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Traveling Mercies

by Mike Vanden Bosch

Joe, eighth-grade bully, pulled low-grade
Peter's pants down one morning in the back seat
of the bright yellow school bus,
while little girls played tic-tac-toe up front.
Naked from waist to ankles, Peter brought two hands
to six-thirty for cover,
but Joe Karate-chopped Peter's forearms:
"What's the matter, Peter, ashamed of your little weenie?"
Peter, blue denim pants and Sears white underwear
rumped around his ankles, back-handed his tears
while muffled sobs tolled his hell.
He bent to pull up his pants, but Joe teacher-talked him:
"Stand up straight, Peter;
Don't you know you're sposed to have good posture?"
Peter tried to turn, but the bully spun him face forward.

Bus driver Mr. Van Eldik, as he stopped to pick up David,
wondered whether the wind would whip falling snow
to white-out before nightfall.

When seventh grader David bounded onto the bus
he saw boys hunched around a show near the back.
The bus lurched ahead and hurdled him
into the huddle and he saw Peter's nakedness.
He pushed past two more boys and
said firmly, "Peter, pull your pants up."
"He won't let me," sobbed Peter.
David glared at Joe and spoke fire.
"Pull your pants up, Peter.
If anybody lays a hand on you, I'll kill him."
David's ferocity surprised the smirk from Joe's face,
wedged shame into the silence,
and starched a dozen boy smiles.
"It was all in fun; can't a guy have some fun?"
Joe searched buddy faces for a Cain,
but each boy watched the falling snow.
The drone of bus gears and moan of tires
against the gravel road was his only reply.

Mr. Van Eldik observed that the snow would stop by noon.

David, feeling naked himself, put his arm around Peter,
now buckling his belt, then sat beside him.

As he pulled into the school yard,
Mr. Van Eldik thanked God for traveling mercies.