it won't kill us to have to walk around such a tiny lizard. The biggest lizards in the neighborhood are iguanas and they line up beside the canal like best friends. Some people eat them and say they taste good and we caught a couple. Not to eat but to keep. Mom says only the dog and the cat are allowed in the house because we don't live in a zoo but Dad says the garage doesn't count. Mom disagrees but she's too scared to move the iguanas so we put them inside a big tank with a branch and a hot rock. We got tanks for the snakes we found too. When Mom does laundry she closes her eyes real tight and picks up the pace. One day Dad forgot to put the book on top of the tank and an iguana got out. Mom went to move our clothes into the dryer and it was on the hood of her van whipping its tail like it owned the place. Now we're only allowed to catch turtles. Turtles are Dad's favorite. Up close they look like dinosaurs. He says it's like they're leftovers from a world before people. Like they were too stubborn to listen to nature and evolve. We see them all the time crossing Rock Island and Atlantic going from canal to canal. Dad'll pull up on the side of the road and run out into traffic to help the turtle cross. Cars swerve and honk and curse but Dad keeps going. Kerrie says one day Dad's going to get hit but Dad says we better hope not because if he dies we'll have to walk home. He must spend all day looking for canals. He knows all the best ones. The credit union canal is good. So are the ones behind the barbershop and the football field. The movie theater canal has too much gunk and the canals out east are big and have boats in them. No turtles live there. Behind the credit

union turtles bob up and down in the water and Dad hands us each a slice of white bread he brought in a Ziploc. He says he should have brought his net. He never remembers his net. I think he likes going in the water. He takes off his shoes and shoves his socks in them and slides right into the canal. While he moves in slow trying not to make a splash we toss bread to distract turtles. We must have fifty of them in our backyard. Dad says if we don't bring them home they'll be hit by a car or eaten by crazy people. Other than throw bread we also look for gators. They sun themselves on the shore like iguanas. Dad says if we're worried we should make friends with the fat kid in class because we don't have to outrun the gator we only have to outrun the other guy. Gators cross the street too but they don't need help. Traffic stops for gators. If a car gets too close the gator lifts its head and snaps its mouth saying this is gator country and he's in charge. If one slides into the canal we get out of there. At the car Dad sits on a towel and whatever turtles we caught go in the bucket Dad keeps in the trunk. When we get home Dad says not to tell our mother about where we were and he takes sliced bananas and apples out back for the turtles. If Dad's home he's either in the bathroom or in the backyard with his turtles. After work Mom heads straight to her bedroom and listens to the answering machine before starting dinner. Dad comes back inside and Mom says we better tell our father to shower if he thinks he's going to sit at her table. Dad walks to the bathroom and his lips move like he's saying something but no words come out. At dinner Mom asks if we finished our homework and we say no. She asks Dad why not and says he better stop it with those turtles and those canals. She can't be the only adult in the house. He keeps chewing that pork chop and Mom asks us how it feels to have a father who loves turtles more than his own children. Dad breaks his plate on the table and slams the sliding glass door on his way out back. Mom throws Dad's clothes down the hall and says if our father loves his turtles so much he can sleep outside. She asks us what would change if we had no father and says that we would have to walk home from school. That's all that would change. When Dad picks us up from school the next day he says we have to love animals more than people because people can take care of themselves. He asks what we need and we can't think of anything and he says see. The animals will all die if we don't help and what kind of world would we live in then? When he goes into the backyard I watch him through the glass. The grass is high and the other houses hide behind the tall hedges. With only turtles and bushes and trees it's like Dad's back in time before I was born and before our house was there back in that big water jungle Mrs. Stafford talks about and I think about how happy he would be.