This is a story about a father helping his son out of a tough situation. It asks us to think about how both parents and their children are imperfect and can sometimes make poor decisions.

It had been two days since Evan Hamilton had stopped smoking, and it seemed to him everything he’d said and thought for the two days somehow suggested cigarettes. He looked at his hands under the kitchen light. He sniffed his knuckles and his fingers.

“I can smell it,” he said.

“I know. It’s as if it sweats out of you,” Ann Hamilton said. “For three days after I stopped I could smell it on me. Even when I got out of the bath. It was disgusting.” She was putting plates on the table for dinner. “I’m so sorry, dear. I know what you’re going through. But, if it’s any consolation, the second day is always the hardest. The third day is hard, too, of course, but from then on, if you can stay with it that long, you’re over the hump. But I’m so happy you’re serious about quitting, I can’t tell you.” She touched his arm. “Now, if you’ll just call Roger, we’ll eat.”

Hamilton opened the front door. It was already dark. It was early in November and the days were short and cool. An older boy he had never seen before was sitting on a small, well-equipped bicycle in the driveway. The boy leaned forward just off the seat, the toes of his shoes touching the pavement and keeping him upright.

“You Mr. Hamilton?” the boy said.
“Yes, I am,” Hamilton said. “What is it? Is it Roger?”
“I guess Roger is down at my house talking to my mother. Kip is there and this boy named Gary Berman. It is about my brother’s bike. I don’t know for sure,” the boy said, twisting the handle grips, “but my mother asked me to come and get you. One of Roger’s parents.”
“But he’s all right?” Hamilton said. “Yes, of course, I’ll be right with you.”
He went into the house to put his shoes on.
“Did you find him?” Ann Hamilton said.
“He’s in some kind of jam,” Hamilton answered. “Over a bicycle. Some boy—I didn’t catch his name—is outside. He wants one of us to go back with him to his house.”
“Is he all right?” Ann Hamilton said and took her apron off.
“Sure, he’s all right.” Hamilton looked at her and shook his head. “It sounds like it’s just a childish argument, and the boy’s mother is getting herself involved.”
“Do you want me to go?” Ann Hamilton asked.
He thought for a minute. “Yes, I’d rather you went, but I’ll go. Just hold dinner until we’re back. We shouldn’t be long.”
“I don’t like his being out after dark,” Ann Hamilton said. “I don’t like it.”

The boy was sitting on his bicycle and working the handbrake now.
“How far?” Hamilton said as they started down the sidewalk.
“Over in Arbuckle Court,” the boy answered, and when

Hamilton looked at him, the boy added, “Not far. About two blocks from here.”
“What seems to be the trouble?” Hamilton asked.
“I don’t know for sure. I don’t understand all of it. He and Kip and this Gary Berman are supposed to have used my brother’s bike while we were on vacation, and I guess they wrecked it. On purpose. But I don’t know. Anyway, that’s what they’re talking about. My brother can’t find his bike and they had it last, Kip and Roger. My mom is trying to find out where it’s at.”
“I know Kip,” Hamilton said. “Who’s this other boy?”
“Gary Berman. I guess he’s new in the neighborhood. His dad is coming as soon as he gets home.”
They turned a corner. The boy pushed himself along, keeping just slightly ahead. Hamilton saw an orchard, and then they turned another corner onto a dead-end street. He hadn’t known of the existence of this street and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived here. He looked around him at the unfamiliar houses and was struck with the range of his son’s personal life.
The boy turned into a driveway and got off the bicycle and leaned it against the house. When the boy opened the front door, Hamilton followed him through the living room and into the kitchen, where he saw his son sitting on one side of a table along with Kip Hollister and another boy. Hamilton looked closely at Roger and then he turned to the stout, dark-haired woman at the head of the table.
“You’re Roger’s father?” the woman said to him.
“Yes, my name is Evan Hamilton. Good evening.”
“I’m Mrs. Miller, Gilbert’s mother,” she said. “Sorry to ask you over here, but we have a problem.”
Hamilton sat down in a chair at the other end of the table.
and looked around. A boy of nine or ten, the boy whose bicycle was missing, Hamilton supposed, sat next to the woman. Another boy, fourteen or so, sat on the draining board, legs dangling, and watched another boy who was talking on the telephone. Grinning slyly at something that had just been said to him over the line, the boy reached over to the sink with a cigarette. Hamilton heard the sound of the cigarette sputting out in a glass of water. The boy who had brought him leaned against the refrigerator and crossed his arms.

“Did you get one of Kip’s parents?” the woman said to the boy.

“His sister said they were shopping. I went to Gary Berman’s and his father will be here in a few minutes. I left the address.”

“Mr. Hamilton,” the woman said, “I’ll tell you what happened. We were on vacation last month and Kip wanted to borrow Gilbert’s bike so that Roger could help him with Kip’s paper route. I guess Roger’s bike had a flat tire or something. Well, as it turns out—”

“Gary was choking me, Dad,” Roger said.

“What?” Hamilton said, looking at his son carefully.

“He was choking me. I got the marks.” His son pulled down the collar of his T-shirt to show his neck.

“They were out in the garage,” the woman continued. “I didn’t know what they were doing until Curt, my oldest, went out to see.”

“He started it!” Gary Berman said to Hamilton. “He called me a jerk.” Gary Berman looked toward the front door.

“I think my bike cost about sixty dollars, you guys,” the boy named Gilbert said. “You can pay me for it.”

“You keep out of this, Gilbert,” the woman said to him.

Hamilton took a breath. “Go on,” he said.

“Well, as it turns out, Kip and Roger used Gilbert’s bike to help Kip deliver his papers, and then the two of them, and Gary too, they say, took turns rolling it.”

“What do you mean ‘rolling it’?” Hamilton said.

“Rolling it,” the woman said. “Sending it down the street with a push and letting it fall over. Then, mind you—and they just admitted this a few minutes ago—Kip and Roger took it up to the school and threw it against a goalpost.”

“Is that true, Roger?” Hamilton said, looking at his son again.

“Part of it’s true, Dad,” Roger said, looking down and rubbing his finger over the table. “But we only rolled it once. Kip did it, then Gary, and then I did it.”

“Once is too much,” Hamilton said. “Once is one too many times, Roger. I’m surprised and disappointed in you. And you too, Kip,” Hamilton said.

“But you see,” the woman said, “someone’s fibbing tonight or else not telling all he knows, for the fact is the bike’s still missing.”

The older boys in the kitchen laughed and kidded with the boy who still talked on the telephone.

“We don’t know where the bike is, Mrs. Miller,” the boy named Kip said. “We told you already. The last time we saw it was when me and Roger took it to my house after we had it at school. I mean, that was the next to last time. The very last time was when I took it back here the next morning and parked it behind the house.” He shook his head. “We don’t know where it is,” the boy said.

“Sixty dollars,” the boy named Gilbert said to the boy named Kip. “You can pay me off like five dollars a week.”

“Gilbert. I’m warning you,” the woman said. “You see, they claim,” the woman went on, frowning now, “it disappeared from here, from behind the house. But how can we
believe them when they haven’t been all that truthful this evening?”

“We’ve told the truth,” Roger said. “Everything.”

Gilbert leaned back in his chair and shook his head at Hamilton’s son.

The doorbell sounded and the boy on the draining board jumped down and went into the living room.

A stiff-shouldered man with a crew haircut and sharp gray eyes entered the kitchen without speaking. He glanced at the woman and moved over behind Gary Berman’s chair.

“You must be Mr. Berman?” the woman said. “Happy to meet you. I’m Gilbert’s mother, and this is Mr. Hamilton, Roger’s father.”

The man inclined his head at Hamilton but did not offer his hand.

“What’s all this about?” Berman said to his son.

The boys at the table began to speak at once.

“Quiet down!” Berman said. “I’m talking to Gary. You’ll get your turn.”

The boy began his account of the affair. His father listened closely, now and then narrowing his eyes to study the other two boys.

When Gary Berman had finished, the woman said, “I’d like to get to the bottom of this. I’m not accusing any one of them, you understand, Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Berman—I’d just like to get to the bottom of this.” She looked steadily at Roger and Kip, who were shaking their heads at Gary Berman.

“It’s not true, Gary,” Roger said.

“Dad, can I talk to you in private?” Gary Berman said.

“Let’s go,” the man said, and they walked into the living room.

Hamilton watched them go. He had the feeling he should stop them, this secrecy. His palms were wet, and he reached to his shirt pocket for a cigarette. Then, breathing deeply, he passed the back of his hand under his nose and said, “Roger, do you know any more about this, other than what you’ve already said? Do you know where Gilbert’s bike is?”

“No, I don’t,” the boy said. “I swear it.”

“When was the last time you saw the bicycle?” Hamilton said.

“When we brought it home from school and left it at Kip’s house.”

“Kip,” Hamilton said, “do you know where Gilbert’s bicycle is now?”

“I swear I don’t, either,” the boy answered. “I brought it back the next morning after we had it at school and I parked it behind the garage.”

“I thought you said you left it behind the house,” the woman said quickly.

“I mean the house! That’s what I meant,” the boy said.

“Did you come back here some other day to ride it?” she asked, leaning forward.

“No, I didn’t,” Kip answered.

“Kip?” she said.

“I didn’t! I don’t know where it is!” the boy shouted.

The woman raised her shoulders and let them drop. “How do you know who or what to believe?” she said to Hamilton. “All I know is, Gilbert’s missing a bicycle.”

Gary Berman and his father returned to the kitchen.

“It was Roger’s idea to roll it,” Gary Berman said.
“It was yours!” Roger said, coming out of his chair. “You wanted to! Then you wanted to take it to the orchard and strip it!”

“You shut up!” Berman said to Roger. “You can speak when spoken to, young man, not before. Gary, I’ll handle this—dragged out at night because of a couple of roughnecks! Now if either of you,” Berman said, looking first at Kip and then Roger, “know where this kid’s bicycle is, I’d advise you to start talking.”

“I think you’re getting out of line,” Hamilton said.

“What?” Berman said, his forehead darkening. “And I think you’d do better to mind your own business!”

“Let’s go, Roger,” Hamilton said, standing up. “Kip, you come now or stay.” He turned to the woman. “I don’t know what else we can do tonight. I intend to talk this over more with Roger, but if there is a question of restitution I feel since Roger did help manhandle the bike, he can pay a third if it comes to that.”

“I don’t know what to say,” the woman replied, following Hamilton through the living room. “I’ll talk to Gilbert’s father—he’s out of town now. We’ll see. It’s probably one of those things finally, but I’ll talk to his father.”

Hamilton moved to one side so that the boys could pass ahead of him onto the porch, and from behind him he heard Gary Berman say, “He called me a jerk, Dad.”

“He did, did he?” Hamilton heard Berman say. “Well, he’s the jerk. He looks like a jerk.”

Hamilton turned and said, “I think you’re seriously out of line here tonight, Mr. Berman. Why don’t you get control of yourself?”

“And I told you I think you should keep out of it!” Berman said.

“You get home, Roger,” Hamilton said, moistening his lips. “I mean it,” he said, “get going!” Roger and Kip moved out to the sidewalk. Hamilton stood in the doorway and looked at Berman, who was crossing the living room with his son.

“Mr. Hamilton,” the woman began nervously but did not finish.

“What do you want?” Berman said to him. “Watch out now, get out of my way!” Berman brushed Hamilton’s shoulder and Hamilton stepped off the porch into some prickly cracking bushes. He couldn’t believe it was happening. He moved out of the bushes and lunged at the man where he stood on the porch. They fell heavily onto the lawn. They rolled on the lawn, Hamilton wrestling Berman onto his back and coming down hard with his knees on the man’s biceps. He had Berman by the collar now and began to pound his head against the lawn while the woman cried, “God almighty, someone stop them! For God’s sake, someone call the police!”

Hamilton stopped.

Berman looked up at him and said, “Get off me.”

“Are you all right?” the woman called to the men as they separated. “For God’s sake,” she said. She looked at the men, who stood a few feet apart, backs to each other, breathing hard. The older boys had crowded onto the porch to watch; now that it was over, they waited, watching the men, and then they began feinting and punching each other on the arms and ribs.

“You boys get back in the house,” the woman said. “I never thought I’d see,” she said and put her hand on her breast.

Hamilton was sweating and his lungs burned when he tried to take a deep breath. There was a ball of something in his throat so that he couldn’t swallow for a minute. He started
walking, his son and the boy named Kip at his sides. He heard car doors slam, an engine start. Headlights swept over him as he walked.

Roger sobbed once, and Hamilton put his arm around the boy’s shoulders.

“I better get home,” Kip said and began to cry. “My dad’ll be looking for me,” and the boy ran.

“I’m sorry,” Hamilton said. “I’m sorry you had to see something like that,” Hamilton said to his son.

They kept walking and when they reached their block, Hamilton took his arm away.

“What if he’d picked up a knife, Dad? Or a club?”

“He wouldn’t have done anything like that,” Hamilton said.

“But what if he had?” his son said.

“It’s hard to say what people will do when they’re angry,” Hamilton said.

They started up the walk to their door. His heart moved when Hamilton saw the lighted windows.

“Let me feel your muscle,” his son said.

“Not now,” Hamilton said. “You just go in now and have your dinner and hurry up to bed. Tell your mother I’m all right and I’m going to sit on the porch for a few minutes.”

The boy rocked from one foot to the other and looked at his father, and then he dashed into the house and began calling, “Mom! Mom!”

He sat on the porch and leaned against the garage wall and stretched his legs. The sweat had dried on his forehead. He felt clammy under his clothes.

He had once seen his father—a pale, slow-talking man with slumped shoulders—in something like this. It was a bad one, and both men had been hurt. It had happened in a café. The other man was a farmhand. Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father’s one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man.

He was still sitting on the porch when his wife came out.

“Dear God,” she said and took his head in her hands.

“Come in and shower and then have something to eat and tell me about it. Everything is still warm. Roger has gone to bed.”

But he heard his son calling him.

“He’s still awake,” she said.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” Hamilton said. “Then maybe we should have a drink.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t believe any of this yet.”

He went into the boy’s room and sat down at the foot of the bed.

“It’s pretty late and you’re still up, so I’ll say good night,” Hamilton said.

“Good night,” the boy said, hands behind his neck, elbows jutting.

He was in his pajamas and had a warm fresh smell about him that Hamilton breathed deeply. He patted his son through the covers.

“You take it easy from now on. Stay away from that part of the neighborhood, and don’t let me ever hear of you
damaging a bicycle or any other personal property. Is that clear?” Hamilton said.

The boy nodded. He took his hands from behind his neck and began picking at something on the bedspread.

“Okay, then,” Hamilton said, “I’ll say good night.”

He moved to kiss his son, but the boy began talking.

“Dad, was Grandfather strong like you? When he was your age, I mean, you know, and you—”

“And I was nine years old? Is that what you mean? Yes, I guess he was,” Hamilton said.

“Sometimes I can hardly remember him,” the boy said. “I don’t want to forget him or anything, you know? You know what I mean, Dad?”

When Hamilton did not answer at once, the boy went on. “When you were young, was it like it is with you and me? Did you love him more than me? Or just the same?” The boy said this abruptly. He moved his feet under the covers and looked away. When Hamilton still did not answer, the boy said, “Did he smoke? I think I remember a pipe or something.”

“He started smoking a pipe before he died, that’s true,” Hamilton said. “He used to smoke cigarettes a long time ago and then he’d get depressed with something or other and quit, but later he’d change brands and start in again. Let me show you something,” Hamilton said. “Smell the back of my hand.”

The boy took the hand in his, sniffed it, and said, “I guess I don’t smell anything, Dad. What is it?”

Hamilton sniffed the hand and then the fingers. “Now I can’t smell anything, either,” he said. “It was there before, but now it’s gone.” Maybe it was scared out of me, he thought. “I wanted to show you something. All right, it’s late now. You better go to sleep,” Hamilton said.

The boy rolled onto his side and watched his father walk to the door and watched him put his hand to the switch. And then the boy said, “Dad? You’ll think I’m pretty crazy, but I wish I’d known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don’t know how to say it, but I’m lonesome about it. It’s like—it’s like I miss you already if I think about it now. That’s pretty crazy, isn’t it? Anyway, please leave the door open.”

Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it halfway.