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READING IS FUNDAMENTAL

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## Reading is Fundamental

“So we kicked the Krauts’ asses back across the Rhine and had ‘em on the run.” My father swirled his glass in his thick wrist. Ice cubes jingled. He swallowed another gulp then hammered the glass down on the table. The aluminum legs shook. “Once we crossed the river, there was no stopping us.” He clapped his hand down and ran it over the tabletop. “We rolled right over ‘em.” Cubes clanked, the bottle wobbled. “We slaughtered thousands. Rounded up a hell of a lot them, too.”

I swallowed my breath. “You killed Nazis?”

My father’s cloudy, gray eyes narrowed behind his thick black frames. He took a deep breath. The boxy blue pattern on his frayed shirt fluttered with the heave of his broad chest. He leaned closer to me. “You damn right I did.”

His glare reminded me of how he looked when he was mad but his eyes opened wider and his lips slowly curled up on the side of his cheek. He leaned back in his chair then reached for his drink. He swirled the tumbler midway into its lift. Cubes clacked against the sides before he took another sip. Then he slid the glass across the table. “Put a few fresh cubes in there, kid.”

I hopped off my chair and scooted round the table to the refrigerator and went up on the toes of my sneakers to open the freezer door. Luckily, there were four full trays. I pulled one out and closed the door. When I bent the plastic frame, the top sheet of ice crinkled then cracked before a couple cubes popped out onto the floor.

“What the hell is going on back there?”

I reached down to pick up the cubes, but one slipped away. It slid a few feet across the cracked linoleum and got stuck in a groove. I ran over and gripped the cloudy

cube but again, it shot out of my hand across the buckled floor. My father yelled, “Christ Almighty, kid. This isn’t brain surgery.” His blue face was expressionless as he watched me wipe the water off the floor with a wad paper towels.

“Do you have to use so many?” he barked.

I didn’t look up. “Sorry, Dad.” He shook his grey head and turned back to the table.

“Hey Dad,” I said. “Were you scared in the war?” The dull whirl of the refrigerator’s electric drone started moaning.

“Don’t *hey* me,” he growled. His eyes were blazing. He pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket and tapped the filter on the table. With his other hand, he snapped the wheel of his Zippo. “Of course I was scared,” he said behind a fluttering orangey blue flame. “But we had a job to do and by God . . .” he paused then nodded with that same grin, “we did it.” He tilted his head and lit his cigarette then blew out a thick, gray cloud. He took another long drag. “I’ll tell you this, kiddo,” he said as smoke seeped out of his nostrils and framed his face in a grey-blue fog. “When you see your best friend blown into a million pieces, you don’t feel *scared*,” he frowned with one eye closed. “You’re *mad*.”

“You saw your friend get blown up into a million pieces?”

My father glanced toward the back door. The kitchen was silent except for the soft clatter of swirling ice. “We were advancing behind a tank.” He pulled on his cigarette then exhaled. “A mortar went off less than a foot away. The ground opened up around me and I was thrown back about twenty yards.” His wrist turned, ice tinkled. “When I shook it off and looked around for my buddy, all I saw was his blood and guts

splattered across my uniform.” He took another drag then placed his glass back down on the table. His eyes receded into the dark rings around them and his drooping blue face became expressionless.

“What did you do?”

My father’s face remained unchanged. He shifted in his seat and grabbed my shoulder. “Do?” he snapped. Sweat was beading on his bristled face. “What could I do?” He fell back in his chair. “I wiped my buddy’s brains off my face and kept fighting.”

It was after nine and my father sent up me upstairs a few minutes later. My brother Tom was stretched out on his bed reading. He put the book down on his chest and flashed his unfriendly smile. “Hello monkey man,” he giggled. “How are all your monkey friends?” He started laughing and his squeaky metal bedframe creaked.

I said, “Leave me alone,” then marched over to my bed on the other side of the room. Everything looked the same but something didn’t feel right.

Tommy’s eyes slid from side to side across his husky face as I put on my pajamas. He was giggling and steadied himself with a hand against a panel of the wallpaper’s wooden pattern. “And that fellow you’re so fond of . . . what’s his nam

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Is it George?” he wondered with a hand pressed to his cheek. “Yes,” he said, jutting a finger into the air. “How’s he doing these days?”

I jerked round on my bed. He was gone. I jumped up. “All right, Tommy, give him back.”

The bed creaked as my brother sat up on an elbow. He opened his palms. “I haven’t seen him.”

I looked all around the room then I saw him. Hanging from the rod, in a fold in the long blue curtain, Curious George was dangling from a noose made of red and white striped bakery string. I knew I was too old for stuffed animals. I was already in the first grade but I still liked him. I grabbed a scissor and climbed up on the radiator to cut my best friend down.

“You know,” Tommy went on. “George once told me he couldn’t stand living here anymore.” He gazed at the rough spackle on the ceiling. It looked like vanilla frosting. “He said he had to get out of here one way or another.”

I pulled the rope off George’s neck then steadied myself against the window frame. “Very funny.”

Tommy pursed his chubby lips and shook his head. “I don’t think it’s funny at all.” He turned toward the wall with a squeak and a clank.

I put George next to me under the covers. It was quiet. “Hey Tommy,” I said. “Did you know Dad killed Nazis in the war?”

Tommy let a fake laugh. “Yeah. And got his friend’s brains smeared in his eyes? So?”

“So?” I said. “He’s a hero.”

Tommy kept his back turned and sniggered. “He *had* to fight, monkey man. Everyone did. He was drafted.”

I didn’t know anything about that but I didn’t care. “That doesn’t matter.” My head’s shadow bobbed along the floor. “He’s still a hero.”

“He’s an *alcoholic*.”

“Shut up!” I didn’t know what he meant but I could tell from his snippy voice, it wasn’t good.

Tommy rolled over with his brown eyes blazing. He scrunched up his nose and pointed at me. “He is. Mary Kate said so. So did Billy.”

He swatted his book onto the floor and told me to turn out the light. With the same look on his chubby face he warned, “If Mom gets off early and sees our light on, she’ll kill us.” He raised a fist. “And then I’ll kill you.”

I shut off the light and hurried to bed. I could see a gray sky above a vast field littered with the corpses. Through splintered tree branches, I pictured my father running in the tracks of advancing tanks, killing Nazis and wiping blood and brains off his face. As I battled the downward tug of sleep, George close in the crook of my arm, I wondered how many Nazis I would have to kill when I grew up and whether I’d be wiping brains off my face or would somebody wipe mine off theirs.

It was late August and school was due to begin. I had been nervous about starting school ever since something hit me while I was watching television with Tommy. My parents were at work and none of my older brothers or sisters were home. Tommy was stretched out on the droopy end of the sofa with a glass of milk on the coffee table and a plate of cookies on his chest. I was next to him, in the chair at the arm of the couch. He was wearing his *I’m with stupid* T-shirt and he wanted me to sit in the direction of the big pointed finger. Popeye was on the screen. At the start of each cartoon, the title appeared



in between two galley doors that opened and closed with each segment of credits. I said, “What does that say” when the doors first opened.

Tommy groaned. “Sea Sick Sailors.”

The galley doors closed then opened again. “What does that say?”

He swallowed a vanilla wafer. “Directed by Seymour Kneitel.” The doors closed.

I was amazed. “And you know just looking at it?”

Tommy wolfed down another cookie. “That’s what reading is, monkey man . . . once you know how, you read everything you see.” He ate another cookie. “Look,” he pointed to the opening doors. “Animation, Jim Tyer.” He placed the empty plate on the coffee table, then shifted on his arm. With his other hand he pulled his shirt to the side until the finger was straight at me. “Duhhhh,” he droned. “Don’t you get it, monkey man? Once you know how, all you have to do is see the words to know what they say.”

I thought about that. A few minutes later, as I watched Popeye tear open a can of spinach, a chill ran down my back. I thought, once I learned to read, I’d be bombarded. Words were everywhere . . . on milk cartons and cereal boxes, street signs, newspapers and television, too. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to read everything I saw.

Weeks later, school started. The teacher, Mrs. Herbert, was tall and had black curly hair and pointy pink glasses. She smelled good, too. Despite all my worries, I learned to read with all the others kids, though there were a few bumps along the way. One night I did my homework at the kitchen table while my father was home. His head’s shadow darkened the table when he peered over my shoulder. A moment later he gasped then pointed at my workbook. “What the hell is that?” he shrieked. I squirmed in my

chair and looked up. A wild fire was burning behind his thick black frames. “I asked you a question, young man.”

He fingered the drawing of a pair of animals. “Oxs?” I squeaked.

His blue face quivered. “Oxen!” he shouted. “Oxen!”

I repeated what he said and he sighed and wiped his brow. He studied me for a few long seconds then said I was going to give him a heart attack. After that, I decided I’d stick to doing my homework upstairs, like Tommy told me.

Mrs. Herbert on the other hand, never got mad and had a way of making hard things easy. Whenever I was stumped, she told me put the all the letters together and sound out the word. I liked reading and first grade turned out to be fun. Every day was a surprise. The first Monday in May was no different. On the board, written in bright yellow chalk was, *Father’s Day in May*. I knew what Father’s Day was but my family always celebrated at home. We’d barbeque in the backyard.

“All right class.” Mrs. Herbert placed her hands on the hips of her long blue dress. “Your parents all received the notice about *Father’s Day in May*. Please bring your signed slips up to the desk.”

I sat at my desk in total confusion as I watched my classmates storm Mrs. Herbert’s big desk in front. They all had sheets of paper fluttering in their hands. When everyone had settled back in their seats, Mrs. Herbert shuffled through the pile and looked over a few. She held one up. “This is called an *RSVP*.” She turned and spelled it out on the green blackboard. “When someone invites another person to a party or some other event, they are asked to return an RSVP, which let’s the host know if the guest will be attending. Is that clear?” Everyone nodded. I looked at the board. Risvip? Mrs.

Herbert pulled a few papers from the pile. “Rebecca, I see your father is coming.” Rebecca’s desk was second from the front, next to the bookshelves along the windows. Her braces gleamed from her freckled face. “I’m sure we’ll enjoy learning what an attorney does.” All around the classroom, little heads were bobbing up and down like a sea of fuzzy waves. She fingered another. “And Matthew’s father is going to tell us about the furniture business and what goes into owning a store.” Mrs. Herbert went through more risvips but I drifted off wondering why I didn’t have one. I wondered if I should I ask Mrs. Herbert if she knew what happened? Maybe the letter was lost in the mail? The postman always came while I was home for lunch. If my mother weren’t busy on the phone, she’d open the mail while I was eating. I decided to hold off until lunch.

Mrs. Herbert walked up and down the rows of desks and gave each of us a big cut out letter. She said we could decorate them any way we wished. When were done, she said we would tape them across the doorway to spell out *Welcome to Father’s Day in May*. Desk lids creaked open with a snap then closed with a clang like an army of square-faced wooden monsters when we all went for our crayons. Mrs. Herbert gave me capital letter F. I liked to color and draw but I was still thinking about the risvip. As I concentrated on making my lines straight, I felt a hollow beating in my stomach. I tried not to worry and kept coloring with one eye on the letter F and the other on the big white clock.

I hurried up the walk past the patchy lawn to my house. When I charged inside, I let the screen door slam and my mother *Shhhs’d* me. She was on the phone. She pointed

to the table. There was a grilled cheese sandwich and glass of chocolate milk at the head where my father always sat. It was my place when he wasn't home. I ran over to her and pulled the sleeve of her nurse's uniform. I started, "Hey Mom," but she raised a finger and poured her watery blue eyes out on me. I stepped back and closed my mouth. She turned away and the spirally phone cord coiled around her. I fell into my chair but then heard someone on the porch. I ran out of the kitchen. "Mailman's here, Mom." There was no letter from the school.

When I went back inside my mother was off the phone. "How's your day, honey?" she asked while she tied her long, gray-blond hair into a bun. I told her about the missing risvip. Her blue eyes twinkled and she pursed her pink lips. "We didn't receive an invitation."

I plopped down in my chair and dropped the mail on the table then noticed a small stack of letters. I pointed to the counter and shouted, "Maybe it's in there?"

My mother darted across my path and snatched the mail off the counter. She ran a hand through my hair. "Let me look, honey. If it's here I'll find it."

I sat down and took a bite of my sandwich. I couldn't wait to show my classmates my father, a war hero and import export agent. He wore a suit and tie and took the train to the city every day during the week . . . sometimes on Saturdays, too. I was sure no one else in my class had a father who killed Nazis.

My Mother opened one of the dented cabinets above the sink and put the mail on the top shelf. "I'm sorry, honey," she pressed the uneven door into its slot and turned around. "We didn't receive the letter." She took a seat next to me and stroked my shaggy hair. Her watery eyes shimmered beneath the blue. "You know honey," she started.

“Your father is very busy. They need him at the office or they wouldn’t know what to do.”

My mother went on but I couldn’t believe my ears. I blinked back the tears and ate my sandwich. In our house, no matter what the reason, nobody liked a crybaby. Still, I reasoned, my mother had said, she didn’t *think* he could go. I figured I still had a chance when my father came home from work. I’d tell him we were having *Father’s Day in May* at school this Friday and he had to take off from work so he could come. He could tell the class about killing Nazis and how he ships stuff all over the world. I finished my sandwich, washed my face and brushed my teeth. Then I kissed my mother goodbye and went back to school, confident the matter would be settled that night.

When I got home from school, Tommy and my sister Erin were in the living room watching a game show and my other sister, Mary Kate, was making dinner in the kitchen. Tommy was lying on the saggy side of the couch near the window and Erin was in the loveseat with the legs of her Levis draped over the frayed arms with her blue clogs dangling off her toes. I told them about *Father’s Day in May* and they both made sour faces. “He’s not gonna go to that,” Tommy howled. “He never goes to anything.” He glanced over the armrest at my sister. “Ask Erin.”

I looked at Erin and she nodded. “He’s never gone to any of my chorus concerts.” She pulled her long blond hair into a ponytail. “It’s no big deal.”

I went into the kitchen and told Mary Kate the whole story. She was spooning tomato sauce into a casserole dish full of pasta. She put the jar down and took a seat at

the table. After I finished, she brushed her long black hair off her rosy cheek and tucked it behind an ear. She placed her soft hand on my shoulder. Her thin lips were pointed at the corners. “Don’t feel bad, Jimmy,” she squeezed my shoulder. “It’s not that Dad doesn’t *want* to go, it’s that he *can’t* go.” Mary Kate told me she knew for a fact that made my father even sadder than me. I suddenly felt guilty about the whole thing. I didn’t want to make my father sad but I wasn’t ready to give up on my mission. “Our Dad isn’t like other fathers,” she told me. I looked up at my sister and she smiled then brushed her hair behind her ear. “It’s just like Dad being a hero. Not all fathers are the same.” She put her hand on my cheek.

I fidgeted my way through dinner wondering what I should do. Mary Kate excused me from the table even though I hadn’t eaten a bite. She said I could watch television while the others did their homework.

I went out into the living room and turned on the TV. There were a few good shows on but I couldn’t enjoy any of them. My stomach was rumbling. I didn’t want to make my father unhappy but I wanted to show everyone what a great guy he was. Time moved slower than ever that night. I worried Mary Kate would send me to bed before my father came home so I turned off the television and went up to my room. Finally, at five after nine, I heard the front door open.

My father was in the kitchen, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. There was a missing button on the cuff and rip in the lining. He slid the jacket onto the back of his chair then loosened his tie as he went to the cabinets. He took out a bottle and glass and put them on the counter.

“Hi Dad,” I called. “How ‘ya doing?”

My father turned his big head and smiled. His cloudy gray eyes were drooping. “How ‘ya doin’ kid,” he said, turning to the refrigerator. He opened the freezer and disappeared behind the door. “Goddamn it! What the hell is going on with all these empty trays?” My father slammed the freezer door and then tossed an armful of empty ice trays into the sink. Upstairs, I could hear shuffling feet and closing doors. He turned and his shadow swallowed me. “Am I the only one who fills these goddamn things?” He sat down and undid the top button of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. I turned on the water and carefully filled the trays but something had me by the throat. I could barely reach the rack inside the freezer and the door’s swing was another disaster waiting to happen. I pulled out a chair and placed it next to the refrigerator but my father glanced over and stood up. He pushed the chair back into its place and opened the freezer door. “Let me help you,” he said, taking the tray in his red hand. “I guess we have do everything around here, huh, kid?” A rush of relief ran through me and settled my jumpy stomach.

When we finished with the trays, my father turned on the oven. He placed the casserole dish that was on top of the range inside the stove. He took his seat at the head of the table and poured himself a drink. He nodded to me. “It’s just as good without ice.” He swirled the glass in his hand and took a sip then a gulp. I sat down on his left and he tilted the bottle above the glass. Then he leaned back in his chair and yawned. His white shirt expanded and the saggy blue bags under the rims of glasses swelled before an airy shriek sent the air rushing back out. He reached for his drink then turned his wrist. I noticed how quiet the house was and missed the cubes’ glassy jingle. He put his drink down on the table. “So what’s news kid?”

I had to be careful. He wasn't happy about the ice but I did help fill the trays. He raised his head and I started to stammer out something about the Mets but before I knew next, I had launched into a full report about *Father's Day in May* as he sat silently in his chair, nodding. I said he could tell everyone about the war and shipping things all over the world and that the school was close so he didn't have to worry about the walk . . . it was a short one.

My father stood up and stuck his head in the oven. He straightened then turned up the heat. "*Father's Day in May*," he said, grinning, as he sat back down. He spun his wrist. "I like that." My heart shot up into the back of my throat. "And all the father's talk about their jobs?" I shook my head. He reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. "That sounds like fun. You're going to have a great time."

The flowery walls and grease stained ceiling swirled all around me. "So you're coming?" I cried.

My father's purple lips drew back upon his face. "I wish I could, kid. But the office is just too busy." My heart sank into one of my sneakers. I fought off the tears and took a few hurried breaths. My father opened a newspaper.

"Are you sure," I started. "You could—"

"Damn it, kid," he slammed his red fist as a light flashed behind black frames. "I said I can't."

I hopped off my chair and went up to my room. I didn't excuse myself but I didn't want to get caught crying. I walked out of the kitchen on pins and needles but my father didn't call to me. I climbed upstairs on the balls of feet to avoid the creaky boards then skulked into my room with a pout on my face. Tommy was sprawled out in bed with the



new issue of *Dynamite*. I shut the door and he lowered the magazine. His dull brown eyes shone dimly and his lips were pressed into an unhappy grin. "What did you do?" he said, shaking his head. "Ask him?"

I couldn't help feeling some excitement about *Father's Day in May*. When we arrived Friday morning, Mrs. Herbert had taped the welcome sign above the door. I thought the capital F that I colored looked the best with its red, white and blue stripes like a barbershop's pole. We moved our desks and made a circle around the room with folding chairs in between each desk for the guests. My desk was in the back corner, near the bulletin board. Mrs. Herbert said she was going to sit next to me and when my turn came, I should introduce myself and tell the class what my father's job was and what I wanted to be when I grew up.

When I left the house after lunch, I started out in a good mood but as I got closer to the school I started to drag. I limped along Morris Avenue under glowing green trees past brick houses with slate roofs and dark shutters. A smattering of speckled yellow light was splattered across the street and sidewalk. When I reached the school, I could see some of my classmates and their father's waiting near the front doors. I stood at the fence and watched them for a few minutes, then the bell rang and a clang of dread shot through me.

When we got upstairs everyone took their seats. Mrs. Herbert welcomed the fathers and said the whole class was pleased they could join us. She sat in the chair next to me, then Mara Levin and her father stood up. "This is my father, Mr. Levin." The

whole class said, *Hello, Mr. Levin*. Mr. Levin said hello and told us he was an airline pilot. He flew planes all over the country and sometimes to London, England. As we went around the room and each kid introduced their father and we learned about their jobs, my mind began to wander. Most of the father's were wearing ties and suits like mine did but they looked different. None of them were missing any buttons on their cuffs and I didn't see any frayed sleeves or even one rip or tear. And they all wore polished shoes that weren't worn down at the heels or scuffed at the toes. I remember watching the way Mike Regent and his father were smiling and laughing together like they were friends. His father had his arm around Mike's shoulder and every now and then, he'd squeeze his neck or pat his arm and Mike would look up at him smiling. It was the same everywhere. All the fathers were listening to the man who was telling us about advertising with their arms around their son or daughter and smiles on their clean-shaven faces.

I walked home from school in a daze. I was thinking about the fathers, how they were all so nice and how each one shook my hand and smiled and told me it was nice to meet me and how much they all liked their kids. I crossed between lights and a brown paneled station wagon honked then swerved. The car ground to a halt and the driver shouted, "Stupid kid."

When I got home Mary Kate was in the living room winding up the vacuum cord. She stood up and eyed Tommy, who was sitting on the good side of the couch. He hopped up and pressed his new *Dynamite* magazine to my chest. "Here, monkey man," he said with a fake smile. "This is a great issue. Check it out." Then he flashed the same face at Mary Kate and started for the stairs.

Mary Kate's sharp blue eyes followed him. "That's very nice of you, Tommy," then she went into the kitchen and made me a glass of chocolate milk. I sat on the couch flipping through *Dynamite*, looking at all the bright pictures and reading the funny comics but I couldn't stop thinking about all the other fathers.

I barely ate my dinner but I didn't get in any trouble. Mary Kate excused me and said I could watch television until nine. I sat in in the living room wondering when my father would get home. I wanted to tell him about *Father's Day in May* but when *Donnie and Marie* ended and he still wasn't home, Mary Kate sent me up to bed. I held George in the crook of my arm and listened in the dark for the front door to open. In the blackness, I could see a green field under a gray sky. Scrambling soldiers and advancing tanks were scurrying all over the smoky battleground. I could see bombs bursting and hear the cries of dying men in between blasts. Then I saw my father charging across the scarred ground with his rifle pointed forward. I fell asleep dreaming of my father . . . a real war hero. No other kid in the class had a dad who killed Nazis.

I woke up early and hopped out of bed. Tommy was still sleeping, encased inside his blanket like a candy bar snug in its wrapper. I tiptoed across the room and shuffled down the creaky stairs. My father was in the kitchen, dressed in the stained khakis and faded flannel shirt he always wore on the weekends. He was rubbing his eyes with his huge red hand and his face was white as a sheet of loose leaf. He put his glasses on then reached inside the cabinet and pulled out the bottle he drank from at night. He poured a

little into his coffee and slowly raised it to his lips. The little cup was shaking in his hands. I went into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Morning, Dad,” I tooted.

My father’s head jerked up and he put his hand on his flat forehead. “Don’t *yell*, kid.” He took a seat then lifted the cup. It teetered back and forth and nearly spilled before he sipped. I sat in silence, watching him. When he put the cup down, I told him all about *Father’s Day in May*.

He lit up a cigarette and puffed. “What did you say when it was your turn?”

I straightened up on my chair. “I told them my father was a war hero and that he was an import/export agent.” My father nodded. “I said you ship stuff all over the world.” He continued nodding. “And that when I grow up, I was going to be an import/export agent, too.”

A flash sparked out behind his thick glasses and his deflated purple lips snapped back and curled down around his chin. His head craned toward me and his teeth were gritted. “You ever do that, I’ll break every goddamn bone in your body.”

Something grabbed my throat and punched me in the stomach. My father fell back into his chair then he reached for his coffee. I couldn’t move. At first I thought I was crying, but a second later, I realized I wasn’t. Something glazed over my eyes but there weren’t any tears. I spun on my seat and drifted out of the kitchen to the stairs but remembered my brother was still sleeping. I sat down on the stairs and tried to figure it all out. A few minutes later, I heard the kitchen floor creak and the cabinet door open then shut. I pressed my head against the banister. Through the space between the balustrade posts, I looked out into the living room, at the saggy end of the frayed couch,

and the newspapers and overflowing ashtray on the coffee table. A million things were swirling around in my head. I struggled to find some order so I did what Miss Herbert had said. I lined up my thoughts like letters of the alphabet then tried to figure them out. A thin ray of light gleaming in from a crack in the curtains caught my attention and I followed it to a bald spot on the carpet. It reminded me of my dad's suit. That's when I put it all together. I didn't even have to sound it out.

### Thank You For Not Smoking

Miss Weissmueller continued to pace the room, peppering the class with multiplication zingers. The longer she went on, the more I squirmed in my chair. I looked down at my sneakers . . . at the L and R scrawled on the tips. There was no way out of this one. Earlier, once we were all installed at our desks, our teacher, Miss Weissmueller told us the big news. For the first time in the history of Morris School there was going to be a competition between all four classes in the third grade. The Math Olympics would deal chiefly with the multiplication tables we learned . . . one through twelve. The winning class would get a whole afternoon of free time, which meant kickball in the yard. A lot of excited giggles, ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ popped up across the room. I sank in my seat.

Miss Weissmueller pulled down the map hanging above the blackboard and pointed to all the continents. We were told we could select countries anywhere in the world and when we came up with five, we would vote on which country we would represent in the games. Miss Weissmueller was beaming as she lifted her glasses off her bosom and placed them on her doughy face. Beads of sweat glistened between the lines on her forehead while the little gold chain hanging from her frames swung gently with a light shimmer as she dutifully noted our selections. Greece was nominated first because we recently learned about democracy and city-states, then Italy because of the Romans. England came next since the United States was once British and France because they helped us win the revolution. The toughest kid in the class and veteran third-grader, Brian McGreevey raised his meaty hand and nominated Russia. Moans and groans murmured from the grid work of desks. When Miss Weissmueller pointed to each nation little hands popped up all around. She carefully counted and noted the tally on the blackboard up

front. In the end, the class chose France and Miss Weissmueller said she thought it was a fine selection. She coughed into a Kleenex then tucked it back into the cuff of her sleeve then yanked the chord and the map rolled up into the long, chrome tube that ran across the top of the board. Suddenly, the room was quiet.

Miss Weissmueller turned back to us and studied the room. She reached for her glasses then abruptly pulled them away from her stony visage. She began to stroll through the aisles, between the neat rows of desks. As she went, she made eye contact with every kid she passed before stopping next to someone's desk.

"Robert, what is nine times eight?" The class waited with wide eyes and gaping mouths.

"Seventy-two."

"Excellent!" She took four steps forward. "Elizabeth McNally. How much is twelve times twelve?"

Elizabeth's pink lips snapped backwards and her pigtails flapped. "One hundred and forty-four, Miss Weissmueller."

"Well done!" I looked at the clock. It wasn't even a quarter past nine.

Miss Weissmueller continued stalking around the room. She caught my eye and stopped at my desk. She placed a hand on my math book. "Tell me James," she said as if speaking to the ceiling. "How much is six times eight?"

My chest had tightened and my stomach twisted while I waited for the question. Once it had come, I started to panic. My mind went blank. I shook my head and mumbled to myself, "Six times eight, six times eight," surrounded by smirking faces. "Uhhh," I stuttered. "Sixty-eight?"

Miss Weissmueller looked like she was having some sort of an attack. Her round eyes bulged, her thick neck quivered and her face went flush. She drove her index finger into my book. “How much is six times eight?”

I wracked my brain and I squirmed in my seat but nothing came. Miss Weissmueller’s red eyes were burning as she waited. A couple kids were giggling and McGreevey pursed his lips and shook his head sideways. He put a finger to his head and mouthed, ‘retard.’ My throat dried up and my heart was beating hard. I looked at Miss Weissmueller from the tops of my eyes and squeaked, “Sixty-eight?”

A weak shriek escaped the portly, paisley clad educator. Her eyes were wide as she put a hand to her open mouth and let the other drop to her meaty hip. A second later, she took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of nose. She slowly stepped back behind her desk, which was a few feet away from mine. She took her seat and sat silent for few moments with the same pained look. A couple of times she opened her mouth but then she’d stop herself. Finally, she stood up and said, “We have been learning multiplication tables for the last four weeks. Each morning, we went over the homework,” she pointed to the board. “And worked out each exercise,” then she pointed at me. “I seem to remember you being here, Mr. White.”

I slumped lower in my seat and the rat behind me kicked my chair. Whenever Miss Weissmueller called me Mr. White, I was in big trouble. I worked my fingers in between the lid and drawer of my desk and tapped them lightly while I knocked my heels together.

“Stop fiddling with your desk and settle down” she said with her chubby face folded into its sharpest look. I don’t know how she did it, but Miss Weissmueller always



had a way of getting to the truth. “Have you been using a calculator to complete your math homework?”

The jig was up. I stuttered and stammered, unable to coax an answer out of my mouth. The classroom was as quiet as courtroom.

“I’d like an answer to that question, young man.” I quickly realized, as I read the awful verdict between the fleshy lines on her face, that for Miss Weissmueller, an offense like this was the worst kind of all. She continued to press. “Did you, or did you not, use a calculator while you did your math homework?”

My mind snapped into gear and I invented a story. I knew I had nothing to lose, so I gave it a whirl. “Well,” I started. “Only to check my answers,” I said as innocently as I could.

Miss Weissmueller shook her head and placed her palms at her sides. She leaned forward and caught me in the burning light of her stare. “Oh, James,” she lamented. “Don’t compound your cheating with lies. Lies will get you nowhere, young man.”

My heart sank into my stomach.

“Now, once again, tell me,” she said, drawing me closer into her eyes. “Did you or did you not use a calculator while you did your math homework?” The classroom was silent. You could have heard a pencil drop.

I glanced down at my sneakers. I didn’t see why this was a big deal in the first place. I suppose if calculators suddenly went extinct, I’d have a problem . . . but everyone knows that would never happen. Still, I wasn’t stupid. I could recognize a lost cause when I saw one. She had me cold. I faced my teacher. “Yes, Miss Weissmueller.”

The career educator launched into a lecture on the evils of cheating. She told me I thought I was cheating her, while I was actually cheating myself. That cheaters wind up in bad places and that they always regret cheating. She wondered how limber my mind really was. Could I successfully compete in the Math Olympics? She said I salvaged my character by telling the truth . . . which I didn't really understand, but she also said the seriousness of the situation had awoken her other fears. "As a result," she concluded, "to be sure we've all done our homework, there will be a test on the multiplication tables, one through twelve, first thing tomorrow." Groans broke out everywhere and my chair jumped with a thump. I turned around and scanned the room. Puny scowls were pointed at me from every direction. "Listen up, folks," Miss Weissmueller called over the moans. She pulled out her folded Kleenex from her cuff and held it to her nose. "Athletes practice and train for their sports. The Math Olympics demands no less. Therefore, anyone who fails the test will be excluded from the competition. I want you all to study tonight." I turned around again and could feel the heat coming off of McGreevey's glare. He raised a fist just above his desk and mouthed. 'You're dead.'

The rest of the morning went by in a haze. We read from our history books but I had other things on my mind . . . like McGreevey. When we were dismissed for lunch, I bought myself some time and rummaged through my desk as the others scurried out the door. Once they were all gone, I took the back stairs down to the basement and headed for the fire exit near the janitor's office. It opened into a closed little space that had steps leading up to the schoolyard. There was a sign that said an alarm would go off if the door were opened but I had seen the janitor, Mr. Holmes, go in and out and once he even said to Joe, his assistant, the alarm had been broken for as long as he knew. That information

had gotten me out of more than one jam. I turned the knob and pushed the heavy door forward. There was no siren but halfway through the door stopped with a thud. I heard a muffled shriek then the door gave way. My mouth fell open and my heart skipped a beat when I saw McGreevey and Mike Galligher sitting on the stairs in front of the door.

“Well, look who’s here.” McGreevey’s jagged teeth gleamed a yellowy-brown. I took a step back but they both jumped up. McGreevey grabbed me by my collar and pulled me forward. Galligher carefully closed the door. “Thanks for the test, dumbass,” said McGreevey. His little brown eyes were blazing beneath his crew cut’s sandy turf. Then his expression brightened and he turned to his buddy and chuckled. “The moron can’t even cheat right.”

When I saw McGreevey’s smile my heart slowed down. The pulsating thump that had been in my throat sank to the top of my chest. I laughed along with them and said, “Weissmueller’s a jerk. She’s always picking on us.”

McGreevey pushed me back against the door and turned to Galligher. “*Us?*” he said the way he did when he was asked questions in class. He turned his husky frame back to me. “What makes you think you’re one of us?”

The tiny encasement’s concrete walls were closing in. I could feel McGreevey’s hot breath and searing eyes graze my face. Galligher looked mad, too. “Well, you know,” I started, “Us three get in trouble more than anyone else.”

McGreevey sneered. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah,” Galligher agreed.

I started to say it did when McGreevey reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He took one out and slid it behind his ear then he pushed the pack at

Galligher. McGreevey's purple lips turned upward and a yellow glint shimmered when he turned the pack on me. "If you're one of us," he huffed, "you'll have a smoke."

The thumping that had slowed sped up again and rose to the top of my throat. I knew all about smoking. My father smoked cigarettes. Even though it worried the rest of family, he liked to joke that since he was in World War II and had made it out alive, he learned the secret: when you're number's up, you're number's up. He said it didn't matter what you did in the meantime, but he also said he'd pin my ears back if he ever caught me smoking. I could feel the sweat squeezing out of my pores as I looked at the open pack and thought about cancer and all the pictures we saw in school of black lungs and people dying in hospitals.

McGreevey croaked, "Well?" and my heartbeat leapt to the roof of my mouth. I reached for the pack and pulled out one out. When McGreevey and Galligher slapped hands and cried, 'All right,' the thumping slowed and the tides of sweat receded. Cancer was one thing, but I was smart enough to know I needed to prioritize . . . do the most important thing first. We learned that in the beginning of the year. I put the cigarette between my lips and Galligher stepped up and produced a plain white pack of matches. He struck the little red tip across the book and we all lit up.

Once the wild strings of smoke started to unfurl above us, the mood got looser. McGreevey blew out a grey cloud and held the burning butt before him. "Nothing like a good smoke, aye?"

Galligher sent out a thick cloud of his own. "That's good stuff."

The little encasement was shrouded in smoke. I didn't say much. I just puffed along dutifully.

“Hey,” McGreevey said, pointing up at the door. “Look at the sign.” It was a small, rectangular-shaped and white. In the middle was a cigarette circled in red with a red stripe running through the circle. Above it in black it read, *Thank you for not smoking*. McGreevey stood up and read the sign in a silly, high-pitched voice with one hand on his hip. “I’m sorry,” he said in his regular voice, “but I don’t give a damn what you say,” then he took big puff and blew it out at the sign. We all cracked up. I took a big puff and blew out the smoke high above my head and watched the thick cloud disappear in the bustling air. The thumping in my chest had changed its beat to a tickle. I realized I was having a good time being bad but then, as we were all still laughing at the sign and I was looking at the ruffling stripes on Galligher’s rugby shirt, I got an eerie feeling. It was like I’d crossed some invisible line closer to something terrible. McGreevey’s joke reminded me of my father. Maybe that was what spoiled the mood? We smoked a few minutes more then the ashes dwindled and our butts burned out. McGreevey ground his under his sneaker then he poked his head above the top step. When he signaled the coast was clear, we all disappeared.

I stopped running a few blocks from school and walked the rest of the way home. Above, the blue sky was cloudless. I remembered the test and thought it was far too nice a day to be in it this deep. The neighborhood had a silvery green glow. Columns of color poked up from the ground like lollipops in front of Tudors and red brick houses with tall, trimmed hedges. Behind white wooden fences with round knobs on their posts, bikes, baseballs gloves, hockey sticks and action figures lay scattered on the lawns. Tangled

branches above tree-lined streets lit up the road in an emerald light. By the time I reached the old Methodist Church on the corner of North Forest, the seriousness of the situation returned. I had gotten past McGreevey but he was small potatoes next to Miss Weissmueller. I could only wonder what I was going to do. I looked up at the cross atop the tall white spire and got a chill. Just like Jesus, there was no fooling Miss Weissmueller. I continued to search for a solution when I thought I might tell my mother. Of course, it all depended on what kind of mood she was in, but if it was a good one, I figured she could help me somehow.

I picked up my pace and crossed Brower Avenue onto my block . . . our house was the second one in from the corner. It's tired white shingles had dulled to gray a few shades lighter than the chipped paint on the porch that gave the place its distinct look in the neat neighborhood. The house next door was enclosed by hedges that were taller than me. I always cut across them and came out in the space between our driveway and the backyard fence. I hated taking the front walk. Anyway, I went inside through the back door to the kitchen. The phone was ringing. I tossed my windbreaker on a chair then hurried into the bathroom to wash the smoky smell off my hands and face.

When I came out of the bathroom my mother was still on the phone. She must have gone to church because she was wearing lipstick and a yellow dress and high heels. Her gray, blond hair sat lightly on her brow and was pulled back around her ears, down to her shoulders. She smiled and shifted the phone to her shoulder. "Hi, honey." Her blue eyes were as light as the sky. She pointed to my seat at the head of the table, my father's chair when he wasn't home. There was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on whole wheat and glass of chocolate milk sitting on a plaid place mat. I nodded and sat down to

eat. She seemed liked she was in good mood. I figured the time was right. I just had to wait for her to get off the phone.

The old white clock, hanging high on the wall above the back door, raced forward. I tried to get my mother's attention but she kept saying, "In a minute, sweetie," then she'd flash her bright smile.

At twelve forty-five I stood up from table and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Usually, I'd be out the door as soon as I could. I liked playing in the yard before the bell. I was still hoping she might hang up but she didn't. After I returned to the kitchen wearing my red windbreaker, she removed the phone from her ear and kissed me goodbye.

"Have a nice afternoon, sweetheart. Eat all your dinner and do your homework. Hurry, now. You don't want to be late."

I started on my way and didn't turn back to say goodbye. "O.K., Mom," I said, then pushed my way through the screen door and let it close with a slam.

The walk to school was less than ten minutes. I wasn't worried I'd be late. Even though I was cutting it close, I took my time since I didn't want to be in the schoolyard too long before the bell. McGreevey and Galligher might be waiting for me. At Maple Street, I detoured around the block to Morris Avenue to avoid my usual route. I waited on the corner, across the street from the school. A couple minutes later, the bell rang and everyone lined up. When the last of the sixth graders entered the building, I sprinted

across the street and into the school. I just made it inside the classroom as Miss Weissmueller was closing the door.

We spent most of the afternoon reading stories from the SRA booklets that were kept in a big yellow box next to the windows. It was a progressive reading program that assigned various colors to each level; the brighter the color the more advanced the reading. I was still in aqua, which was the second level, one ahead of white. We sat at our desks reading and answering the questions printed on the back flap. When we first started, McGreevey got up and sharpened his pencil. On the return trip, he slapped me in the back of the head. Miss Weissmueller never missed a thing. She said, "Please Mr. McGreevey, we've had already more than enough excitement for one day." Then she told him to take his seat and the rest of us to quiet down.

When the bell rang at three, McGreevey and Galligher corralled me into the hall and escorted me outside to our little clubhouse at the fire door. We sat on the steps and smoked two cigarettes each. Luckily, McGreevey had to go somewhere or he might have made us smoke the whole pack. When I got home, my sisters, Mary Kate and Erin were in the living room watching soap operas. I went up the creaky, old stairs to the bathroom and washed my hands and face. I wasn't all that worried about getting caught. Everything in our house smelled like smoke. After that, I went into my room. I still had to figure out what I was going to do. I knew I couldn't learn all the times tables overnight and cheating was out of the question . . . I'd never get away with it. I figured my only hope was to somehow learn enough to at least pass the test. Miss Weissmueller didn't say it but it seemed clear to me that a passing score would clean up the whole mess.



I sat on my bed with my math book in my lap and poured over the times tables, up and down every column as I recited them aloud. Then I took out a pencil and copied them all out. I made neat rows in my binder just like the columns in the book. A little while later, Mary Kate called from the stairs. It was time for dinner. When I got downstairs, my brothers, Billy and Tommy were at the table. Billy was a freshman in high school. He had Tommy in a headlock, which for me was always a welcomed sight.

Mary Kate put a bowl of meatballs swimming in red sauce on the counter, then she brushed her long black hair over her ear. She sharpened her stare then reached for Billy's nose and gave it a pinch. "All right, now," she said like my mother. Erin might have looked more like my mom with her blond hair and tiny frame but Mary Kate *acted* like her. "None of that horse-play at the table." Now that my oldest brother John and next oldest sister, Jeannie, were away at college . . . they both got scholarships . . . Mary Kate's word was law when my parents weren't home.

Billy, who was a giant like my father, released Tommy from his hulking grip after Mary Kate gave his nose another tweak. Then everything settled down. I ate my spaghetti and cleared the table when we were done. Tommy washed the dishes and Erin put them away. After that, everyone did their homework.

I was back on my bed, breaking my brain when I noticed my brother Tommy, whizzing through his assignments. We couldn't be anymore different. Tommy was short and stout while I was tall and wiry. He was good at sports and I was a scrub. And to top it off, Tommy was smart and I was dumb . . . he always got a perfect report card without even trying. When he slammed his notebook shut and hurried downstairs to watch TV, I

looked into the mirror hanging on the wall between our beds and couldn't help feeling like somehow I'd been gypped.

I continued to copy out the tables again and again, hoping to memorize their order. A little while later, Tommy returned with a bang through the door. He looked at my book and screwed up his lips. "You still doing that math? What's taking so long?" He stood at the door with a dull look and shook his head. "I told you, you were adopted."

"Very funny," I said. "I'm almost done."

"Well, hurry up, Einstein" he said, as he pulled off a sock. "It's almost nine."

The light went out but I couldn't sleep. About an hour later, I heard the front door slam then some noise downstairs. My father was home. I pulled the covers over my head and tried my hardest to fall asleep but a few minutes later, I heard my name rattling up the stairway. First "Tommy!" then "Jimmy!" reverberated through the floorboards and shook the peeling wallpaper.

I pulled the covers down and glanced across the room. Tommy looked worried. "C'mon," he said as he jumped out of bed. "He's mad."

I followed Tommy downstairs to the kitchen. There were pots and pans scattered all about. Mary Kate and Erin were both at the counter, frowning, as they silently scrubbed with their heads bent over the sink.

My father was sitting in his chair at the head of the table, still in his worn, gray suit. Even seated, his giant size posed a threat. "Why isn't the garbage out front? It's Monday, isn't it?" He looked at us through the foggy lenses of his thick black frames and swirled the cubes round in his glass. Rhythmically, the cubes clinked lightly against the glass. He slowly raised it to his lips and drank, keeping the both of us in his icy sights.

My brother's face was white as a sheet. I was pretty scared as we stood there, looking at the dull flowers on the wallpaper. I suppose my father scared all the color out of them, too. He put the glass back down on the table with authority. "Well is it Monday or not?" he demanded.

Tom spoke up. "It's Monday."

My father slammed his palm against the table. "So then get those cans out there. What the *hell* is the matter with you two?" We immediately took off and he yelled after us. "I'm getting tired of having to tell you guys every time."

He didn't have to tell us every time. That wasn't true but I knew any discussion of that point could only lead to more trouble. We put our sneakers and jackets on and went out to take the garbage to the curb. We didn't have a car so the driveway was always clear. Tommy liked to pull his can behind him as he ran down the driveway . . . that way the can would swiftly slide down the little incline to the curb. I grabbed a handle and started to follow him but just when I started to get going, the can got snagged in a crack in the pavement. It lurched forward then backwards, out of my grip. I turned around and the lid was off and the can was on its side. Little white plastic bags were scattered all around.

Tommy laughed like he never saw anything funnier. "Smooth move, Clyde," he called from the porch. "Better pick up those bags before Dad sees."

He was right. I hurried over and put the bags back inside the can as Tommy went back inside the house. I stood the can up and pressed down the lid. Then I carefully dragged the can to the curb and set it next to the other. When I got back inside the kitchen, I heard Mary Kate and Erin on the stairs. By then, my father was stationed on the

couch in front of the television with a drink in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth. He told me to get to bed. I hastily shoved my jacket back in the closet without putting it on a hanger then I started up the stairs but stopped on the second step. I crouched down below the banister and looked out between the posts. My father was watching the news and his head was beginning to sag a little to the side, closer to the collar of his wrinkled, white shirt. His head drooped further then his cigarette fell out of his mouth. My heart jumped and I started to straighten but my father woke up and snatched the burning cigarette off of his lap.

I scurried upstairs and went into my room. Tommy was already sleeping. I got back into bed and closed my eyes but all I could see were falling cigarettes. They fell on the floor, on the couch, on the front of my father's shirt. Fire and flame engulfed my mind. I tossed and turned for another half hour. Finally, I sat up on my elbows and looked out in the dark. I figured there was nothing to stop me from creeping downstairs to see if everything was all right.

I slunk out of bed and tiptoed down the creaky stairs and took a seat on one of the splintered steps. My father was still sitting on the couch where he was, smoking. I pressed my face between the baluster posts with my head in my hands. As I watched him watch TV, I wondered when he started smoking. He continued to nod, in and out of sleep with a cigarette dangling between his fingers or lips. Each time he fell out, his head would jerk to one side or the other before he'd wake up. He'd catch the ash, take a drag or stub out the butt in the ashtray before lighting up a fresh one. I stayed on the stairs for hours watching his heavy head sink and snap. I could feel my own eyes drooping. My mind was spinning but that's when I saw the line that I had crossed near the fire door. It

was just a tiny thread, thin as hair separating the bully with the cigarettes and the rumped giant on the couch. A chill skated down me from the top of my head straight into my socks. A moment later, my father sat up he took and took another drag then stubbed the butt out. Then he kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the beat-up couch. Seconds later he was snoring. I pulled myself upstairs and fell into bed. It seemed like I barely closed my eyes before Erin was shaking my shoulder, yelling at me to get up.

I got dressed and went downstairs. I didn't eat my breakfast, which would have been a problem if my mother were home. She was at mass.

"Don't eat," Mary Kate said as she put a pitcher of orange juice back into the refrigerator. "You'll wish you had later. And don't even try to play sick . . . you're not staying home."

I lollygagged my way to school in a daze, looking at all glowing leaves and tall trees along the way. When the bell rang, Miss Weissmueller greeted the class then promptly distributed the test. I looked at the problems and my mind went blank. Everything I thought about was swirling around so fast I couldn't keep track. Twelve times seven? Eight times nine? Nothing made any sense. When everyone had finished, we exchanged papers with our neighbors and Miss Weissmueller went over the test. The kid behind me, the rat who got my paper, kept kicking my chair, hooting and howling after each answer was checked.

Miss Weissmueller collected the tests then looked over each one before she wrote a grade in red at the top and circled it. I got a thirty. I was disqualified from representing France in the Math Olympics along with McGreevey, the class' other failure . . . somehow Galligher squeezed out a seventy. On Thursday McGreevey and me were given

math exercises to do in Mrs. Walsh's second grade class next door while the rest of the third grade competed in the auditorium. Our class won and Miss Weissmueller was happy but when Friday came, McGreevey and me weren't allowed to join the free play . . . we hadn't earned it. We were given books to read and were told to write a report, which was due first thing Monday.

After school, when I refused to smoke, McGreevey beat me up. It wasn't as bad as I imagined but he did give me a fat lip. Anyway, when my mother saw my face and read the note Miss Weissmueller sent home, she was mad too. When my father came home, he finished the job McGreevey started. He growled at me and said only bums cheat and cheaters are liars. He said he wasn't in the business of raising bums. That I was a Catholic and Catholics don't lie and cheat. He said he'd be goddamned before a son of his bashed the church . . . and right under his own roof. The next morning, my face was still red and I was told I was grounded for the entire weekend but I didn't care. I had to do that stupid report.

## Summer Fun

The bell rang and Miss Weissmueller dismissed the class. I joined the bustle with rest of the screeching crowd, when she stepped in my path and pulled me aside near her desk. It was the last day of school before summer vacation . . . it couldn't have come any sooner. I was relieved and excited because it had been a tough year in Miss Weissmueller's class. I suppose prisoners feel the same way when they make parole.

Miss Weissmueller took her seat and folded her hands in her lap. She began, "I hope you have a wonderful summer, James, and I want you to remember," she said, nodding the tight, little blond bun at the back of her head. "Always obey the rules. You know where bad boys end up, don't you?" Her look was severe. "Prison."

I wasn't sure why she said that since I didn't get in any trouble that day. Besides, I had a hard time paying attention. My mind was on other, more important matters. Near the door there was a bunch of large, plastic bags full of papers and notebooks that we all threw away when we were cleaning out our desks. The chalkboard was covered with pictures and doodles. I was dying to get out of there so I told her I would always follow the rules.

Still, she made no sign of closing the conversation. She leaned closer to me. "You had a very poor *attitude* this year." Here, she cocked her head to meet my sight. "If you're going to succeed, you need to adjust your *attitude*."

I really had no idea what she meant but I shook my head, 'Yes,' anyway.

"Promotion to the fourth grade is no small matter. It will be a challenging year and you'll quickly find out, bad behavior is simply not tolerated."

Miss Weissmueller's face was grave as ever . . . I think she laughed only once all year when her pet, Thomas Reese solved a killer math problem . . . a real brain bender. Anyway, you would have thought it was walk off homer in the last game of the World Series. I was beginning to sweat and could feel heat rising from my temples. "You have a wonderful mind, James, but," she raised an index finger in the air, "you must challenge yourself to be the best you can." She took my hand her in her flabby fist and shook it. "I know you can do it."

All I could see was the door. I looked up at my teacher. "Thanks, Miss Weissmueller," I said. "I'll do good in the fourth grade."

Miss Weissmueller's eyes widened and her necklace of flesh tightened then shook. "You'll do *well*."

"Yes, Miss Weissmueller. I'll do *well* in the fourth grade."

When I got outside almost everybody was gone. I didn't see my friends anywhere and the last few cars that were parked in front of the school were pulling away. I walked home alone, thinking about the summer ahead. It was 1977 and there was another oil crisis going on. For the last week, if people needed gas, they had to wait on long lines that went on for blocks. There was a gas station near my house. Every morning that week, when I was going to school people stuck their heads out car windows and asked me to go to the deli for them. Most of them said I could keep the change. That got me thinking. My father's birthday was Sunday and I didn't have any money to buy him a gift. If I got up early the next morning, I figured I could make some money, running back and forth to the deli for all the people waiting on line. A pile of quarters, dimes and



nickels twinkled in my mind. I marched into the house with a heavy step and let the screen door close with a bang.

My mother was in the kitchen, cooking noodles for dinner. She was already in her nurse's uniform. When the door slammed, she turned and I froze in her stare. "Why can't you come in here like a civilized person?" I had never seen the look she had on her face before. I knew it couldn't be just the door. She seemed angry just by the sight of me. Her icy blue eyes shimmered coldly above her sharp, pressed lips. She brushed her gray hair away from her cheek and turned back to what she doing. I crept away and went up to my room. I figured it was safer up there. None of my brothers and sisters were at home. School had let out for them the day before. They were all out doing things on their own.

I thought about what Miss Weissmueller said and decided to stay in my room until my mother left for work. I didn't want to get in her way. I kept myself busy, making preparations for the next morning. While my mother was in the back yard, hanging clothes on the line to dry, I scampered down the creaky stairs to the basement where my oldest brother stored boxes of his things. He was away at college and I knew there was an alarm clock in one of them. After a quick search, I found the clock and returned to my room. I put a pencil and a small pad aside on my dresser then set the alarm for seven o'clock. The rest of the day, I read the M volume of the World Book Encyclopedia and arranged my baseball cards.

Later that night, as I readied for bed, my older brother Tommy noticed the alarm clock plugged in near my bed. "What's with the alarm clock? You going somewhere?"

I was a little hesitant to explain. Everything I did or said seemed stupid to Tommy. "I have to get up early."

Tommy placed his hands on his hips and screwed up his eyes. “What do you have to get up for?” A glossy color poster of Jimmy Walker, better known as J.J., Kid Dyn-o-mite, from my favorite television show, *Good Times*, was tacked to the wall behind him. I thought J.J. would never treat Michael like this.

The faux, wood panel wallpaper and creaky, uncarpeted floor left me feeling boxed in. Tommy pushed me down on my bed then back down when I tried to stand up. There was no putting him off. “I have to work tomorrow. I’m going to run to the deli for people waiting for gas.”

Tommy let a laugh. “That’s pretty dumb,” he howled. “How much do you think can make? Millions, I bet.” I never thought about that. I had no idea. I sat there on my bed, wondering how much change I could make when Tommy turned off the light. “Oh, by the way, Mr. Hughes,” he said in the dark, “if that alarm wakes me up, you’re dead.”

I slept all night with one eye open. When the alarm sounded, I reached for it as fast as I could. Tommy stirred but to my relief, he rolled over and slipped back asleep. I slithered out of bed and grabbed a shirt, pants and sneakers before creeping out the door. I put my clothes on in the bathroom then tiptoed down the squeaky stairs to the kitchen. There was an empty coffee cup in the sink. My father was already gone. I made myself a glass of chocolate milk and when I was done, I went out the back door.

With my pencil and pad I walked down our empty driveway. Already I could see a lot of cars waiting. The line stretched out from the station past my house for blocks. I was delighted to see so many potential customers and got right to it. I walked along the edge of the curb, asking motorists if they needed anything from the deli. It didn’t take long before I was swamped. Once people knew what I was doing, they waved and called

to me out their windows. I ran to the deli as fast as I could which was just across the street from the gas station. The second time I came in the man behind the counter realized what I was doing and he took my orders first. He piled newspapers, bagels, egg sandwiches, juices and styrofoam cups of coffee in brown cardboard boxes. I shuttled back and forth for hours. It didn't take long for the profits to add up. Thirty-five cents from a station wagon, fifty from a Mercedes; one guy in a Datsun let me keep seventy-five. I was getting pretty tired but the cash was rolling in. I kept going, jotting down orders and running as fast as my legs could carry me. Then suddenly, as if by magic, all the cars went away. I asked the man in the deli where they went. He told me because there was an oil shortage, gas stations were only permitted to open from eight in the morning until noon. He said it wouldn't go on much longer but with Carter, he said kind of laughing, you never know. I looked out at the gas station, past all the meats and cheeses hanging in the window. It was already closed. The man motioned for me to come around to the side of the tall counter. I was sure I'd done something wrong as I slowly walked to him past the glassy chrome cases filled with cold cuts, salads and desserts. I thought I might have gotten in someone's way while I waited for the orders.

The man came around the other side and bent down. I didn't realize he was so tall but I guess he had to be to take orders from behind such a big counter. He wore a white, short-sleeved shirt and a coffee stained apron, checkered pants and pointy black shoes. "I want to thank you for all your help, today." His smile widened and his gray eyes glowed as he held out a crisp dollar bill. "Take it. You've earned it," he said with conviction. I was astonished . . . paper money.

I took the bill with one eye on the dessert case. "Thanks," I said.

The man stood up. "Wait a minute." Then he slipped back behind the counter and reached into the case. He dropped a chocolate-coated éclair into a brown, paper bag and came back out front. "Here," he said. "Your bonus."

I took the bag and thanked him again. As I started toward the door I could feel all the change rising and falling inside in my pocket. The jingling jangle perked up my tired steps. I couldn't wait to get home to count out the loot. When I arrived, my mother was taking a nap. No one else was home. Luckily, Tommy had something to do. I was free to attend to business, undisturbed in our room. Once there, I emptied my pockets on the bed. The little pile with the dollar bill on top was the most money I had ever seen in my life. I counted it out not once, twice or even three times but five, maybe six. I was pleased by my success and wanted to be sure the accounting was correct. In total, I made six dollars and nineteen cents. I looked at the neat pile of coins and the crisp bill while I chomped on the éclair. I scooped up the money and stashed it in a shoe under my bed then went downstairs with a whole new swagger. My mother had since gotten up and she was in the kitchen, making a cup of tea.

"Hi Mom," I shouted.

"There you are. Where have you been? I was going frantic looking for you." The dull flowers on the kitchen wallpaper looked as sad as my mother. She had the same look on her face she did the day before.

"I was working."

"Working?" she exclaimed. "Where have *you* been working?" She took the teabag out of her cup and wrapped the string around the spoon and squeezed the bag.

I told her all about my morning but she didn't care.

“Next time,” she said in her sternest voice, “you better tell someone where you’re going. I have better things to do than worry about *you* all morning.”

I knew she was right but I hadn’t even thought about it. I was never more than three blocks away. I didn’t think it mattered. “Sorry Mom, “ I said looking down at my ripped sneakers.

“Well, Mister, you can spend the rest of the day inside, thinking about it.” She stretched her arm out upon the empty chair next to her and shook her head as she studied me with lips pressed and cold eyes shining. “Go upstairs and take off those ratty sneakers. You look like you don’t have an owner.”

I went up to my room and put on my other pair of sneakers. I hated them because they used to be Tommy’s and they were a little too big but my mother said they were fine. I didn’t even like the color . . . they were blue. I always got red. I sat on my bed, stewing over my punishment. I was thinking about the look on my mother’s face, the one she made the day school let out. Tommy made a face just like it whenever we had broccoli for dinner. I couldn’t help feeling I was being punished because it was summer. I looked out the window into the blank blue sky and sighed.

I looked across the room at J.J. He had a crazy smile was wearing his denim Kangol. His skinny arms were spread wide and he’s shouting, “Dyn-o-mite!” which is written in print bundled up and strung across the top of the poster like colored wires. I started to smile then was suddenly inspired. Soon, my mother would be leaving for work. Nobody else was home. Who would know if I slipped out to the drugstore? Earlier, I had decided that’s where I’d go while I walked home from the deli. They had a lot great things; fancy stuff, too, which they kept in glass cases. I had more than six dollars and

figured I could get my father something really great and still have plenty left over. Then it occurred to me I could get my mother something too . . . I thought it might help smooth things over.

I sat in my room, thumbing through the encyclopedia as I waited for my mother to leave. A while later, she poked her head in my room and said goodbye. When I heard the front door close, I slapped my hands together like J.J. and shouted, “Dyn-o-mite!” then hurried downstairs. In seconds, I was on my bike peddling down the road. A whole new wave of something I never felt before came over me. I was exhilarated as I pumped away towards town. When I arrived at the drugstore, I locked my bike against a telephone pole then scampered inside. I had to be quick but I didn’t want to make a foolish selection. I walked through the bright aisles, jammed with colored, plastic packages and tiny, cardboard boxes of toothpastes, deodorants and soaps. I went along slowly, inspecting each item before I reached the aftershave. Row after row of different shaped bottles lined the neat shelves and sparkled under the fluorescent lights. I quickly honed in on the rounded, blue bottles of Aqua Velva. The *Ice Blue* version featured a special offer . . . two free disposable Bic razors attached to the cap. Without a second thought, I pulled a bottle off the shelf and went to another aisle to find something for my mother. I choose a bottle of bubble bath then went to the counter and paid. When I told the girl behind the register they were gifts for parents, she took the bottles out of the bag and wrapped each one in shiny paper and tied up with a bow.

I got on my bike and headed for home with forty-four cents still jingling in my pocket. My heart was racing with excitement. Surely when my parents saw their beautifully wrapped presents and opened them, they’d know what a great guy I really

was. I'd gotten in a lot of trouble that year, more than ever before and I wanted to do something good to clear my name. It didn't matter anymore if Miss Weissmueller hated me, but my parents were a different matter.

I peddled hard, determined to pull off my plan without a single hitch. The road sped away underneath my reeling tires and the wind rushed through my hair. I was cruising along at a pretty good speed past solemn houses with sharp, green lawns when all of a sudden, my front tire hit a crevice in the road, sending the bike down into the crater then back up with a snap. I held onto the handlebars with the paper bag dangling but still tight in my grip. The bike jerked forward and when my tire bounced back on the pavement, the bottom of the bag gave out. I jammed on my brakes and screeched to a stop and looked back at the shiny packages lying in the street. Tiny yellow bubbles and blue colored liquid was seeping out all around the battered boxes. I jumped off my bike but it was no use . . . both bottles were smashed. My eyes welled up but I fought back the tears. I didn't have time to cry. I swallowed the sadness and peddled home with a heavy heart. I put my bike in the garage then slipped inside the back door. Thankfully, no one was home. I went up to my room and splayed out on my bed. That's when I finally let myself cry.

A couple hours passed before the house started to fill. I heard a few of my brothers and sisters downstairs but I stayed in my room. A little while later, I heard my father come in. It was only six o'clock, which was strange. He almost never made it home before nine. When he arrived this early, he was either in a really good mood or a really bad one. I decided he was early because of his birthday. I jumped off my bed and hurried downstairs.

My brother Tommy was stationed on the couch, in front of the television with a plate of Oreos and a glass of milk. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Howard Hughes, himself,” he scoffed. “How’s the bustling world of business, Mr. Hughes?”

I don’t know what came over me. I told him to shut up.

“Careful, Mr. Hughes,” he said, as he wagged a finger. “Or I’ll have to void your account.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that but without a single thought, I uttered the one word that had been known to change the destinies of kids’ lives all over the world. If I had been a little smarter, I might have been able to control myself but it was no use. I said it.

Tommy’s eyes fluttered and his mouth hung low. “Dad!” he screamed. “Jimmy said the F word!”

A tremendous fear took possession of me and twisted my guts. I heard the clang of a beer can against the kitchen table and a moment later, I could feel the floorboards shake as my father stormed into the living room. He was still in his suit. Instantly, he grabbed me. His giant hand gripped my shoulder, neck and back. “You want to live in the gutter?” he bellowed. I saw Tommy’s chubby smirk as my father continued to yell. I could feel something burning inside my stomach then suddenly, in one swift move the Irish giant released me and pivoted towards the kitchen. Before I knew next, his hand came around and connected with my cheek. I was swept off the carpet like dust in the air, backwards against the closet door. I picked myself up and ran up to my room. I stayed there while the rest of the family ate dinner. I never told anyone what happened. Two days later, my father’s birthday came and went and no one was the wiser. I didn’t care



that I didn't have a gift for him and besides, I could tell he didn't expect one. And that bubble bath was a stupid idea. My mother always took showers.

## Up a Tree

It was starting to get dark and Tommy was still in the tree. He had been up there for hours and even though my real fear was what would happen when my father got home from work, I couldn't help wonder how he could stay up there so long. I would have peed my pants or maybe even fell down. But Tommy was tougher than me. The fact that he was still up there, proved it. Still, my heart was beating fast and hard and my palms were itchy. Every minute he remained in tree, the more explosive the situation became. All I could do was watch the fuse burn.

I stood at the edge of the patch of ivy that surrounded the tree looking up with my mouth open. When my parents bought the house they were told our pine tree was the tallest one in town. I was very proud of that fact and took great pains to insert it, very matter-of-factly into conversations with friends or classroom discussions. My father didn't feel the same way about the tree as I did. He said he was going to cut it down, because one day it would ruin him when a hurricane would come and send it crashing into his house.

A wooden grind then metal screech peeled out from the second floor and I turned back and looked up at the house. A second later, my mother's head and shoulders popped out of a window. Her teeth were clenched and her thin pink lips were pulled back tight. She hissed at the tree, "You're in big trouble, Mister," then she pointed at some branches higher up. "Come down from that tree, right now," she demanded.

I couldn't see Tommy in the maze of wood and needles but I heard him say, "No."

My mother's mouth fell open and her eyebrows snapped into a V. She placed her hands on the bottom of the windowsill and leaned out further. "What did you say young man?" Tommy made no answer and my mother's eyes burned brighter. She struck the casement with an open hand. "Answer me."

Suddenly the branches near the middle shook. "No!" thundered out from the needles.

I looked up at the wild light burning in my mother's eyes. "Oh, you..." she started. She struck the windowsill again. "Thomas Leonard White, this is the last time I going to tell you: come down from that tree this instant."

The branches rustled. "But all the other kids . . ."

"I don't care about the other kids," she thundered. "Let's go. Right now, Mister."

Tommy remained silent while my mother waited. A few moments later, she let out a huff then the window slammed shut. I ran into the ivy even though I hated it and shouted, "You better come down. She's mad," then I looked down to make sure nothing was slithering in the vines near my feet. "If you don't, she'll tell Dad."

The branches rustled then shook. "Shut up." Then a second later, "Just get out of here."

I tiptoed out of the ivy into the back yard and sat down on the stoop. By then both Mary Kate and Regina were home and I could hear my mother in the kitchen, telling them what was going on. Her tone was sharp as she cut through the details then added, *he's going to get it*. A terrible feeling was gathering in my stomach and I could feel my heart's steady beat. Birds were chattering and every now and then a whoosh of wind whisked across the bushes and trees above the reeling hum of passing cars. I thought my

brother was crazy . . . risking his scalp just to avoid a haircut. The razzing at school never went on for more than a few days and by the next week it was usually over. It just wasn't worth it. In our house, Tommy had just committed a capitol offence, which was right up there with looking at *Playboy* or stealing.

My sisters came out the back door and walked around the house to the tree. Mary Kate was tall and had dark hair like my father and Regina was shorter and blond like my mother. Anyway, Mary Kate's eyebrows were pinched close together the way they always did when she wanted to get to the bottom of something. Regina stood next to her with a smirk on one cheek and her brown eyes beaming. She was only a couple years older than Tommy . . . they fought like cats and dogs.

Mary Kate was looking up into the tree and I suppose she spotted him because after a few seconds, she walked into the ivy. "Tommy," she called gently. "Come down from there. It's only a haircut." She waited for a moment but he didn't answer. "What if it didn't have to be so short?" She brushed her long black hair over an ear and pursed her lips. "Would that be OK?"

Tommy didn't say anything. Even though Mary Kate was the boss when my parents weren't home, her offer was suspicious. I knew my father would have something to say about all this. He seemed to have a hatred for human hair on males and he kept what was left of his own very short and made Tommy and me do the same. When Billy started high school, my father stopped making him get a crew cut too, but Tommy and me were still a long way off from high school. Mary Kate remained in the ivy looking up into the dark shadows and tangled branches with the same easy look on her face. She had a way making everything OK. I watched her as she stood there in the ivy and knew I

could never withstand such pressure. I would have climbed back down the second she called my name but the branches remained still. Finally, Regina hooted, “You’re going to get killed when Dad gets home.”

Mary Kate’s long hair flipped back then and a crunch from the vines ripped out from the ivy when she turned. She slowly screwed her head at Regina with her blue eyes wide and her mouth clamped shut. Regina let out a huff and sailed off on the skirts of her flowered prairie dress. She pushed me aside and her clogs clacked up the steps into the house. Mary Kate called to Tommy a few times more but all he said was “No.”

“OK. You come down when you’re ready.” She walked out of the ivy and started for the porch. As she went, she glanced my way then trailed off towards me. She bent down and ran a hand across my head then gave me a kiss. Her thin lips were pointed at the corners and her eyes gave off a soft, blue light. “Don’t worry about Tommy. He’ll come down soon.” Her rosy cheeks swelled and she pressed her hand against my cheek then went back inside the house.

I ran into the ivy. “See?” I called. “It’s OK,” I tried to assure him. “Come down and it’ll all be over.”

The patch of branches near his nest rumbled. “Shut up!”

The same wooden grind and metal crunch suddenly screeched out from the second floor window. My mother stuck her head out and pointed into the tree. “This is the absolute last time I will tell you, young man,” then she motioned to the ground. “Come out of that tree.” Her look was now blank and her voice was sterner . . . not crackled like before. I might not have been as smart as Tommy but I could recognize the danger in her calmness . . . like the coming hurricane that worried my father. I was

standing on the lawn, just at the edge of ivy hoping to hear his answer but he didn't say a word and the branches didn't rustle. Tommy had been in the pine tree for more than hour at that point. My mother waited with her head and shoulders sticking out of the window and her hands gripping the chipped paint on the casement. She remained still, gazing straight ahead into the needled thickness. A minute later she snapped, "Suit your self," and the window roared shut.

A heavy lump was gathering in my chest. I tried to get a grip on what was happening but the situation had spun out of control so quickly that my head began reeling with all kinds of terrible scenes showing my father hitting Tommy. A smack on his head, a fist in his face, a kick in his gut. I could hear his screams in the halls of my head, as I pictured him falling down on the creased linoleum in the kitchen with tears gushing from his eyes. I looked down at my jeans and noticed my twitching knees. It felt like the air was choking me. I took breath after breath but couldn't get enough while my father's red hands gripped my imagination. The window suddenly roared open and my brother Billy stuck his head out. I hadn't realized he was home. He looked down at me and pressed his lips into frown and shook his head. He turned to the tree and said, "What the hell are you doing?" He glanced back down at me with same grave face then looked back into the tree. "The old man is going to kick your ass."

The branches shook. "I don't care."

Billy's eyebrows arched and he turned up his head. "You don't care?" He pulled the brim of Yankee cap and nodded with an unhappy grin. "You will soon enough, my man," then he went back inside the window.

I called up to Tommy but he told me to shut up and leave him alone so I trudged out of the ivy and went back to the stoop. I was staring at the tips of my sneakers and the slab of gray slate sunk into the grass at the bottom of the stairs. My stomach hurt and a cold feeling was slithering all over my body. For some reason, my father was tougher on Tommy than he was with the rest of us. No matter what Tommy did, my father had a way of turning every one of his victories into a pitiful defeat. I remember one time, when Tommy hit a walk-off home run and was so excited as he told my father about it, that he rushed his words into garbled sentences. All my father said was, *You're singing, Tom. Take a breath and speak clearly.* I'll never forget the sad expression on Tommy's face as my father dropped the subject and told us to wash up for dinner as he pulled the tab off a fresh can of beer. My mother knew all this and that's why she usually let Tommy get away with a lot. I knew she was mad but I still thought she wouldn't tell my father. Now I wasn't so sure. Billy and Regina thought she would and I knew no matter how nice Mary Kate was my parents always had the last word.

Things had quickly spiraled out of control. I wished I could slow everything down . . . begin again. It all started the second we got home from school. We had barely stepped into the house when all hell broke loose. My mother was in the living room, folding laundry and there were small stacks of jeans, shirts and socks piled up on the couch. Bright sunlight streamed through the open curtains and a lemony, detergent smell soaked the air. She pointed straight at us. "Hold it right there, fellers," then she reached into her apron and produced a five-dollar bill. "Haircuts . . . the two of you."

My brother's eyes spiraled and his mouth fell open. He dropped his binder, "No way," he shouted. Then he tore off through the kitchen. I didn't realize what was going on until I heard the back door slam.

My mother scampered around the coffee table past a mountain of unfolded laundry. I chased her apron's flapping strings and caught the screen door as it screeched back on its springs. She rushed out into the middle of the lawn and placed both hands on the hips of her blue dress. Her blond head slowly scanned the whole backyard from the bushes to the fence. She started toward the driveway when a branch broke snapped from the side of the house. She spun round on her beige sandals and marched across the yard to the pine tree. Suddenly, she stopped and gasped with her head aimed high at the dark tangle. I looked into the woody maze and a few seconds later, I spotted a pair of blue Keds dangling over a branch between a swath of pointy needles. Tommy's torso popped out of the green and he glanced over a shoulder before he started off again . . . one sneaker disappeared and then the other peddled away, leaving fluttering boughs in his wake. I followed his path to a small gap in the branches and waited. Seconds later, his arms reached up and grasped two separate limbs. One elbow flexed before the other then his head and shoulders crossed the gap. Next, the red and white stripes on his shirt shimmied past then his ripped blue jeans before his sneakers disappeared and the clearing was empty.

My mother ran into the patch of ivy blanketing the base of the tree and her sandals got snared in the vines. Her small body jerked forward and her apron strings snapped backwards. She caught herself and shrieked, "Jesus Mary and Joseph!" She pulled her feet out of the jumbled web of leaves and adjusted her footing before she went closer to



the tree. She looked up with a hand against the trunk and called, "Come down here right now, Mister." It was harder to see him the higher he went . . . but the steady shake and creak of the branches gave him away. My mother waited for a minute but Tommy didn't answer. Her arms dropped to her sides as she turned around and sloshed out of the ivy. Her blue eyes were blazing and her sandals hammered the wooden steps as she went back into the house.

I stayed where I was, gazing up into the branches. I'd stopped climbing trees after I fell off the garage roof a couple years earlier. I didn't get hurt but I never went up there again. Tommy always had a way of amazing me . . . there was nothing he couldn't do. He always got straight A's, in the Little League he made the all-star team every year and Tommy never got beat up. I remembered what he said to me as we walked home from school a few months earlier. It was the day after the last time we were sent to the barbershop. He was in bad mood when I met him near the swings after the last bell. He didn't say a word until we were halfway home. He was walking a few steps ahead of me and suddenly stopped in the speckled shade lining Lakeside Avenue and swung around to face me. A fire truck blared by and he waited it for it to pass with his eyes screwed tight into a pair of burning slits. "I'm never getting a haircut like this again," he declared with a wild wave of his hand. "We look like we're in the army." His pink fingers were white at the tips as they gripped the binder against his side. He shook his head and bit his bottom lip. "I don't care what they say. Never again."

I was still out on the back stoop, looking out into the yard, past the pointed wooden fence posts and black-shingled roofs of our neighbors' houses and the leafy green treetops fanned out beneath the blue sky. Wisps of white clouds were stretching

across the horizon and an orangey-red sunlight was glowing behind the garage as an idea floated into my head. I blessed myself then closed my eyes and prayed: *Please Jesus, you gotta help me. My brother's in the pine tree and Dad's gonna kill him. Please save him. It's easy for you. Bring Tommy down from the tree and I'll never curse again. Amen.*

We always ate dinner at six but that night, my mother didn't call us to the table until six-thirty. The sun was going down and Tommy was still up in the tree. There was an eerie feeling in the kitchen that evening, like a ghost was in his empty seat. Other than scraping forks, scratching knives and the light thud of glasses against the tabletop, dinner was unusually quiet. After a few tries at conversation and still she was unable to pry a word or two out of any us, my mother gave up. She snapped her napkin into a triangular fold and dabbed her lips with a sharp look directed Mary Kate's way. Mary Kate returned the glare with an identical shade of fiery blue. Above the water pitcher, there weren't any crackles or sparks but could you feel heat coming from the point of impact where their smoldering eyes collided. Even Billy stopped shoveling chicken and dumplings down his throat for a moment and watched them with his fork in the air, his mouth hanging open while Regina's head zigzagged side to side. My mother's look was fierce but there was also something about it that made it even more terrible . . . the way her upturned lips were pointed on her cheek . . . like a smirk. Mary Kate lifted her fork, still staring and took a small bite of chicken and swallowed. She laid her fork on the side of her plate and placed both hands on her lap. "Yes, Mother?"

Billy dropped his fork and Regina's eyebrows arched. My Mother's eyes were still searing above the dark rings beneath them but her lips started to curve slightly upward on one cheek as she studied my sister. Then her gaze shined across the table at the rest of us and we all looked down at our plates.

I was what my parents called 'a bad eater,' so when I saw my mother's gaze, I knew what was coming next. "Jimmy," she cracked. "Food costs money. And worse, wasting is a sin. Jesus would not be happy."

I was fidgeting in my chair. I didn't want to waste food but I wasn't hungry. Then, all of a sudden, I could feel a lump in my stomach when I realized that if Jesus got mad at me for wasting, there was no way he was going to help Tommy. I started to shovel the dry, boiled chicken down my throat, like the way Billy did, wondering when Jesus was going to save my brother. During one of those painful swallows, I heard my mother say, 'Better,' and I felt some relief. Still, I worried that I might have wrecked Tommy's chances. I liked Jesus but hated how my mother always got him involved when she wanted me to do something. My mother went to St. Agnes every morning and sometimes during the day when there weren't any services. She'd sit in a pew in the dark cathedral among the sparkle and pop of little white candles, arranged in long rows like a flickering wax choir, casting their yellow sheen on the creamy walls and pillared ceiling of the dark eaves flanking each bank of mahogany pews. Her long blond hair tied in a bun, a tissue clasped in her thin, bony fingers with her sagging blue eyes on the verge of tears, she'd spend hours that way, talking to Jesus and saying her prayers. I could feel the pasty dumplings piled up in my stomach all the way to the back of my throat as I forced down the last bite. I was thinking about my deal with Jesus and remembered the time when I

asked my mother why he never came down to earth to help people. She told me Jesus did his work *through people*, which was why it was important to be a good Catholic. Jesus, she said, might need me some day, so I had to always try to be my best because one day, he might do his work through me. Then I remembered something else she said. I was having trouble with some kids at school and came home upset about their teasing. She told me, "If you know what is right in your heart, nothing anyone says can matter." I thought about all that and suddenly felt the lump in my stomach drop lower when I realized something . . . only my mother could save Tommy and if Jesus was going to help, he'd have to do his work *through her*. I knew in my heart if she had listened to Tommy plead his case when he tried, she would have changed her mind about the crew cut.

When dinner ended, Billy went up to his room and Mary Kate told Regina and me she'd do the dishes and our chores as well . . . the drying and putting away. She turned back to my mother and her crimson cheeks faded. "I want to talk to Mom alone."

I was in my room, sitting on my bed with my math workbook open. I had homework to do but I couldn't concentrate. I was looking across the room at Tommy's empty bed and the poster of Jimmy Walker from the television show *Good Times*, tacked to the wall above it. I usually got a charge out of J.J.'s big toothy smile and his mantra, 'Dy-no-mite!' spelled out across the top of the poster but for some reason he bothered me that night. I closed my math book and fingered through baseball cards instead. The house was quiet . . . Billy and Regina were in their rooms, doing their homework, Mary Kate

and my mother were down in the kitchen and Tommy was still up in the tree. I kept looking at his digital clock that was on top of the little table at the head of his bed feeling like an inmate on death row. There was no set time when my father came home from work, which made the wait even worse. It was already seven-thirty and at any moment, he could step around the corner and start up our front walk. I dreaded his arrival but something inside me wanted to get the whole thing over. I was losing faith that Jesus was going to do his work through my mother as the bright red numbers rolled closer to eight. My mother hadn't gone to the window since dinner and Tommy had been up there for almost four hours.

The floorboards on the stairs creaked and I hopped off my bed. I raced out into the hallway and saw Mary Kate come around the balustrade's bend. She wasn't smiling. Her eyebrows were arched and her mouth was screwed shut. She bent down and kissed my cheek, then she started for the stairs to the attic. She said, "I have to do my homework," then she climbed up and away. Seconds later I heard her door slam so loudly I could feel the ceiling shake then another rang out from the front door below.

I skulked downstairs on the balls of my feet and peered out around the alcove into the kitchen. My father's figure occupied most of the frame . . . I didn't see my mother until he bent down to kiss her. He tossed a newspaper onto the table and turned to the cabinets above the sink and loosened his tie. I heard the cabinet door squeak as my mother watched him place a bottle and glass down on the counter. My mother passed out of sight then I heard the freezer door's pop. She passed by again with an ice tray in her hand then I heard the clinking cubes drop into a glass. Every hair on my body felt like a needle poking through me. My father took his chair at the head of the table. I crouched

lower and stayed closer to the wall to avoid being spotted. I could hear the cubes jingling as my mother sat down next to him but I couldn't hear what she was saying. The back of her blond head was bobbing between her shoulders as she spoke. Then the crack of glass shot off the table with a rattle from its icy report. My father removed his thick black glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He growled, "Christ, Almighty! I have to come to home this?"

Moments later, my father was on his feet turning to the screen door. I scurried back up the stairs to my parent's room and gently cracked the window. With one eye just above the casement, I looked down and saw my father walking into the ivy. I turned to the tree but it was too dark to see anything but I could hear rustling branches. I looked down at my father rolling the cuffs of shirtsleeves. He turned his big gray head up at the tree. "Tom," he barked, "get down here right now or I'll cut this goddamn tree down with you in it."

I could hear branches shaking then a minute later in a swath of light pouring out of the living room window, I saw Tommy inching his way down through the tangled darkness. When he hopped to the ground my father grabbed him with one hand by the back of his neck and hunched over him. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I lifted my head higher and looked out with both eyes. A second later, my father snapped back up and he pulled Tommy out of the ivy by the back of his neck then pushed him toward the house. I gently pressed the windowpane shut and noticed my hands were trembling. I snuck out of my parent's room and met Billy and Regina in the hallway. They were standing at the top of the staircase. Billy motioned to be quiet and Regina's big brown eyes looked watery and she had a hand across her mouth. A crash and bang

then gurgled shrieks rose up from the kitchen. Then, my father's dry voice thundered out of the ruckus. "When your mother tells you do something, you do it!" Then the scrape and flutter of aluminum legs on linoleum bounced up the stairs before a heavy thud. There was another snapping sound of flattened flesh and I could hear Tommy crying. My father's voice growled, "Not such a big shot now, huh?" and there was another cracking slap. Every second I stood there, trying not to make noise on the squeaky floorboards felt like a hundred years. Every cry, crash and smash ripped me. Through the walls and floors I could see my brother bang into the refrigerator, the kitchen table and my father's red hands smacking his face. I looked down at my own hands, at the tiny half moons pressed into my wet palms and brushed them against my leg. Billy was looking at the opposite wall, shaking his head with his mouth pressed shut and Regina kicked the hamper then went into her room and closed the door. Then Billy went up to the attic, still shaking his head.

Everything suddenly became quiet except the mingled murmur of my parents' voices. I started to creep down the stairs when I heard footsteps near the alcove. I hurried up the stairs on the tips of my toes and into my room and turned off the light. A couple seconds later, Tommy limped in and closed the door. He was crying. I heard his bedsprings creak when he sat down, then the thud of his sneakers hitting the floor. I didn't say anything . . . I just listened as he got into bed. There was another creak then the whoosh of his bedspread before a long silence, made worse by his staggered breathing and gasps that went with his tears. After a while I couldn't take it and whispered, "Are you OK?"

Tommy sniffled then wheezed. His bedsprings creaked. "Yeah."

His bed creaked again and there was more silence. I laid there in the dark listening to my brother cry himself to sleep. I couldn't sleep. In the blackness of our unlit room a fire started inside me. All I could see was mother's face, the smirk she was wearing while she staring at Mary Kate . . . those blazing eyes and pink lips pointed up on her smart cheek. My father was the one who did the hitting but I knew where to place the blame. My mother's smirk confirmed it, like she knew, in our house she was the almighty. She could have saved Tommy but she didn't. In my mind I screamed, 'Ffff,' dragging out the f sound before adding the 'uck.' It felt good to curse. I knew I couldn't depend on Jesus. Still, I didn't get any sleep that night and I remember I was still groggy the next day when Tommy and me walked to the barbershop.

I managed to stay out of the paths of both my parents for the rest the week. My mother was working and she was always gone before I got home from school. She returned when I was in bed. I was glad. Since that day, I could barely look at her at breakfast. I usually fussed about eating my egg but for the rest of the week, I gulped down my juice and milk and stuffed the fried egg down my throat without saying a word. On Saturday, when my father was home, I stayed out of the house and played stickball at school until dinnertime. Then I hid out in my room for the rest of night. Mary Kate stayed in her room most of the weekend, too. She'd been grounded for two weeks.

Sunday's we always had a big breakfast before we went to church and then a big dinner later since it was the one day they were both off from work. We had just finished eating. My father finished his coffee and said he was going to the deli to buy cigarettes.



After the table was cleared, my mother turned to Tommy and me and said, “Let’s go you, two. Get ready for mass.”

I don’t know what came over me but a burning sensation lit up in my chest and I heard, “I’m not going,” slip out of my mouth.

My mother’s eyebrows rose up between the wrinkles on her forehead. She slowly folded her napkin then slapped it down on the table. “Really?” she said with that same smirk on her cheek. “And what would Jesus think about that?”

It was like I was there but wasn’t there . . . like watching yourself on TV. I saw my slow, steady breathing and could feel the heat in my hands.

My mother’s look remained unchanged. “Well?” she said.

My chest was smoldering and everything felt like it was melting. My mother looked like someone else. Her small pointed nose was crooked and blue and her thin red lips were sharp and bloody. I swallowed my breath and mumbled. “Fuck Jesus.”

My head started swirling with my brothers’ and sisters’ shocked faces, the cabinets, refrigerator, oven and countertops all spinning round while my mother’s blue stare drilled me back into my seat. She was sitting with her hands folded in the lap of her yellow dress, that same smirk, the same fiery eyes and slanted lips settled in between the wrinkles on one side of her face. “What did you just say, young man?”

I jumped out of my chair and shot out the back the door. My mother was fast on my heels. I ran into the ivy and zigzagged around the tree then jumped for a branch near the bottom. I could hear her yelling and sap snapping underneath my sneakers as they pulled away from the branches. I followed the wooden web higher past the windows in my parents’ room and went up even higher then looked down. Through the green and

brown tangle, I could see the sun speckled outlines of my family. They were looking up from the ivy. I turned to the clearing at the front of the house. A huge swath of bright blue hung over the shingled rooftops and dripped in between the glowing green leaves flanking the vista. The smell of pine filled my head and my hands were itching from the prickly needles as my heart raced. I scanned the horizon for my father's stormy figure then closed my eyes when I heard Tommy call to me. I settled in between two branches and looked through the pointy boughs at the clearing. Then I took a deep breath and gripped the branch tighter and waited for my father to come home and cut my tree down.

## Irish Bar Mitzvah

My alarm clock went off as usual at five-thirty. I quickly reached over and shut off the buzzer before my brother woke up. Tommy was only a couple years older than me but he was a heck of a lot bigger. I'd already learned it wasn't very smart to disturb him when he was sleeping. I tiptoed across the room and slid into my clothes before slinking out of our room. It wasn't fun getting up to go caddying on the weekends, but I did enjoy the quiet house, which was the only time of day it was like that. With a bunch of kids under one roof, something was always going on and if you could have heard the fireworks that went off the night before, you'd know what I mean. My father was an early riser so I carefully crept down the creaky stairs to the kitchen and took a slug of O.J. and grabbed the first thing I found in the breadbox. Then I went out the back door.

It was still dark. The last few stars holding out against the oncoming day dimly dotted the purple sky. The golf course, Christian Hook Links, was a little more than a mile and a half away . . . about a twenty-five minute walk. I started out down our empty driveway munching on a dry bagel when it all hit me again: today was Jeff Litz's Bar Mitzvah . . . the day I had been waiting for all month. I'll explain. About five weeks ago, I had been invited to a guy in my class' Bar Mitzvah. I want to get this right. You've got to understand, this was *Jeff Litz's* Bar Mitzvah. To simply call him popular was an understatement. Jeff was the coolest, smartest and I suppose, best looking guy in the whole seventh grade. I ate lunch at his table everyday and we were in the same class last year, but honestly, I never thought he'd invite me. I RSVP'd *yes*, but once again my bad luck caught up with me. I had spent most of my caddying money on clothes a week earlier. This was at my mother's insistence. She said I looked like I didn't have an owner

and that I had to get some new stuff, otherwise, I would have held out longer. Anyway, it rained both days the weekend after that. I banked on using the money for a gift and I had to give my father my secret stash. Sometimes he was a little short and his monthly train ticket to the city was expensive. He knew I looped both Saturday and Sunday the week earlier. I didn't have any choice. All three of my older brothers were tapped out; my brother Billy told me the old man tagged him at the beginning of the week. My sisters didn't work, which left only me. I didn't mind giving him the money but I was plenty mad about missing the party. I couldn't go without a gift.

I was brooding along the sleeping streets past manicured lawns and well kempt homes thinking about all the fun I was going to miss then, somewhere along the walk, I realized that I might still be able to attend the party. If I could finish up at the course early enough, I could still get to town and pick up a gift. The service was scheduled for six and the party was starting an hour later at seven. Anyway, by the time I approached the maze of rolling green fairways tucked behind the tall, wrought-iron fence, I figured I'd try to get out of there as soon as I finished a loop. I walked along the fence towards the parking lot then cut through the hedges for the back path leading to the caddie yard.

I was a little surprised because there was already a lot going on. Skippers were sweeping everywhere and the buckets of water and barrel of rakes were already out in the yard. A couple of guys had gotten nearly half the carts out of the garage and were still busy lining them up near the first tee. I didn't see Bernie anywhere but as usual, I could hear him ranting once I got inside the yard. The caddie master was a living stereotype when it came to his job. You'd think it was the end of the world if he saw a stray leaf or piece of paper on the pavement in front of the Pro Shop or bag room. From the starter's

table up front, Bernie assigned loops, kissed ass and pressed sweaty dollars out of the members' palms. Despite his hunched posture he was certainly no slouch. No one was better with a blower or broom.

Bernie waved his arm like a fan on *high*. "Jimmy White! Over here. On the double, son!" he barked as soon as he spotted me. "You're late. Get in there." His little orange head bobbed toward the open door. "Start pulling bags. We've got more than a dozen foursomes already. Check the book."

An outbreak of laughter sounded out from the yard. Bernie launched himself through the door and lumbered outside. "Shut the hell up in there," he shrieked in what he thought was a whisper but was actually as loud as a yell. "The *members* are coming." Bernie looked a little extra ragged. His blinking, blood shot eyes were bulging nearly as wide as his sagging stomach and the ever changing expressions running across his face gave him the appearance of a run down machine in need of repair. I kept pulling bags, lining them up along the rail until Bernie told me to, "Get out in the yard," as he settled down for coffee and Danish.

By that time, the yard was packed. Both long, weather-beaten wood benches running along the fence were completely full; there wasn't one empty spot. On one side all the skippers sat together, giggling and teasing each other about who was going to get out and who was going to get stuck shagging. On the other side were all the vets, drinking coffee while they nursed hangovers and smoked cigarettes. There was always a heavy smell of spent booze on that side of the yard, which is why I stood near the buckets against the bag room wall. I remember when I was a skipper. It was the worst. I must have shagged balls on the practice tee all day, every day for months before I got my first

loop. For a caddie, standing in a fairway collecting balls was the ultimate degradation. Every now and then, when there were no skippers in the yard, one of the older guys would have to shag, which always resulted in some kind of scene. There was a hierarchy in the caddie yard with several grades of loopers. There were skippers . . . kids who carry only one bag. They did all shagging, the sweeping and club cleaning and whatever else Bernie wanted. Next were the vets. Generally, these guys were left alone but as I mentioned, they weren't above shagging if needed. The only guys who were untouchable were super loopers . . . an elite few. A super looper was a caddie who had finished three loops in a single day. It's no easy feat for two reasons. Besides the physical challenge of carrying golf bags all day there are time constraints involved. Once the course gets crowded, an average loop takes about four, sometimes five hours. Even if you wanted to go three times, chances are there wouldn't be any action when you finished your second round. The benefit was super loopers never had to sweep and they could practically pick and choose whom they caddied for, which always meant the gang bangers . . . four or five foursomes of the club's highest rollers. They gambled like crazy. These were the most coveted loops and it made sense. When you have a group of guys playing for thousands of bucks, whether they win or lose, none of them ever thinks twice about peeling off a C note for the guy toting his bag. Bernie was a jerk, no doubt about that, but as a career caddie he did live by the code. I didn't hate Bernie like most of the guys. For whatever reason, I didn't bother him as much as some of the others and for the past few months he'd been sending me out with the early birds. Anyway, most of the skippers were my age. I knew some of them from school, but I had started caddying a year before them and had already paid my dues. Just a few weeks earlier, one guy, a jerk in my gym class who

only started coming to the course a few weeks ago, was sitting on the bench laughing and hassling me, saying I'd never get a loop. You should have seen his face when he saw me walk off the first tee with the second group of the day. The early birds weren't the greatest golfers or tippers but the old guys played fast and since the course was wide open, they always finished just after ten. At twelve bucks a bag it wasn't exactly the gang bang, but considering the loop's ease and speed, it was nothing to sneeze at either.

"Jimmy White," Bernie cried, "let's go son . . . get a rake . . . on the double. Your foursome is on the tee. You've got Robb and Corrado." Robb, Corrado, Fury and Perri always played together. They were all old men and like the other players their age, they sped through the course as though they were running a race. As a loop, it was a cakewalk. They all managed to hit the ball fairly straight and they all pulled their next club after they took a shot. For these guys, all you had to do was keep an eye on the ball and tend the pin once they were on the green. Carl was carrying for Fury and Perri. He was an old guy who stank of booze. He always wore a cap, plaid pants and tattered golf spikes. For some reason, he liked to tend the pin. Whenever I looped with him, I never pulled a flag.

As we cruised down fairways, up hills and past bunkers I kept myself busy thinking about my plan. I figured once we finished, I'd quickly clean my clubs then get a skip to bring them back into the bag room while I took off on the back path. It was an old trick but still a good one. Our group moved steadily forward and soon we were on the eighteenth green. It was only ten-thirty and I was back in business with twenty-four bucks in my pocket.

Carl and I walked back to the yard together while my busy mind rehearsed my escape. I figured I'd go directly to the store from the course. When we got in, I could see

there were a lot of bags on the rail and only a few caddies in the yard. As we passed the starter's table Bernie barked, "Don't you two get lost . . . there's a lot of action coming in."

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. In my mind, I was already on my way but Bernie's direct words were a problem. If he hadn't noticed I'd come in or even said anything to me, I could have gotten away but since he said stick around, he'd have a serious case against me if I left . . . and that meant bad loops. Bernie could be pretty mean and I didn't want to get on his bad side.

I was feeling a little tired. I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. My father's yelling woke me up when he flipped out because my brother came home a little drunk. I tried to remain calm and thought about my predicament some more before I decided it wasn't as bad as I originally thought. I remembered my father was at home and if I took off this early, I'd have to deal with him for the rest of the afternoon. He wasn't a bad guy; he just had a habit of breaking chops. It was worse when he was drinking beer, which was what he did on the weekends while my mother was at work. It was funny. He drinks beer all the time but when Tommy does it, he wants to kill him. It wasn't fair. Anyway, I didn't want to get home too early. I perked up when I realized if I got back out on the course relatively soon, I'd still have about an hour, maybe even two to get a gift and get ready for the party.

Loopers were slowly dribbling back into the yard and Bernie told them to stick around, too. I was pretty hungry and my stomach started grumbling. The snack shack wasn't open when we passed. I looked up and Willy McD., a looper who had left college about a year ago to become a full time caddie, straggled in. His green polo shirt was



pulled down at the neck and stretched out of shape. Sweat covered his forehead and wet the wild tuft of brown hair above his red ears. “Ahh,” he exhaled, sliding off his shoulders. “Bernie gave me,” he started then gasped, “ah couple-ah-haa-kass.” Willy McD. spoke with that strange accent all golf rats his age had. They caddie, play golf and drink . . . that’s a golf rat. Anyway, he wiped his brow like a man fresh out of the desert and popped a cigarette in his mouth. “Light me up, babe,” he panted. I struck a match from a stray pack sitting on the table with all the towels we used to clean clubs. Willy exhaled a deep drag. “Ahh . . . Thanks, babe.” He reached down into the bucket and wet his hand in the dirty water and patted down his neck. “Brutal, babe,” he muttered shaking his freckled, suntanned face. “Absolutely brutal out there.” A group was going off the first tee and the sound of sizzling golf balls peppered Willy’s words.

“Who did you have?” I asked, once he seemed a little more collected.

“Brutal, babe. Brutal,” he muttered again. Willy squinted his eyes and bared his chipped teeth. “It was haa-rable. Slasher city. I had the whole foursome . . . Anderson and Kendrick; Simmons and Orloff rode. Babe, they were everywhere. Jail, the beach, deep rough . . . when I tell ‘ya I saw parts of the course I never knew existed, I’m not telling any tales, babe.” He took another long poke off his butt and ran his hands through his bushy hair. “Brutal.” He reached down and pulled up his sagging sweat socks and as he started to straighten, he suddenly snapped up with a terrified look on his flushed face.

“How’s the action up there?”

“Heavy,” I replied grinning. “Husbands and wives go off at eleven.”

“Hubs and dubs,” he yelped. “No way, babe.” Willy McD. dropped his cigarette into the bucket where his dirty clubs were soaking and ran out of the yard on the back

path. Talk about the luck of the Irish; a minute or so later, Bernie came rolling into the yard to take inventory.

“Whose clubs are those?” the caddie master cried, jerking his orange head back and forth. “Where’s Willy McD.?” No one in the yard said a word. “Did that creep take off? Where the hell did he go?” The smoke coming from Bernie’s red ears was almost visible as he strode across the yard to check the back path. Then, with a gruff sigh he turned around muttering and bounced back to the bag room. A couple minutes later, he returned. “What is that?” he pointed to the ground.

“A gum wrapper,” a skipper replied.

Bernie’s eyes lit up. “A gum wrapper?”

“Yeah,” says the skip.

“Then pick it up!” the caddie master shrieked in his same loud whisper. Unable to focus until the mess was cleaned up, his beady blue eyes followed the skip as he deposited the wrapper in the trash. He shifted his head and got back into gear. “O.K. Jimmy, let’s go, on the double. Grab a rake.”

Husbands and wives had just started going off. My foursome was due up shortly. I wasn’t happy to have the whole group but I tried to look on the bright side: we should be done by about three and with the extra money I was going to make, I could get Jeff a really good gift and still have money leftover. Not that I expected to make a lot. Hubbies and dubbies were the worst loops on the rail. These foursomes were known for bad golf and poor tipping. Also by the players’ peculiar need to change clubs no matter what the situation . . . like they feel it’s their obligation or somehow a rule they have to make a club change after every dismal swing. I’ll never forget what Rick Hand said to a guy one

hot summer day. I was right there, carrying for the other pair in the foursome. Anyway, it's about ninety-five degrees and Percy Kern was hacking away, taking out huge divots and blasts of sand on every hole. He yanked whatever he got his hands on first. A three-iron, a four, a three wood then a five-iron. When we were on the twelfth hole, he called out for a club and without any attempt to hide his disgust, Rick sighed loudly. He turned to Kern and said, "Just take another swing . . . you couldn't get there with a cannon." Kern's tiny mouth dropped to his spikes and his wife was aghast but no one said a word. I don't know how I didn't crack up.

I slid my rake into one of my bags and headed up to the first tee. I was carrying for the men while the ladies rode. Between the four of them, I don't think we missed a single sand trap. It got so bad that I started dropping the bags on one side to run across the fairway and rake the sand then I'd run back across and pick up my bags. It wasn't pretty but it was a lot easier than zig-zagging around the course with both loads. That was another characteristic of a slasher . . . the worse the golfer the heavier the bag.

On the fourteenth hole Mr. Henderson lost a ball, which clearly annoyed him. It went over the fence, way out of bounds. He never said it but it sure seemed like he thought I lost it in the rough. He kept searching, lifting his cap and scratching his head as he went even though I said I saw it clear the fence. From that point on, he was pretty gruff and wouldn't make eye contact when he changed clubs. I'd seen this act before and was sure it was just a way to justify a stiff job. I used to get mad when someone stiffed me but after I'd been looping a while, I'd learned sometimes you just have to grin and bear it, like the old saying goes. In country club lingo, a guy like Henderson is known as a ham sandwich, which meant he was a cheap-o. I never really understood why a ham

sandwich meant someone was cheap. At the deli it was just as expensive as roast beef. Anyway, Henderson seemed determined to blame me for hitting wide and there was nothing I could do about it.

After the group putt out on eighteen, as suspected, I was stiffed. Craig wasn't as bad, which made up for it a little. Anyway, I loaded my bags into the passenger seat and drove the cart back along the windy path to the yard. It was just about three, which is pretty late around the course. No one was in the yard and there seemed to be no more action up front. I hurried as I cleaned all four sets of clubs then returned them to their slots in the bag room. I was relieved to see Bernie was gone and the night watchman, Joe, was installed behind the starter's table.

"Hi, Joe," I said wearily. After thirty-six holes, I was pretty beat. Joe looked up momentarily from his paper before going back to the track report. "Not bad, kid. How ya doing?" It was still daytime but a drowsy calm had already settled into the front nine. All I could hear were the sounds of singing birds and a soft clatter from the trees. I was glad I was done.

Suddenly, the peacefulness shattered when a group of arguing men turned the corner. It was Mr. Confort, his two sons Mike Jr. and Preston followed by Mr. Brennan. They were the best loop at the club. Tommy Mac, the coolest guy in the yard, came driving in with their bags. As the group came closer, we could hear everything they were saying.

"Listen girls," Mr. Confort said. "Not this time. We all ride or we all walk. But remember, I *never* ride."

“What does it matter who walks or rides?” Mike Jr. cried, thrusting his tanned arms in the air.

“It matters, kid.” The group continued bickering until they reached the starter’s table. “You know, Jack” Mr. Confort said turning to Brennan as he sidled up against the rail. “I thought I raised men. Where did I go wrong?” he asked with his arms spread wide.

Preston pulled a tee out from behind his ear and frowned. “All right Dad, that’s enough.”

Mr. Confort went on. “Haven’t I been a good father? Didn’t I take you guys to the beach? I coached Little League . . . Jesus, Jack, you should have seen them,” he said to Brennan. “That’s when I started praying for daughters.”

“All right, fine,” Mike Jr. said with a wave of his hand. “We’ll walk.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s bullshit, Dad,” Preston said, shaking his head. “These spikes are new. They’re killing my feet.”

“Noted, Gertrude.”

I couldn’t help listening. They were funnier than Rick Hand. Tommy Mac came into the bag room and lit up a cigarette.

“Hey babe, what’s doing?” He pushed his green visor up on his forehead and brushed his long blond locks back over his ears. He looked at the starter’s book from the morning then took up his cigarette and began to blow smoke rings. Tommy was a super looper deluxe. He could joke with anyone and he never let Bernie get him down. And since all the members loved him, he always got the best loops no matter what crazy stunt he pulled . . . and he pulled a lot.

“That’s a great foursome,” I said. “You should have heard them squabbling.”

“I know, it’s hilarious,” Tommy grinned. “The old man and Brennan had the kids beat on thirteen . . . they got shellacked. Mike Jr. wanted a rematch but the old man made them finish out the round. They’ve been going at it since then. I think they got tanked up when we stopped at the shack. Do you know if they’re going to ride?”

“They’re going out again . . . today?” I asked.

“That’s right, babe.” This was dangerous. Tommy and me were only loopers around.

“Hey Jimmy,” Joe called, craning his neck backwards. “You ready to go again?”

Before I could think of a lie, Tommy Mac whispered, “Do you realize how much cash this loop is worth? Don’t be an idiot.” He put out his butt then slapped my back and went outside. “Jimmy is coming with us,” he announced to the group. “Best looper in the yard.”

I went outside when I heard my name. “Excellent,” said Mr. Confort. “I’m Mike Confort, this is Jack Brennan,” he said motioning towards Brennan, a mountain of a man in pink and green and white saddle shoe spikes. “My boys, Mike Jr. and Preston.” They all smiled and shook my hand. To me, they seemed more like a gang of kids than a group of members. A minute later we were on the tee.

While balls sizzled out above the neat green fairway I realized it was over. All the stores in town closed at six, the same time the Bar Mitzvah began. I’d be on the course until at least seven. There was no hope. I didn’t feel very happy about it, but I suppose I was just too beat to let myself get worked up. I tried to look on the bright side: I had an easy loop and would probably make more than I ever did before. Both Mike Jr. and

Preston pulled clubs right away and went after their own balls. All of them were big hitters. Nearly every par four they were all on the green in two. They were a fun group to go out with and they teased each other and made wisecracks with every shot but it was on the greens that the ribbing was best.

“Where did you get that shirt?” Mr. Confort asked with a grim look on his face.

Mike Jr. looked up from his line with a skeptical look drawn on his face. “You like it?”

The old man laughed. “I’ve got news for you, sonny. Whoever gave you that shirt, doesn’t like you.”

“That makes sense,” replied Mike Jr. dryly.

“How so?”

“You and Mom gave it to me last Christmas.” Everyone burst out laughing.

We were about to head off up the seventh, which ran alongside the eighteenth, when on the other side of the trees, from the next fairway someone yelled, “Shut the hell up over there! People are trying to play golf!”

It was Mr. Wagner. He had the heaviest bag at the club and was by far the most dreaded loop on the rail. Not only was he a stiff but an incredible ball-breaker and a hack to boot. I caddied for him once; thank God it was only once. Luckily, he always went off when I was already out, which was reason enough to get to the course early. Anyway, he was walking towards us on the edge of the eighteenth. “Hey, bigmouth” he called again as he approached.

Mr. Confort looked at Brennan and the boys incredulously. “Is that slob talking to us?” Then he corrected himself. “To me?”

“I think so, Pop,” replied Mike Jr. grinning at Preston.

“Here we go,” said Brennan and he tossed his glove in the air.

Mr. Confort turned to the eighteenth. “Hey Wagner!” he bellowed. “Was that your foul mouth shouting a moment ago?” Mr. Wagner seemed a little taken aback by Confort’s sharp tone and stopped at the edge of the tree line. Confort stepped forward and pointed. “Take your head out of your ass and mind your manners.” He motioned to his sons. “You see I have my boys with me?” Wagner stood speechless as he glanced toward the pair of young men in their early thirties. Confort continued. “Clean up that filthy mouth before you come out here or next time I’ll submit a formal complaint. Where the fuck do you think you are? A truck stop?”

Wagner was clearly intimidated. He was short and portly while Confort was tall and stout . . . not that the situation was ever in danger of getting physical but the obvious discrepancy in size had to figure in somehow. Wagner was still in shock but not one for backing down from a confrontation, he struggled to come back. “Now see here,” he began as he advanced but Confort quickly cut him off.

“Apology accepted.” Wagner shook his head then started up the eighteenth. We pressed on the other way. “What a jerk-off . . . total light weight,” Confort concluded as we went, which made me laugh.

“Ah, you like that, eh?” Mr. Confort said, grinning. “You ever get stuck with that horse’s ass?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, shaking my head.

“He’s a stiff, huh?”

“The worst kind,” I replied.



We played on, moving at a decent pace and by the twelfth hole the match was over. Mr. Confort and Brennan had beaten the boys again. The snack shack was on the thirteenth tee, and when the group stopped by they invited Tommy and me inside. Usually, caddies got their hot dog and soda through a little window on side of the shack. There was always a golf cart parked outside that the girl who ran the place used to drive out there in the morning and then back again in the late afternoon after the shack closed. That's where the caddies would sit and eat while the members were inside. I must have been there hundreds of times since I started looping but that was the first time I'd ever been inside. Tommy didn't waste a second and went straight inside with the others when we arrived. I never realized how nice it was. There was a small bar with five stools and a small table with four chairs. The wooden wall planks were painted white and a who's who of golf greats' portraits hung all around. Hot dogs and beers were quickly served. When Mike Jr. handed me a cold bottle, I didn't know what to say. Mr. Confort looked at me closely across the bar. He knitted his eyebrows and said, "You're twenty-one, right?"

My heart jumped. "Actually, I'm not," I replied.

"Well" he said with a flip of his glove, "neither am I. If you don't tell neither will I." And that was it. I hadn't even gotten past the top of the label when they all started on another. We lingered at the shack a little longer than usual while Tommy and the others continued to drink beer. I'm not sure how many they had but it was a lot. When Mr. Brennan said we should get going, Mike Jr. and Preston ordered more beers but told the girl not to open them. They stuffed them into the pockets of their bags for later, which weighed me down a bit at first but they broke into them pretty quickly so it wasn't a big deal.

We went off the tee, all of us with a beer in hand. As Tommy and me walked up the fairway together and he said, “Who did you have this morning, babe?” All I was thinking about was the bar mitzvah. It suddenly occurred to me that this was my third loop.

“I went out with the morning birds then some hubs and dubs after that,” I replied coolly to mask my excitement.

Tommy stopped walking and his eyes widened and his thin jaw dropped in disbelief. He slid a bag off his shoulder and stopped in the rough. “Babe, you’re moving up to the big time. Holy shit!” he exclaimed, flapping his visor in the air.

“What?” called Preston. “Holy shit, what?”

Tommy was beaming. He knew my older sister, so when I started looping, he always looked out for me. “This guy is on his third loop.”

“No shit?” Preston replied, stepping away from his ball. “Way to go kid.”

The others could see we were talking about something and Brennan yelled, “What’s up?”

“The kid’s on his third loop. Hey Mike,” Preston called to his brother, “did you hear that?”

Mike Jr. leaned back on his club and pulled his lips into a sideways grin. “Congratulations, kid,” he called across the fairway giving me the thumbs up. “Preston wanted to be a super looper. Didn’t you Preston?”

“So did you,” his brother shot back. “But I don’t think you ever went out twice.”

“Well neither of you did three,” mediated their father. “And do you know why?”

“*Why?*” asked Mike Jr., with his lips puckered.

“Because you’re both spoiled brats.”

Laughter broke out everywhere then Mike Jr. proposed a toast. He went into his bag and pulled out a fresh beer then snapped off the cap with his thumb, sending it flying up the fairway into the thick turf. “To Christian Hook’s newest super looper,” he chimed.

“Here, here,” the others returned as a slight breeze clapped through the treetops above us.

I guess I was swept up in the moment, because when Mike Jr. handed me another beer, I drank it down quickly, just as fast as the others while we celebrated in the middle of the fairway.

When we reached the eighteenth tee I was bubbling with anticipation. I almost couldn’t believe it was really happening and I wondered if I’d feel any different once we finished. Eighteen was a long par five . . . over five hundred yards long. I was pretty spent by that point and my shoulders ached, but I soldiered on along the plush fairway until we reached the green. Proudly, I put down my bags and walked out onto the dance floor to tend the pin. A light breeze sent the flag flapping and Tommy remarked the golf gods were pleased. In a just a few moments it was over and when they finished putting out, I was officially a super looper.

Congratulations went all around and I couldn’t help smiling while everyone patted me on the back. Mr. Confort went to his bag and tucked his glove in the bottom pocket. He said his sons, “Take care of Tommy and the kid with what you owe us,” an idea that seemed to surprise Mr. Brennan but Confort quickly barked, “What, you cheap bastard? You’ve got a problem with that?”

Brennan waved off his partner and slapped me on the back. “Good going, kid.”

I had no idea how much they were playing for but when Mike Jr. handed me five crisp one hundred dollar bills my heart almost stopped. Added to the other two loops, I'd pulled in five hundred and sixty-two bucks. I'd never seen a wad like that before and as Tommy and me walked back to the yard, I reached into my pocket a couple times just to feel it. Tommy was talking about all the great loops I was going to get from now on but I couldn't help thinking about the bar mitzvah. Still, I tried to keep in mind that soon the party would be over but the cash would last. When we reached the bag room on our way to the yard Joe looked up from his paper and said, "Evening, Mr. super looper."

I dropped my bags put all the clubs into the buckets. That's when Tommy took off. The club was quiet now and all you could hear were tired birds and the scattered rustle of wind. The golden sun was falling lower toward the treetops. I was looking out at the course and was startled when Tommy pulled up in a cart. Mike Jr. was with him.

"Get in," Tommy called in a hushed voice.

"What?" I said.

"Come on," said Mike Jr. "Get in the cart."

"What about the clubs?" I said.

"Leave them," said Tommy. "Get in."

I slowly walked to the golf cart. Tommy jumped out and I slid into the middle. Once Tommy hit the seat, Mike Jr. peeled out and we were off, zooming along the cart path heading for the back nine. "Where are we going?" I asked as we cruised at nearly twenty miles per hour.

"It's a surprise," said Mike Jr. He let out a howl and I could hear Joe yelling to us.

We sped along the acorn-covered path, crackling and snapping as we zigzagged its course. Mike Jr. turned onto the sixth fairway and started straight for the green. I had no idea what he was doing but strangely enough, I didn't care. I don't know if it was the beers or the high I was on from becoming a super looper, but for some reason I wasn't worried. I always did my best to stay out of trouble, but I suppose I got carried away with all the excitement. As we neared the green Mike Jr. yelled, "Hold on!" and he cut a sharp turn around it, between the trap and fringe near the lip. We hurtled down hill on only two wheels and headed straight for the gate. It was still open. Mike Jr. shouted, "Here we go!" and without a second thought or even a quick glance around, he drove straight through onto Demott Avenue . . . a very busy street. Tommy was laughing so hard I thought he'd fall out of the cart. Passing drivers slowed their vehicles when they saw a golf cart speeding by and all along the way, astonished people pointed from their lawns and porches with their mouths wide open and eyebrows raised. Mike Jr. drummed against the steering wheel and howled as he turned onto Brower Avenue and headed towards town. When we cruised past the police station as though nothing were wrong, I thought my heart was going to stop. A block later, we turned into the big parking lot across the street from the train station and cut across to the other side, where we came out on North Village Avenue, which was basically the town's main street. Without warning or signal Mike Jr. hit the brakes and we slid into an empty parking spot in front of Ryan's Bar . . . a notorious caddie hangout. "We're here," said Mike Jr. as he hopped out of the cart. Tommy ran inside the bar.

I couldn't believe what was happening. Mike Jr. put an arm around my shoulder. "Let's go. I'm buying."

When we stepped inside Tommy was standing on the bar and with arms spread wide. He proudly announced, “Gentleman, I give you Christian Hook’s newest super looper!”

Instantly, as though a bomb went off, the sleepy bar came to life and everyone started cheering. I saw a lot of guys I knew from the course like Willy Mc. D. and Rick Hand and also a lot of people I didn’t know but had seen around town. They were all going wild. Everyone hopped off their stools and mobbed me, patting my back, shaking my hand and pulling my cap. I’d never seen such a frenzy and I have to admit, I didn’t know how to act. The bartender bellowed, “Shots on the house,” and whiskey flowed freely while the others fought their way forward to buy me a beer.

“Not bad, ‘ay, babe?” Tommy said smiling. “You’re a big man now.”

Mike Jr. commandeered the jukebox and put on Irish music. When he raised both his arms high and shouted, “Shooters for the house,” another uproar rang out. Soon after, everyone in the place was singing and hugging and laughing and cheering. A guy named Mike found a tall stool for me and placed it in the center of the bar. I sat there drinking beer and whiskey with a bunch of shot glasses turned upside down in front of me. It was a heck of a celebration and I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but I still couldn’t help thinking about the bar mitzvah. Even though I was a super looper, I think I would have traded it to be there. Anyway, a little later, a valet from the club’s parking lot named Wesley arrived for the cart. We weren’t in any trouble. The theft was chalked up to boys being boys. Wesley said everyone thought it was funny and bets were made on where we went. Ryan’s, of course was the favorite.

That's the way the night went. I sat on my stool as guys congratulated me and shared their best looping stories. I guess I was a little drunk by the time I realized how late it was. I hadn't even called home. I staggered off my stool and went for the door. A few guys wanted to drive me home but I declined, thinking the walk might help me get it together. As I went, I thought about all the cash in my pocket. I figured I'd buy my father his next monthly train ticket and something for my mother at the pharmacy. Something good like perfume.

It was just after ten when I arrived home. I went for the back door, hoping to creep in and sneak upstairs without waking my father who was always sleeping by then on the living room couch. I grabbed the doorknob but it wouldn't turn. The door was locked. My stomach sank at the prospect of the front door but I had no other choice. I went around the house and slowly climbed the porch steps, relieved when I saw the front door open. I could see my father on the couch so I stepped forward on the tops of my toes, gingerly navigating the creaky floorboards beneath me. Carefully, I pressed the little button on the screen door's handle but it wouldn't click. He locked that one, too. Suddenly, my father woke up and gave me the evil eye through the window. He sat up for a minute and continued staring at me, which was never a good sign. Slowly, he slipped his feet into his slippers then got up and came to the door.

"Where the hell have you been?" he growled through the screen. My father's tone of voice made me sicker than the booze. I'd known him for thirteen years. When he yelled, you were usually all right. He was always yelling but when he growled, you were in trouble.

"Caddying," I slurred softly.

He continued eyeing me from the other side of the door. “Have you been drinking?”

Naturally, my instincts told me to lie but it was useless; after all, I’d be trying to pull one over on a seasoned professional. He kept his eyes on me but didn’t say a word before he reached over and undid the latch. Slowly he opened the door, never taking an eye off me. As I stepped inside my chest heaved while my knees turned to jelly. I felt like I was walking into the path of an oncoming truck. I barely got two steps inside when my father grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. He yelled, “What’s the matter with you? Do you want to piss your whole life away and wind up a slob who can’t pay his bills? A goddamn bum?” He loosened his grip and pushed me into the wall. I was pretty scared but remained frozen against the wall. My father shook his head and muttered. In the corner of his eye I saw something glisten before he stomped off into the kitchen where he continued to bang around some more. I beat it out of there and crept upstairs to my room, completely consumed with fear of what might follow.

The next morning my father was up before me. He was in the kitchen, drinking coffee and reading the paper. “Have some eggs before you go,” he said as he pressed the pages closed. “Hopefully, today you’ll make it home at a decent hour.” I was so surprised I was almost scared. All seemed to be forgotten but still, just being in his presence made me nervous. I was looking at him bent over the stove in his tattered flannel shirt and stained khaki pants and thought about what he had said when he was yelling at me. That’s when I realized I had seen a tear in his eye. Somehow that changed everything,



reworked his words from reproach to a warning. I thought it was strange . . . I mean, here I was afraid of him but at the same time, he was scared. I ate my eggs and thought, I'll never forget Jeff Litz's bar mitzvah.

## Black Eyed Baptism

It was before anyone was awake and he was already downstairs screaming. If it were some other time I would have stayed in my room, but it was getting late and I had to get to the golf course. I shuffled lightly on the toes of my sneakers, down the stairs' loose planks past the dull paint and spidery cracks on the wall. When I reached the bottom, I paused a second before turning the corner into the narrow foyer facing the kitchen. The broad blue back of his plaid shirt was heaving. I stayed where I was and watched him rifle through a drawer at the end of the counter. The table was bare, but the beginnings of breakfast was on the other end of the counter; the usual . . . a can of coffee, bread, eggs, and sausage. Weekends, my father did all of the cooking.

I felt a lump in my stomach when I heard him as I came out of my room. He usually started in a little later, around seven . . . when I was already gone, safe on the second hole. I had been caddying at the country club since I was twelve. At first, I hated getting up early, but changed my mind soon after. I had a big family. The house was never that quiet during the day. I continued to watch him rage through the drawer and held my breath as a panic started creep up my legs, past my sweat socks. It pooled up in my knees leaving them loose and rubbery. He was saying, '*What the hell this?*' and '*What the hell that?*' Lots of stuff from the drawer was heaped up on the counter. Then, a minute later, he stopped cursing and gripped the edges of the countertop and hung his head low. A half-minute later, he started in on another drawer.

This time it was '*Where the fuck this*' and '*What the fuck that!*' His curses cut and tore the air around him while his red hands worked the drawer. All around him, faded daisies cast sad smiles from the wallpaper's pale green grass. The horseshoe of hair

around his head was galloping up and down and nearly bumped into one of the aluminum cabinets above him. I craned my neck to see the clock hanging on the back wall . . . it was now ten before six. I had to get moving. I took another long breath and stepped forward. Just when I reached the kitchen, my sneaker's sole squeaked on the faded linoleum and like a corkscrew, he straightened and spun. I was paralyzed by the beam coming out of his thick, black frames. He was in his weekend uniform . . . blue plaid shirt, worn khakis and a ratty pair of moccasins. He cocked his head toward me and the sharp reflection of a high wattage bulb splintered off his bald spot and pricked my eyes. I slid out of the glare and saw his image towering above the empty countertop with both hands stationed on his hips.

“Oh,” he bleated. “Just the man I wanted to see.” In our house that was the last phrase anyone wanted to hear. I ran through the events of the last few days but couldn't think of anything I did wrong. “Where the hell is my Phillips-head screwdriver?” He pointed straight at me. “I saw you with it.”

This was a delicate operation. One time, my brother Tom really got it after he left a pair of pliers on the back porch overnight; Billy and John told similar stories. My heart started pounding and my chest felt tight. I searched my mind for something to say but I couldn't think straight. “I don't know,” I told him. “That was two weeks ago.” He let out a sigh and shook his brick-red face. I slowly walked into the kitchen's faded forest, past the table-wide shadow he cast across the buckled linoleum floor. Slivers of fright drummed along my spine like icy nails as I went to the fridge for some orange juice.

He stepped toward me. “Listen kid,” he said, motioning to the mess on the counter. “I saw you take it out of the drawer,” then he nodded to the door. “And out to the

garage.” He had that awful look he always made before he’d explode . . . one eye closed and his head cocked on the opposite shoulder.

“Yeah, but—” He stepped closer and I backed into the wall. I was boxed in . . . the table on the left and the refrigerator to the right. I could hear my blood pumping hard in my ears.

“Don’t *yeah* me,” he thundered.

“Sorry,” I said, in my most deferential tone. I knew, one false move and he could blow but I tried not to panic. I was just seconds from getting away. I acted as innocent as possible and began, “I used the screwdriver,” I acknowledged, “but when I finished with it, I put it back in the drawer . . . where *you* keep it.”

His bloodless lips sagged and he sighed. “I should split someone’s head open,” he said nodding to me as though I agreed. “Maybe then you kids will learn how to put things back where they belong.” He returned to the counter and began arranging the items he took out with a defeated indifference. He stuffed forks, pencils, knives, pens and kitchen matches all together in the same drawer.

I kept my eyes on him before I made a move. I wanted to slam down some juice before I got out of there. God only knows what could happen if I stayed long enough for toast. I went to get a glass out of the cabinet when my father abruptly shuffled to the next drawer. I slithered out of his way and I reached over his head and fingered the loose door open then pulled out a glass. When the cabinet door squeaked closed, my father turned quickly and bumped his head into my glass.

He turned his pale lips up to his nose. “What the hell are you doing?”

My neck was sweaty. “Just getting a glass,” I squeaked.

He knitted his wiry brows then shook his head. “You do something like that in the army and you’d get a plate broken over your head.”

I looked at my sneakers and began to pour the juice but a smirk leaked out when I thought about what he had said. Just then, he turned to the table with an armful of eggs. Both gray eyes narrowed behind his thick glasses and the lines on his face ruffled up on the sides of his rubbery nose. He dropped his load on the counter and took one step towards me before an open hand came round and smashed me in the face. The strength of the blow sent me straight off my feet. I crashed back into the table with a bang then hit the floor with a thud. A yellow waterfall of Florida orange started to rain down from the table and puddle around me in the creases and cracks in the linoleum. I was down on one knee with a hand over my eye and I think I said ‘Shit,’ or something like that because his next words were, “You better check that Goddamn mouth, kid.” His gruff, husky voice installed a new fear behind my knees and in the pocket of my shrunken stomach. My eye was stinging like crazy but once the initial shock passed, I felt like I’d somehow stepped outside of myself . . . as though I could just drift away . . . like warm breath on a mirror.

I looked up and his wide eyes were looming over me. They bulged against his glasses. I could feel my stomach winding like a strained rubber band. Then suddenly, I snapped forward and sprung up and away. In a second I was in the foyer, just a step from the door. I grabbed the loose knob and pawed open the chain then undid the lock. When I got the door open, he was only a step away. He shouted, “Where the hell are you going? Get back here! Who’s going to clean this mess?” But I didn’t turn around. I sped down the stony steps and across the lawn then motored up the street. When I reached the tall hedges on the corner, I heard the front door crack closed.

My heart was beating fast. My new alligator shirt . . . it cost me thirty bucks, was all sweaty. I walked as fast as I could under the lime green light of the towering trees that lined Brower Avenue, past all the stately brick houses with their trim lawns behind tall, tidy hedges and neat wooden fences until halfway to the course, I stopped for a moment near some shrubs outside a big Tudor house. As I straightened my shirt's collar, I could feel my eye stinging. I pressed the skin underneath . . . it was swollen. All of a sudden, my eyes welled up and I started to cry. It was embarrassing; but I allowed myself the luxury of one good minute of it before I pulled myself together and started off again. I was late. Between the run-in with my father and this delay, I'd lost fifteen minutes but it wasn't like I was going to miss my loop. Still, with Bernie, the caddy master, everything was a big deal.

When I got to the club, I could see the sun had already climbed up over the trees separating the third and eleventh holes. The clear, bright light outlined their leafy tops. Underneath, the fairways were gleaming with dew. I took the back path that ran behind the caddie shack to the yard. There were already a lot of loopers waiting. Both of the long wooden benches that ran along the fencing were nearly full. All the older guys were talking, smoking cigarettes and laughing in small groups while the skips were still busy sweeping, parking carts and pulling bags. It was going to be a busy day. It was the first round of the club championship, which really meant nothing since the finals didn't take place until next month, on Labor Day. It was a club tradition . . . an unwritten rule that every member enters and posts their cards each week. That insured the club champ was truly the best of them all. Anyway, there were a lot of loops going out that day. I knew I could count on two. I nodded to a few friends then walked toward the fence and looked

out at the rail. There was quite a lot action. I could see my regular foursome was already lined up, waiting to go.

A minute later, Bernie stepped out of the bag room. He was adamant that I should be in the yard at least a half hour before the first tee off, which was six forty-five. He was big and doughy, nearly three hundred pounds and had short freckled arms and a red gin blossom. When he walked, his large, bulbous belly bounced over his belt and pulled on his shirt, giving him the appearance of a guy carrying a bag of groceries. I heard him shout to Joe, his second in command, "Is Jimmy White out there, yet?" He must have decided to see for himself because in an instant, he rolled right up on me. "There you are," he cried. Sweat, which was not a product of toil but rather, overworked nerves, rolled down his freckled cheeks and pink rubber neck. "You're late." He blinked a few times and pulled back his pinched face then crouched down to meet my line of sight. His light blue eyes were swimming in a bloodshot sea above flushed cheeks gilded red in the sheen of his bright, orange hair. They focused closer and he stepped back a pace. "What happened to you, son?" Bernie had the same bewildered look he wore when Tommy Mac stuffed Limburger cheese into the bag room's heater. "That's some shiner. What happened to you?"

I didn't think I heard him right. I also thought it was strange when I heard him ask Joe if he'd seen me. I'd been caddying for four years and for the last three, Bernie always referred to me as, '*that fucking Jimmy White.*' But don't get the wrong idea; it wasn't like Bernie singled me out for any special treatment because he didn't. The fact was he hated everyone. Sure, Joe and some of the real old guys, caddies older than him got some respect, but generally, everyone else was on Bernie's perpetual shit list. I'd thought about

this since I first noticed. It wasn't personal. It's just the way he was. I looked at his saggy, pink face. He still had that concerned look wedged between his chubby cheeks, doughy nose and watery eyes. "I'm all right, Bernie," I said. "Just a little accident," then I proceeded to tell him a lie, which I repeated the rest of the morning to everyone who asked.

"Bernie crossed his arms against his heaving chest. "Hmmpf," he tooted. "Well, be more careful. Are you ready to go? I have Confort and McManus. Carl has Wilson and Morano." He took a few steps into the yard for a closer survey of the caddies on hand. When he turned back to me, he seemed more like his regular, nervous self. He flailed his short arms in a fluster. "Well, let's go Jimmy, grab a rake . . . your foursome is going off." He turned toward the bag room and fluttered his chubby fingers, "C'mon, now, let's go. On the double."

There was no reason to get excited. I was ten yards away from the tee and my foursome hadn't even come out of the clubhouse's swinging blue doors; besides, we were going off second. I stepped inside the bag room after Bernie rolled out the door. He sped into the dark cart garage on the other side of the yard. The assistant caddie master, Joe, was in there with a couple of loopers . . . Mark McNulty and John Sullivan, but everyone called him Sully. They were both a couple years older than me and in my opinion, two of the biggest jerks in the yard . . . an oversized idiot and his pizza-faced yes-man. They always hassled the skippers and stole golf balls from members' bags. They used to give me a hard time too, until Tommy Mac . . . a guy no one fooled with, set them straight last summer.



Anyway, something was going on. I had watched Bernie as he wheeled to the garage. There was something unusual about him. It's not what he said, like calling me 'son,' although that was pretty weird too, but there was something different in the way he carried himself. He was moving with a buoyancy I had never before seen, which was strange because from the very first moment I met Bernie, he seemed to be sinking, drowning in his own boiling blood. In any other case, I would have held off asking since Sully and McNulty were littering the place, but Bernie's behavior that morning was extraordinary. I couldn't stop myself. "Hey Joe," I called across several rows of polished leather bags.

He was at the desk, wearing his reading glasses and like usual, studying the track report before the races started. He took one look at me and gasped. "Christ. What happened to you?"

I repeated my lie and Sully laughed and called me a klutz. McNulty got a big kick out of it, too. When we finally got past all that, I asked, "What's up with Bernie?"

"Yeah," Sully chimed in, like a rusted, old bell. He always spoke a few notches too loud. "He's acting weird."

As Sully's henchman expressed his agreement, Joe sent a knit head-cover flying at his leader. "Button it, ya' little prick, ya'," the assistant caddie master cried as the pom-pom connected with its target. "He might be outside."

The bristles of Sully's crew-cut turned up at McNulty, who immediately went to the open door and popped his head outside. "He's still in the garage," he reported, mainly to his leader.

That's when Joe let out a dry, airy laugh that could pass for a cough. He pulled the brim forward on his madras, flat cap then pushed his glasses down to the tip of his pear-shaped nose. He turned to me and said, "What are you talking about?" as he uncrossed his checkered legs and folded the newspaper.

I said, "Doesn't he seem like he's in a good mood?"

Joe reached back and placed the paper in an empty spot on the bag rack and began to laugh. He removed his glasses and pressed his index finger and thumb over his eyes and the bridge of his nose as he chuckled. After a second he calmed down and leaned forward and craned his neck toward the door. He glanced back at all of us with his eyebrows arched high and both hands open on the sides of his mouth. He whispered, "Red's got a date."

We expressed our disbelief but Joe assured us it was true. Joe had known Bernie for years and no matter how poorly they treated one another, they both seemed to agree they were friends. Regardless, Joe, who was married, snickered and said it was the first time he knew of that Bernie actually had a date. He also said that Bernie lived with his mother, somewhere in Westchester . . . I knew that. Anyway, somehow the old lady engineered the deal with another old bag who lived nearby. Someone or other was having their kid christened. After the baptism, there was going to be a big, catered party at a hall. In Joe's words, Bernie was probably taking the "...ugly duckling who couldn't get a date." Naturally, the edgy caddie master wouldn't take the day off but Joe told us he was going to leave earlier than usual. He had to be in Westchester by one, which meant he had to get going by eleven at the latest.

Bernie bounced back into the bag room and hustled us outside to wait for our foursomes. Sully and McNulty were going out together with the first group. My foursome was going out second. While we were all together with our bags along the rail, Sully turned to me with his elastic, red lips pressed into a demented smile. McNulty was wearing a dumb grin too. His brick red face looked like a deluxe pizza with extra pimples and pockmarks. Sully placed a finger to his temple and giggled. "I'm not a mind reader," he snickered, "but I can see the future."

"What do you see, swami?" says the pizza man.

Sully rubbed the bottom of his flat forehead in a circular motion with an open palm, his eyes closed as if deep in a trance. "Mmm," he hummed as he tapped his forehead. "The spirits tell me Bernie won't make it." The conspirators swapped glances then laughed together but I didn't understand what they were talking about.

Sully looked at me and his eyes and grin opened wider. I said, "What do you mean?" as the crunch of golf spikes came crackling from the other side of the hedges.

Sully placed his hand on his forehead and hummed, "Mmm," before he made a prediction. "I see . . . I see . . . I see car trouble," then he and McNulty cracked up again.

I was out on the fairway with a couple of bags on my shoulders, the smell of fresh cut grass in the air and wet clippings coating my sneakers. The chatter of busy birds filled my ears. Between fairways, trees and crescent-shaped sand traps, manicured greens, sculpted and clipped, dotted the view across a cloudless range of blue with their small red flags waving gently above them. I could count on going out on another loop later, which

meant I wouldn't get home until somewhere near four. My mother left for work on Saturdays at three o'clock, which meant that by four there was a good chance my father would have a few drinks in him; enough to bring out his lighter side. Usually, he didn't get scary until nighttime. Still, the truth was, there was no way of knowing for sure. I figured I'd try to forget it, put it out of my mind until later.

Once I stepped onto the first tee I knew I was in for a tough day. I usually had an eagle's eye but with the sun shining so brightly and my right eye all swollen, it was difficult to spot balls. And I wasn't getting any help from the other caddie. Carl was an old guy who kept to himself. Most caddies drop their bags off in the same place and watch tee shots together but Carl left his bags yards away from mine. I didn't mind. He smelled of booze and mumbled. I could never understand a word he said. Anyway, I was lucky that both Confort and McManus hit the ball long and straight.

We were walking up the sixth fairway after Mr. Confort laid up about thirty yards short. He handed me his three-iron as we went and smiled when I took his club. He was a big man like my father and had a tremendous head of snow-white hair. I had been caddying for him regularly for the past couple years. He was considered a great loop because he was a great golfer and tipped big. "So," he said in a playful yet somehow serious-sounding tone. "Another encounter with an errant book?" A sly smile skated to the edge of his face. He was referring to the lie I concocted about my eye. "Didn't you have a similar accident last fall?" he wondered aloud as he pulled off his glove and stuffed it in the back pocket of his seersucker slacks. I knew what he was getting at. Not only did he catch me in a lie . . . I forgot I used that one . . . but he was approaching something that was a little too close to the truth for my liking. I kept pace with his long,

striped legs with my head aimed at the fairway. Then the blue saddle of leather on his spikes came to a halt and their pointed white tips pivoted my way.

“Yes, I do remember an incident involving a book,” Confort said with a wave of his long index finger. “That time,” he said as a matter of fact, “if I remember correctly, it was the left eye.” Mr. Confort turned to the flapping flag and began walking again. From the far side of the rough, outside the fence, the soft hum of a passing car played past. He knitted his wooly brows and said, “I don’t understand it,” with a feigned look of confusion, his arms extended, palms opened upward. “You don’t seem clumsy to me,” he remarked, still in character. “In fact, I’d say you’re weren’t clumsy at all.”

He started walking again. His gaze was fixed on me as we continued up the fairway. I felt pressured to come up with something, so finally I offered, “Just unlucky, I guess.”

Mr. Confort pulled his lips wide and fixed his eyes on me in an expressionless gaze. He tilted his snowy mane and replied in a flagging lilt, “Yeah” he said. “Just unlucky,” then he pulled a wedge and marched off to his ball.

My eye wasn’t throbbing anymore but it was swollen so much it was nearly half closed. It was puffed up and dark, more black than the tiny blue ring that enclosed it. On the fifth tee, I caught a glimpse of myself in the service cart’s hubcap outside the clubhouse kitchen. Luckily, I didn’t lose any balls but later on the eighth, when McManus shanked one into the jail running between the seventh green and the ninth, I got a “get out of jail free card,” when Mr. Confort told McManus to take a two iron, then he directed him to his lie.

We were on the twelfth hole when I saw Sully and McNulty that I forgot about my embarrassment about what Mr. Confort said. I started to wonder what they had cooking. My group was heading the opposite way on the eleventh and the two of them were walking together along the tree line on the twelfth. I was standing in the rough on their side of the fairway, about forty yards away. They were getting into position before their group teed off. As I passed, they both looked at me with goofy grins on their ugly faces and Sully put his hand on forehead and mouthed something I couldn't make out. Anyway, the same thing happened, three more times; when they passed on the fourteenth, the dogleg on the sixteenth and again when they were going off eighteen . . . by then I figured out Sully was saying, 'the future.' I guess I didn't care when I first heard their plan but after I'd been thinking about it since I saw their stupid faces, it didn't seem so funny to me. Not that I liked Bernie. I didn't. But there was something sick and strange about their plan, something puny and small that was at the same time, huge and out of proportion with any imagined crime Bernie could have committed against either one of them. I felt like a jerk taking Bernie's side, but I also knew it didn't matter. There was nothing I could do about it. Sully and McNulty were a couple of fools, there was no doubt about that, but they were a tough couple of fools who'd kick your butt before you even knew you were in trouble. I'd already had my share of that for one day.

On the eighteenth green, Carl grabbed the pin so I waited off the fringe for the group to putt out. I was looking into the dining room directly across the cart path. Every year, during the club championship, a large crowd gathered nearby and all the windows and doors are opened up so the old stiffs having an early dinner could get in on the excitement. I was feeling a little tired but I knew was going to have to go out again. I

looked across the fourth fairway towards the bag room to check out the action on the rail. Anyway, I had a sick feeling in my stomach that I had been trying to ignore . . . ever since the twelfth, when I saw those laughing idiots. I couldn't help feeling somehow involved with what they were going to do. I wished they hadn't said a word to me.

McManus was good for twenty. After Mr. Confort stuffed his glove into his bag's bottom pocket, he pressed two twenties into my palm. Then he squeezed my shoulder. "Hang in there sport," he winked. "It gets easier. Trust me."

I stuffed the money into my pocket and head back to the caddie yard. Bernie was fidgeting around the starter's table and Joe was on his feet and actually pulling bags. There were a few skippers on the bench and a sampling of stragglers too hung over to make it in earlier. I dropped my bags against the wall, near the rickety old table where the buckets and towels were stationed. The water was already brown. Sully and McNulty had finished cleaning their clubs before I came in. I had just put McManus' clubs into the bucket when both Sully and McNulty came back into the yard with sodas. They must have gone to the machine in the parking lot.

"There you are," Sully bellowed on the approach. He crossed the yard with his yes-man in tow and motioned for me to follow him to a knot of bushes near the back path. Sully led the way, I followed and McNulty skulked behind. "Get those clubs cleaned then get 'em back into the bag room," the mastermind instructed me. He put a firm finger to my chest and poked the alligator. "Hang around as long as you can. If you see Bernie going out to the parking lot, take the path around the pool to the back entrance and wave." Here he turned to his red-faced accomplice and gave him a backhanded slap

on the shoulder. "One of us will be looking out." Then Sully turned back to me. "Think you can handle that, numb nuts?"

I didn't say one word. I just walked back to the table and started cleaning Mr. Confort's irons. I was annoyed by the way Sully ordered me around, like I was actually in on it. I could feel my heart speed up the way it did when I got mad. I kept pulling clubs out of the murky water when I heard, "Ahhmm," grind out behind me. I jerked my head around and Sully pointed to his wrist and mouthed, 'Move it.'

I could feel my heart beat harder and thought, 'What the hell is this guy talking about? I hadn't agreed to anything.' I took my time with McManus' clubs and even used one of those green scouring pads on the irons as well the woods. When I finished, I lifted the bags onto my shoulders and started for the bag room. Sully and McNulty both called to me as I was leaving but I didn't turn around.

I dropped Confort's clubs in his spot near the side door to the adjoining Proshop. Then, when I was carrying McManus' bag to his slot in the second to last aisle, I saw Bernie at the back worktable, hunched between a driver and three-wood. They were both having their worn, leather grips changed and were locked in the hold of two old, black metal vices on each end of the bench. Bernie was stooped forward, combing his hair in the little square mirror Joe used to spot shadows when he straightened bent shafts. For a minute or so, I watched him fuss with his hair before his tiny reflection. He was attempting a part on the side. The comb's black teeth slid through the wispy orange strands it was trying to govern to no effect. Every time his thinning locks emerged from the comb unchanged, he brushed them back with his free hand and began again. I tiptoed into McManus' aisle and quietly hoisted his bag into its slot on the upper shelf. I didn't



want Bernie to see me. The whole scene was a little weird. He seemed happy enough as he tried to fix himself up but there was something about it all, I can't really say what, that made me depressed even a little sad. And it was more than what I knew Sullivan and McNulty had going. Then, right when I got the clubs into their place, a zipper caught a pocket on the bag in the next slot and a small pop cracked when it snapped out of the snag.

Bernie dropped his comb on the table and turned his massive frame toward me. "Oh, Jimmy." His little eyes were bulging from their ringed, purple sockets. He glanced all around and then scratched his head before he wiped his mouth with a stroke of his pink, freckled hand. "A lot of action this afternoon. Plenty of good loops," he rambled. "C'mon now, get out in the yard . . . and don't get lost."

I think I said OK . . . I'm not sure. I had other things on my mind. Then, as I stepped out of the bag room, I felt a powerful surge of heat in my chest. It travelled through my limbs and made my fingertips itchy. I went into the yard and grabbed a plastic rake then bolted past the bag room and across the putting green to the path around the pool. Bernie always parked his car in the last space, near the hedges bordering the outside fence and the sixth tee. I was running as fast as I could, which was hard because of my eye. I was sure I was going to fall down on the craggy asphalt. I found the culprits near Bernie's beat-up car. They seemed to be in conference, huddled together and camouflaged by the hedges.

"Stay away from Bernie's car," I shouted, when I came up on them with the rake on my shoulder.

Sully was incredulous as he came towards me. "What did you say, numb nuts?"

“You heard me,” I growled as I lifted the rake, brandishing it like a baseball bat. “Stay away from that car, man. I’m warning you.” McNulty attempted a charge but I pumped my arms back then swung the rake with a quick, half stroke. “You want some of this!” I roared.

There was group on the sixth tee and my yelling caught their attention. “Shut the hell up, asshole,” Sully cried under his breath. “You’ll get us nailed.”

I didn’t care. “Get the hell out of here,” I yelled again at the top of my lungs. That did it. The both of them took off all helter skelter into the grid of luxury cars when they saw a member emerge from the hedges and start towards us. I took off too but as I went, I knew this was far from over.

When I reached the back path behind the caddie yard, Sully and McNulty were waiting for me. They were crouched inside the bushes along the path . . . one near the entrance, the other at the foot of the yard. I was trapped.

“We’ve got you, now, numb nuts,” McNulty giggled. “And Tommy Mac can’t save your ass this time.”

Then Sully whistled and I turned. He put a fist to his hand and said, “You’re going to look like a raccoon after I blacken your other eye,” and in an instant, they were both on me. I swung the rake as hard as I could and hit Sully in the shoulder, then I jabbed McNulty in the gut with the other end. In practical terms, I’m not sure if those two shots were worth the price of admission. In dollars and cents or better, flesh and blood, probably not, but what I went through on the back path with those two idiots was anything but an ordinary beating and even though they did give me another black eye and

even sweetened the deal with a fat lip and a bunch of bruises, I knew they didn't win . . . it just looked like they did.

By the time it was over, a crowd of skippers had gathered. Sully and McNulty pushed their way through them and went into the yard congratulating each other. It didn't take long for all the adrenaline I had pumping through me to wear off. When I was back on my feet, every inch of my body was aching. Those idiots even tore my new alligator shirt. I couldn't caddie looking like that. I had to go home.

I was walking along the path beyond the tall, wrought iron gate in the front of the club. A skipper named Rob came up from behind and asked if I was OK. I said I was then he told me, "Bernie's pissed. A couple members told him you were fooling around the clubhouse and someone saw you run across the putting green. Then he went into the yard and asked where you were. Someone told him you went home."

I asked what Bernie said about that. "He was pissed." The skip adjusted the brim of his visor. "He was shaking his head like he does when he's mad, grumbling, 'That fucking Jimmy White.' Then he went back to the bag room."

I walked home slowly, thinking about what Rob told me. In the short time it took me to reach Princeton Road, I decided I didn't care what Bernie said or thought. I couldn't tell him what had happened. That would be even lower than what those two idiots tried pull.

When I made it to the Brower Deli, I went inside for a soda. In the mirror over the counter, I could see my new black eye. It looked just like first one but at least now I could blame both of them on the fight I had at the club. As I left the store, it suddenly occurred to me that I might still have a larger problem waiting at home. I slowed my pace

to a limp and proceeded along the sidewalk, sweating, like I was heading to the gallows. It was hot as hell already, well over ninety degrees. The white sun was burning near its high point in the blue, washed out sky.

Our house was the ugliest one on the block. It's broken, gray shingles and sagging roof stood out next to the unused driveway and crumbling garage. The place was unusually quiet . . . all my brothers and sisters were out. When I opened the screen door, I could see my mother sitting at the kitchen table. It must have been about noon because she was already in her nurse's uniform. I stepped inside and heard her say, 'Jimmy' to my father, who was sitting to her left, just out of my view. I wasn't even in the kitchen yet when he started yelling.

"You took off in a hurry this morning and left me with a huge mess. Who the hell do you think you are, Mister?" he shouted from his throne at the head of the table.

I stepped inside the kitchen looking like an old rag doll with my shirt torn and hanging from my scratched shoulder, a pair of blackened eyes and a bulging, fat lip. My mother gasped then her mouth fell open. She jumped to her feet and started toward me but I waved her off. She checked herself near the stove. Her sad blue eyes probed my disfigured face.

My father put the paper down and sat up in his chair. "What the hell happened to you?" he cried. I returned his gaze with his same intensity when something happened. "Well?" he repeated a little louder . . . the blue vein running across his forehead began to swell. I didn't say a word. He started from his seat then he sunk back down. It took me a long time to understand what occurred in the kitchen that afternoon. You see my father was a bastard, which made me a son of a bitch. When he saw me standing there, brass

balls and undaunted, a pair of black eyes glaring back at him, he knew. And that was the end of that.

## He's Gone

There was no casket, no church, no graveyard and no priest. There were flowers, and a big, blue candle and a gold-framed, black and white picture of him, leaning against a fancy ceramic jar. Inside was the freshly incinerated guest of honor. His wife Sabrina, wanted to get the whole thing over without a fuss. Something of a bohemian herself, she decided to forgo the more traditional burial rituals for a more fitting sendoff and opted instead to hold Johnny's final farewell at his favorite bar. I was still in there from the night before, shell-shocked from the impact of the news. Anyway, around noon, Sabrina walked in. When she saw me sitting with the bartender, Stuart, she seemed a little surprised but not half as surprised as Stuart, who realized we'd been carrying on in there with the front door unlocked since he closed the place at four.

Sabrina put her box of . . . I guess you'd call them funerary stuff, funeral supplies? The candle, the urn, flowers. She put the box down on the bar and walked over and gave me a restrained hug. I briefly got the whole story of how she found Johnny before I carried the box over to his regular stool where she set up his little shrine.

"You don't look so good, Jimmy," she said as reached for a candle.

"Yeah, well...I don't know," I mumbled.

"I hope this makes you think." That was the last thing I wanted to hear. I had a feeling she was going to somehow link me to Johnny's OD. I wanted to avoid the whole subject. "See what happens when you screw around with that shit?" I told her I did but she went on. "Yeah, you're a smart guy," she laughed with a mirthless grin. "You'll get it." I was stuck between the points of her glasses. She stroked the urn. "Johnny was smart, too." Then she turned her back and continued with the arrangements.

There was nothing I could say, so I squeezed out a few weak words. “I’m really sorry Sabrina . . . about everything,” then I excused myself. What put the sting in her words was the truth behind them. The fact that I was hurrying out the door to a payphone to call my dealer proved it. I was beginning to get sick since I hadn’t had anything in nearly two days . . . when Johnny died. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get through to the man. His phone must have been off the hook. He always pulled that kind of crap. I’d been trying to reach him from the phone in the bar but all I got was that snickering busy signal.

Sabrina finished and sat down on her late husband’s regular stool . . . the one with the cow-patterned seat cover. Within a half-hour, the place was packed and Johnny’s wife, or rather, his widow, was accepting condolences from all their sad friends. Johnny was well known in many worlds. He knew artists and musicians, junkies and jonesers, and all the neighborhood regulars, too. I was always surprised by how many different people greeted him when we walked the streets and his funeral, here at the bar, was a venerable who’s who of downtown New York. There was also a large contingent of the city’s jazz scene. Players and singers, hip to the tragedy, emerged from the smoky underground in their best threads and coolest shades. Even the place’s peevish proprietor, Peter, showed up to say goodbye to his best customer, from whom he was still making a healthy buck.

Sabrina’s words had been working on me since I heard them. Not because she was right, but mainly because I’d been feeling pretty bad about everything myself. I mean, hell, when I was kid, I caddied on the weekends and always went to mass. I never imagined I was going to turn out like this. I was fairly wasted. I’m not sure how long the whole funeral had been going on when I started feeling a dizzy. I got up off my stool to

go to the men's room. I needed to splash cold water on my face. As I went along, I had the sensation I was floating. I got a shock when I got inside and glanced in the mirror at my pale, almost transparent skin and bloody eyes. I looked like a dead man who hadn't the good sense to lie down in his grave. I wiped the water from my face and head back to my stool with my habit and conscience fighting it out in my head. Just then, like a Christmas miracle, in walks Clarence . . . a horn player who dealt dope on the side. He and Johnny had known each other since their time together at the conservatory. He was a short Italian guy with big, bulging, round, brown eyes and closely cropped black hair. He pulled his mouth into a restrained smile and gave me a hug. "Jimmy, how are you?" He adjusted his hands on my shoulders and focused his big, bug-eyes on mine.

"OK, I guess." I never scored from him but I knew Johnny did. All I could think of was how I was going to broach the subject. "Can you believe it?"

"Actually," Clarence replied. "I can." I was completely taken aback and my mouth fell open. "Johnny never learned. You know how many times he OD'd on me?" the saxophonist tooted. "The guy had more lives than a cat and he still blew it," Clarence looked down at his worn, crackled shoes, shaking his head.

"Well," I said as a matter of fact, "Fucking sucks."

"You got that right," Clarence turned to the bar to order some drinks. I was getting sicker and was still wondering how to approach him about a transaction when out of nowhere he handed me a small paper bag. He said, "Take this. Don't open it here." He shooed my hand when I tried to look inside. "Put it away. Fast."

I jammed the little brown bag into my pocket as soon as he freaked. I looked up at his big, bug eyes. "What the hell is it?"



Clarence glanced over his shoulder then whispered through the grieving crowd's commotion. "A deck of D. Johnny ordered it before he died. You were one of his best friends," he said. "Consider it your inheritance."

My heartbeat slowed its rapid pace and the chills suddenly subsided. "Oh, my brother," I cried, throwing my arms around his bony neck. "Thank you, man."

Clarence's blue lips snaked upwards. "You look like you could use it."

The place was getting pretty noisy and my head was pounding. Clarence took off to talk to a bassist and I climbed back on my stool, since there was a wait to get inside the men's room. The juke was off. They were playing Johnny's music on the house stereo. The sweet shift of an alternating beat, the signature of his style, gently sifted out of the speakers into the smoky air. I closed my eyes and I could see him, sitting behind his drum kit. I thought about all the good times we'd had. I never hassled anything while he was around. Now, all those worries I'd been avoiding were coming in at a rapid fire. My habit was quickly growing; not to mention all the blow I'd been doing. If I didn't have my job running weed I'd be dead. The money was good, no complaints there but now that Johnny was gone all the risks seemed worse.

I was sitting there, spacing out when I noticed my heart beating, but not just beating, pounding and I was covered in sweat. I had to get out of there before my head exploded. Without a word to anyone, I went for the door. When I got out on the sidewalk, there were a lot of people standing around, talking and smoking like the others inside. I stood out there with my head down low and both hands in pockets. I had an awful feeling that I just couldn't shake. A couple minutes later I decided to get a beer a few doors down at the bodega and go for a walk. I figured it would help clear my head. Somewhere along

the way, I decided I'd break into my inheritance. It just didn't feel right getting high in the bathroom with the funeral going on, not to mention, if I spent more than the length of a piss in there everyone would know what I was doing.

I went off into the maze of Greenwich Village, brown bagging it with nowhere to go or any particular destination in mind. I just walked. I started to head west towards the river and figured maybe I'd get high on the docks. I slumped along the pretty neighborhood's neatly manicured sidewalks, past stately brownstones and leafy trees. Oddly, the more the neighborhood's somber beauty struck me, the worse I felt. Johnny was more than just a drug buddy . . . he was a real friend. Since he died and my mortality caught up to me, I just couldn't pick up. That's why I held off scoring. I'd been doing four bags a day, which some might consider small potatoes but for me it was a man-sized habit. Johnny's death scared me, but like Sabrina said, the real moral of the story was that I needed to kick before the same thing happened to me. I'd been in the bar all night and my lungs were all blacked out. My pipes started to clog up from too much of that clean air blowing off the river and I started coughing and hacking. Unintentionally, I spit in front of a passing family. It hit the pavement with a thud. The parents froze for an awkward moment then they hurried their kids across the street.

I decided to get off that block altogether, so I turned up the next street to start again, fresh, when up the walk comes Ernie, pushing his rickety old-lady's cart. As always it was jammed with all kinds of crap and it looked like he was having a hard time navigating the uneven sidewalk, rumped and cracked from all those pretty trees' unruly roots. I stood on the corner and waited for him. We hadn't seen each other in days and I wondered if he'd heard the bad news. Johnny was Ernie's greatest patron. He always

gave him money and sometimes paid him to go uptown to score, which, depending on the size of Johnny's habit, could be a full-time job.

"Hey Ernie," I said, when he finally arrived, huffing and puffing behind his rolling wreck.

He parked the cart then reached for his cap and pulled it off. He wiped his sweaty brow. "Goddamn, bitch of a day out here," he whined. He began rummaging through his cart then looked up at me. "You hear about Johnny?"

"Yep," I said, backing up to sit down on a stoop. "Goddamn shame, huh?"

"Hell yes," Ernie agreed. "I don't know what I'm gonna do now. Johnny was one of my best people," he moaned. His animated face fell flat as he contemplated his situation. "Don't you know it, as soon as *he's* gone, *I'm sick*." He slapped his hand at the air. "Nobody gave me nothing on my corner yesterday or today," he complained. "They don't wanna come near me," he railed. "Like I'm some kind of monster." He was referring to the bloated, rubbery black and blue hole in his head where his left eye once lived . . . the result of a misguided needle. "*They're* the monsters!" he yelled with clenched fists.

Ernie shot up to his Harlem location whenever Johnny needed the cure, and for his efforts, Johnny always threw Ernie a few bags. For Johnny, a clean-cut junkie with a retro be-bop style, the whole uptown street scene was one enterprise that was totally out of the question. His pale face and short hair made it impossible for him to cop. The last time he tried, he barely made it out of there with his scalp.

Ernie motioned for me to move over so he could sit, too. "I'm screwed," he said when he plopped down next to me. He looked bad. His good eye was watery and had a

dull yellow color. When I first saw him, I noticed his limp was a little more exaggerated than usual and the way he was breathing . . . labored and shallow, made me ask if he wanted to go to the emergency room. I had known Ernie for years and was well aware of his habits, but this was something different. There was clearly something wrong with him, but Ernie, an old street veteran with a puritan work ethic declined. “Hell no!” he cried. “They ain’t gonna give me what I really need,” he complained. “’Cides, I gotta get back to my corner.”

Ernie began bitching about his corner when I reached into my pocket and pulled out the little bag Clarence had given me in the bar. There are ten bags in a deck but I knew if I gave Ernie more than a few he’d blow it all in one huge shot. I reached in and pulled out three. I figured that should take the edge off but good. “Here,” I said nonchalantly, placing the cure in his hand. “That’s your flavor,” I kidded. “Isn’t it?”

Ernie looked into his palm and made a face like he had the whole world in his hand. “Oh, my God . . . gee,” he stuttered, completely astonished. It truly was the first time I’d seen him speechless. “I don’t believe it,” he went on. He got sloppy and reached out to hug me as he started to cry out his only working eye. “You don’t know what this means to me,” he sniffled. “I feel better already. You’re like an angel, swooping down and saving my ass.”

Ernie was eager to get cooking, but there was nowhere nearby that was safe. He said he intended to cross the highway and get high under the docks. I figured I’d join him, since I had nothing to do anyway. We passed a deli and Ernie asked me to buy him a fruit punch. He loved fruit punch and if you ever saw him on his corner, he might be enjoying one . . . that is if someone bought him one. I think his general policy was food

and drink only when absolutely necessary . . . all resources were dedicated to maintaining his habit. I grabbed another tallboy for myself then we took off for the river. Like I said, Ernie was looking ill, so I pushed his cart for him. I have give the guy credit . . . it wasn't easy. Trying to steer those little wobbly wheels across the West Side Highway was harder than you'd think. I was sure I was going to get hit.

Once we safely arrived at the dock, Ernie did his thing underneath, where the wind didn't blow and I sat down on the edge. There were a few of these old, decaying docks still hanging onto the west side. It was a good place to get away from all the confusion. A couple minutes later Ernie emerged from under the planks and climbed through a hole in the fence, refreshed and refueled. He straightened his cap then slid down next to me, dropping his legs over the side. The water's gentle rhythm, lapping against the rotten, wooden beams was hypnotic.

"Ain't life messed up?" Ernie wondered aloud. He was looking off towards Jersey then he reached back and pushed himself up on his feet. "Do you ever wonder how things turn out like they do?" he asked. He looked toward the highway. "I mean, I had a *good* family. *Good* parents, *good* home," he railed in his scratchy voice. He threw his arms up in the air then dropped them to his sides. He faced the fading sun and pulled off his cap. "When I was your age, I had a brand new Cadillac," then he steered his head forward to drive the point home.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," he cried. "My Father was a Free-Mason and my Mother was a nurse." Ernie went on to tell the same old addiction story. Drugs begin, then drugs take over . . . so and so loses everything. Misery meets death or plot B . . . homelessness. The end. I

listened patiently to his whole story, every last detail down to the Caddie's pristine, cream-colored, Corinthian leather. He stopped talking then fumbled through his pockets for a moment before he produced a beaten, blue ski wallet. I cringed at the pull of the Velcro's tear. He fished out a small photo, maybe three by three. He stood still for a moment admiring it before he handed it to me. He said, "Be careful," with authority. "Take it by the edges." I carefully pinched the photo by its skinny white border and looked at it. "What do you think of that?" he asked.

It was a black and white picture of a man and a boy standing on a dock. They are holding freshly caught fish suspended on a line. The man is wearing dark sunglasses and a broad brimmed hat; the boy is in shorts and sporting a cap. "Nice," I said. "Who are they?"

"That's me," Ernie said. "And my Dad. Don't we look alike?" The tone of his question called more for agreement than anything else, so without a thought I nodded a firm yes. "You can see the resemblance, right?" he pressed. I assured him that I did see the family resemblance and more than that, I told him I thought his father was a good looking man. "That picture was taken in Montauk," he cried. Ernie was more animated than I'd ever seen him. "Summer, 1951. You know Montauk?"

"Yeah," I said. "Out on the island?"

"Yeah," said Ernie. "The farthest point east on Long Island. The tip. The end," he said pointing straight ahead like an arrow. He swung back toward the river. "We used to go out there every summer. We had to get up at three in the morning, 'cause we was starting out from the Bronx, but I didn't care. The whole trip was an adventure to me." Ernie paced the dock and gestured as he continued his story. The acrid smell of the river

saturated the air. “We’d rent a little boat and fish all day. The train didn’t leave until eight at night. After we’d come in, we always got these shrimp dinners with broccoli and a baked potato. And butter,” he remembered, “lots of butter. It came with corn bread, too,”

“That sounds good.”

“It was,” Ernie assured me. “We always ate sitting on the benches at the train station while we waited. Back then, there were only two trains a day . . . one in the morning and one at night. My Dad was always nervous about missing it,” Ernie let out a small laugh. “We never explored the town much. I guess he didn’t have the dough for a motel. Man,” Ernie said, looking off toward the redbrick buildings and spewing smokestacks across the river. “What I wouldn’t do for one them dinners now . . . mmm” he imagined. “I can still taste those shrimps!” He limped toward me on the decaying planks. “You can’t get *that* no more. I mean, *nobody* does it like that no more.”

The sky was brilliant. The sun was winding down bleeding an orangey red across the horizon. I was feeling depressed again and decided to get out of there. Before I took off, I pressed a ten-spot into Ernie’s hand but I’m not sure he noticed. He was far away and instinctively stuffed it into his pocket. When I was halfway across the highway, standing in the middle divide with traffic whizzing by in both directions, I turned back to look at him. He was still standing where I’d left him, gazing at the silvery flutter on the Hudson. That’s when I noticed I forgot to get high. I couldn’t keep anything in my head. Everything was swirling all around me: dead Johnny, the breezy air, my dope habit and the oncoming traffic. Racing cars, running into the gusty wind drummed steadily against me. I put my hands to my head and covered my ears but it did no good. A sudden terror had gotten inside me. My heart was pumping faster and I was drenched in sweat. I was

melting down in the middle of the West Side Highway. I screamed, "Help!" at the traffic as it whizzed by. "Help!" I yelled again with both fists shaking over my head. I thought my heart or brain was about to explode while the last gasps of rush hour traffic zoomed past. "Help me, Goddamn it!" I screamed at the wind but nobody heard, or they just didn't care. Everyone was racing forward, going wherever they were going, living their lives. With a violent jerk, I thrust my hand into my pocket and pulled out the little brown bag. For a brief moment, I stood there looking at the dope before I threw it into the oncoming traffic. Swept away on the wings of a dirty angel, the little stamped packets soared off into the rushing traffic and out of my sight. I'm not sure how long I was freaking out but when I calmed down, I turned back to the last streaks of sunset. Ernie was still on the dock, chasing ghosts through the orange afterglow. I watched him awhile until he rippled away when I thought about Johnny and my eyes welled up.



*Baraka*

Johnny had been dead for almost a year and I was still delivering pot. I was walking up Lafayette, just past Kenmare near that skeletal little park that's always empty, past all the behemoths of red brick and columns of white-framed windows that flank the street. By the early afternoon, they shut out the sun from the small, slivered lofts between them and the restaurants and shops on the ground. Every now and again, a yellow cab streaked by leaving a glowing red trail in its wake. Along the shadowy sidewalks heels clicked and clacked against the pavement.

Halfway up the block, I saw a guy selling books. He had frizzy white hair and was wearing a green army jacket. His rickety, aluminum table was piled high with titles. It squeaked against the cement when you picked up a larger hardback. Immediately, a dusty, brown book called, *Travels in North Africa* by Nahum Slouschz, grabbed me. It was published in 1927. The sandy blond paper was weighty and thick and the bold black print was pressed deep in the page. It had that stuffy, woody smell, too.

After work, I went straight home to my room on Nineteenth Street and sat by the window all night, listening to the traffic outside as I read about the author's far out trip. He'd seen a lot of cool stuff, but one chapter in particular interested me . . . the one about Morocco. According to Slouschz, in Morocco, Arabs, Jews and Berbers alike believe in what is called, *baraka*. The term describes a powerful spirit that can bring peace, wisdom or good fortune to anyone who possesses it. It is also associated with protection and healing. *Baraka* can be found in a variety of natural objects as well as human beings. Certain stones and trees may have *baraka* as well as natural formations, like a spring or a mountain. Holy people like saints can have *baraka*, too. It is transferred spiritually or by

touch. In an effort to attain *baraka*, Moroccans make pilgrimages to the tombs of saints. They say *baraka* is felt when it is encountered. I thought about it and decided if *baraka* existed in Morocco, there had to be plenty here in New York.

That's what was running through my head, early the next morning. Shards of sunshine had started to stick through the bent plastic blinds covering the window. I didn't care. Lately I hadn't been able to sleep much and besides, it was my day off. I was grateful for the job but I was beginning to feel like I'd made a big mistake. I started thinking about how first started hanging out with Johnny. I'd been out of work for five months after the coffee shop closed. I was the assistant manager. Anyway, things quickly went down hill and I came pretty close to getting kicked out of my room. If I wanted to eat, I had to collect bottles and cans for the deposits. That's why I started delivering pot. Johnny saw me picking through trash and took mercy on me. He got me the job. Soon after I started running, Johnny and me were inseparable. I was so thrilled to be making money, real money for the first time in my life that I rushed out and got a tattoo in honor of my new profession. It was a silver handcuff outlined in steel blue around my right wrist . . . like those guys who chain themselves to their briefcase. Anyway, we made deliveries all day, noon until eight, then after checkout we went to the bar. And then everything changed.

I was making deliveries downtown and decided to stop into a little Irish bar on Third Avenue. It was packed with a bunch of geezers but I didn't care. I wasn't going to be there long. I didn't want to attract any unwanted attention, so I pulled my sleeve below my wrist before I took a stool at the bar and ordered a beer. After I drained it, I threw my messenger's bag over my shoulder then head back toward the bathroom for the phone

nestled into the uneven wall. The afternoon sun reached in through the window all the way to the back of the bar and the thick shellac coating the wood was glistening. I was hoping there were a few more runs before the evening rush. I shaded my eyes then dialed in.

“Hey. It’s Jimmy.”

There was a moment of silence before Walter, the dispatcher, murmured, “Yo,” in his deep, brittle voice. More silence. Finally, he said, “I don’t know how to tell you this, man.”

“Tell me what?” He sounded serious, but I didn’t buy into it. Walter always played games on the phone.

“I’m just gonna say it.”

“Say what?” I thought he was going to send me uptown, something like, ‘You gotta go north.’ “What is it?” I said. “You’ve got something way uptown?”

Silence.

“C’mon man,” I pressed. “What is it?”

And that’s when it ended. “Johnnie’s dead.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt like my guts had been ripped out of me. As though a slippery fist reached down my throat and twisted my innards before it withdrew from my mouth with all my organs in hand. Then and there, a frightened panic took possession of me . . . like I was naked and the cops were closing in.

“Did you hear me, man? Johnnie’s dead.”

I think I was in shock. My knees slowly buckled and I fell to the floor. The receiver jerked out of my hand and slammed against my chin as it snapped back against

the phone with a dull, plastic thud. All the old-timers swiveled on their stools and turned their pink, wooly heads my way with their mouths hanging open until I pulled myself up and turned back to the phone.

“Are you still there? Yo! Jimmy?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. What happened?”

“He OD’d.”

That was exactly how it went down. In half a second, I crossed the border between self-deception and reality. From the other side, the view was brutally clear. I regularly carried a felony on my back and if the odds were correct, it was only a matter of time until I got popped. Worse, I knew in the business I was in, fear and paranoia only started the clock ticking . . . a nervous runner always gets caught. I had managed to stay under the radar this far but I started worrying that the longer I rolled the dice, the more likely I’d wind up a loser.

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I stayed flat on my back, spacing out as I stared at the crackled, cream-colored plaster on the ceiling until the sharp light poked me out of bed. I slid out from under the covers and put my feet on the cold, uncarpeted floor. For a few minutes I just sat there on the edge of the bed, looking at the cuff around my wrist. At first I really liked the tattoo but ever since Johnny had died it made me depressed. It was like a constant reminder that I’d locked myself in. I hadn’t had a legitimate job in nearly three years . . . a suspicious hole in my resume. I looked around my room. It was a tiny mess. Next to the television, a

mountain of laundry threatened the view and on the other side, stacks of magazines and books were piled up against the plywood wall.

I got dressed without even bothering to shower, grabbed some cash from the cigar box I kept stashed under my bed and got the hell out of there. I hated that little room, and sharing a bathroom with a bunch of strangers was not only inconvenient but also disgusting. It was all the way at the end of the hall and it was always filthy. Puddles of soap that looked like melted ice cream, oozed on every side of the tub. And in and around the rust stained sink, there was always a slimy medley of shaving cream, whiskers, and hair. Sometimes, I wondered if I needed a shower after a shower. I was making good money and could afford to live somewhere better but that didn't matter. Management companies and realtors want W-2 forms, bank statements and credit reports. On paper, I was unemployed and broke.

When I finally got out on the street, the morning rush was over. Traffic was moving steadily uptown along Eighth Avenue but it wasn't jammed. I looked out across the street at the little park then quickly crossed at a gap in the flow.

Tall, black iron fencing ran along the park's perimeter with its pointy tips cutting through the sky. The truth is, it really wasn't much of a park. In fact, Jackson Square wasn't square at all . . . it was triangular; a tiny nook wedged into the traffic between Greenwich, Eighth Avenue and Horatio. Inside, there were green benches with concrete legs and wooden slat backs. In the center, a ramshackle fountain was filled with rainwater and leaves.

I sat down and looked up at the tall elm trees that shaded the park with a glowing wooden canopy of crimson and gold. Across from me was a small of crew of homeless

guys stretched out on a couple of benches. I knew them. For years, they used to live in the open space underneath the movie theatre on Greenwich Avenue . . . sort of an open garage. They kept it clean so no one hassled them, but when the building was sold a few months ago they got the boot. They'd been in the park since. I turned away from the dirty, jumbled mass of men scattered across the benches and looked out at the neighborhood. Well-heeled people, most of them impeccably dressed in the latest suits and fashions came and went past neat townhouses with brass fixtures gleaming out from stately doors. I looked back at the men, at their torn slacks and worn sneakers, unlaced boots, grimy windbreakers and sleazy sweaters; they were all still asleep. A couple feet away, next to a tree with dark gray bark and deep, craggy furrows, I saw a large rock about the size of a softball, lying in the dirt. I sat there a while on the bench, studying it, wondering if it might have *baraka*. A few minutes later, I figured I'd give it a try. I stood up and walked over to the tree and picked up the rock. I couldn't say what kind it was . . . only it was beige and had dark purple rings. I sat back down and held the rock in both hands and waited with my eyes closed tight. At first I thought I felt something but then I realized it was only the subway rumbling by underneath. I opened my eyes and looked down at the rock, then back at the sleeping crew. I tossed the rock behind me and it disappeared in the thick ivy along the fence.

I got up off the bench and started west. I was thinking about Johnny as I went . . . his memorial at the Bethune Street pier. It was one of his favorite spots. He liked to hang out there and watch people skating and biking along the river. When our little service was done, Johnny's wife Sabrina scattered his ashes along the dilapidated planks and murky Hudson. I thought about how Moroccans make pilgrimages to the tombs of saints. It was

almost a year since Johnny had died, but it felt longer. Every day he seemed to fade a little more from my memory. I closed my eyes, hoping to conjure his image. Slowly, his tall, wiry frame emerged from the haze. He was behind his drum kit in a dark, basement bar . . . a soft yellow light playing against his short, red hair. Slack-jawed with eyes pinned, his head bobbed sideways as he caressed both cymbal and snare with a wide, fan brush. Suddenly, a wave of relief washed over me and Johnny was gone. I thought about the Moroccans and then about Johnny and then the Moroccans, again. I laughed at myself for being so thick. Johnny was certainly no saint but he did look out for me and, I don't know; what I mean is . . . everything was cool when he was around. That's what was going on. I mean . . . that's why everything had been so cool. Johnny had *baraka* . . . a lot of it. Because we were together so often, I must have caught some off him . . . but it had obviously worn off.

I picked up my pace and hurried to the pier. After I made it across the highway, I stepped through a hole in the fence blocking off the path that stretched along the waterside. I walked against the wind past the decaying piers toward Bethune. It was cold out there and the air was drenched with an acrid smell off the river. I zipped up my jacket and pulled the bill down on my Yankee cap and looked out at the water. A strong, metallic blue current was flowing toward the harbor that sent small waves rippling off the sides of boats moving against the current. Frothy, white surges roiled then churned in their wakes before they died out in the dark flow.

When I made it to Bethune, I leaned against the dock. I stepped out onto the rotted, weather-beaten pier. There were missing planks everywhere. The long, dilapidated frame splintered out into the river and sloped downward to just a few inches above the

waters' ruffling gray surface. I sidestepped the holes and inched out further on one of the stronger boards to where we stood when the ashes were scattered. Anyway, I'd never done anything like this before and had no idea what to do next. I stood there for a while with the wind whizzing by, stinging my cheeks and ears. I wondered what Moroccans did once they arrived at a tomb. I figured they prayed but the thought of praying to Johnny was just too crazy. I had to improvise. I closed my eyes and held out my hands and thought about all the good times we had. When he got me my job, getting drunk at the bar, the first time I shot dope. I fluttered my fingers to stir up the vibe but nothing came to me. I figured it would probably take a while, so I stayed in my place, looking out at the steel, gray sky. It was featureless and flat as a mirror. From the other side of the river, redbrick smokestacks and dull wooden water towers stared back at me through the reflection above swaths of brick, tar and concrete stacked up on the ground.

An hour went by and still nothing. I thought about leaving but then I figured this might be a test, so I nestled deeper into my shoes and leaned back against the *Keep Off* sign. I wanted a drink but figured it could wait. I looked all around at the rough, ripped up planks and rushing river underneath and tried to retrace the path of Johnny's ashes. A little bit had scattered in the wind; some spilled onto the dock and the rest fell into the water. It didn't matter. What was important was that I was there, at the scene of Johnny's last gig.

The iron sky wrapped the horizon in a deep blue blanket and the wind was growing steadily. I was getting pretty cold out there and my skinny frame started to shake. I waved my arms and wiggled my fingers, hoping to jar some *baraka* but I didn't feel anything other than the wind. A half hour later, I turned away from the river and



walked off the pier. A few bicyclists wheeled by on the buckled asphalt. I thrust my hands in my pockets and went on, wondering if maybe there was a delayed effect; maybe *baraka* sank in slowly? But then I remembered what I read. *Baraka* is felt when it is encountered.

By the time I reached Tenth Avenue, I was in a pretty bad mood. I was worried there was something wrong with me. Only a crazy person would stand out on that windy pier like that with his hands in the air. I continued wandering up the avenue. I don't know what I was thinking. I was on autopilot . . . I just went. I didn't even know where I was going but I didn't stop. A million thoughts were flying through my head but I couldn't catch any of them. They all screamed at me, demanded my attention then scurried away into the haze before I could get a single word in.

I found myself on Eighth Avenue, across the street from Penn Station, near that sleazy deli that sells fifty-cent beers. Cabs were lined up on the Garden side and traffic was heavy, but it was moving. On the opposite corner, a continuous flow of high-heeled, wing tipped and booted commuters streamed up and down the subway stairs. The people coming out all squinted as they climbed into the light. I crossed the street and went inside the station. I figured I'd at least earned a drink. Anyway, I knew a decent bar in there that was cheap.

When I got to the upper level, where Amtrak and New Jersey Transit trains arrive and depart, I quickly discovered the little dive I liked had turned into a fancy, rip-off oyster bar. Then I bumped into two suits. I wheeled out of the traffic and backed into a spot in front of a luggage shop. In the tinselled window's reflection, I saw an empty chair in a cross-section of the station that served as a waiting room. It wasn't really much of a

room, just an open space cordoned off with a long, blue ribbon attached to short, chrome poles. My head was still reeling and I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. I figured I'd sit down for a minute and think things out. Luckily, when I stepped past the ribbon, the rent-a-cop at the battered podium didn't ask to see my ticket. I closed my eyes then fell back onto the soft, plastic cushion and let out a deep breath. My heart was beating hard against my bony chest and lines of sweat trailed down my face and neck.

“It's very tiring.”

I opened my eyes and then turned my head. I guess I didn't notice her, but an old woman was sitting on my right. She was tiny and wrinkled and her ears sagged low. At first glance the expression on her face seemed sad, but looking closer you could see a glimmer and glisten in her cloudy eyes. Her gray hair was neatly tucked under a pillbox blue beret and as she gazed off into the bustling station, she pursed and pressed her lips while she grasped and knotted the neck of her worn, tweed coat. A raggedy brown leather bag was slung over her shoulder and at her feet was an old, green suitcase.

“Tiring?”

When she pried her attention away from the station's bustle, she shifted in her chair to face me. She explained in a silvery tone, “Taking trains and busses and things.” She nodded ‘Yes’ with her eyes arched high and a sympathetic smile pressed on her pale lips. “It gets very tiring.” She let out a sigh and smoothed the lap of her long, brown skirt then clasped her hands together making a steeple with her forefingers as she looked off again at the busy station.

“You're right. Commuting is hell.” I said, then suddenly felt bad for using the word hell.

She turned back to me. “I know it,” she said and her beret bobbed. “My Harry used to complain ‘till no end. And you know,” she said, leaning closer to me. “It took much longer, then.” Her gentle voice had a meandering lilt that filled me with airy lightness and pulled me along like string on a kite. I suddenly felt calm. “You must be going home to your family,” she said with a confident nod.

“No,” I said. “I just stopped in for a minute.”

“That’s nice. Family is the most important thing,” she replied as though she were in a trance. She spread her tiny pink hands wide. “In the end, what have we got?” She paused for a moment and skipped two beats. “Family.”

“That’s true,” I agreed.

Her grin disappeared when she turned in her seat and glanced over her shoulder each way. She gripped her collar tight and let out a sigh. Then she turned to me again. “My daughter’s coming.” She looked back into the busy station. “To pick me up.” She continued with the same anxious expression pinned to her face. “She should be here, soon,” she mumbled.

“She’ll be here,” I told her. “Is she late? Have you been waiting long?”

“No, not very,” she said.

We sat together a little while longer. I got the whole story about Harry’s commute from Perth Amboy, all the way to the store on the Upper West Side where he sold pricey stringed instruments for a man who wasn’t very nice . . . but he was fair. And how she always kept her husband’s dinner warm in the oven and how she used tinfoil to prevent it from drying out, which she informed me wasn’t cheap, but worth it, considering prices these days. Why let a perfectly good meal get ruined while reheating in order to save a

few pennies? She told me about her children . . . a girl and a boy. Her daughter worked in a bank and her son was in real estate.

“Well, good luck,” I said. “I hope you have a safe trip.” I was just about to thrust myself out of my seat when she grabbed my wrist.

“There’s no such thing as luck,” she said straight into my face. She shook my arm. “People make their own luck.” She pursed her lips and tightened her grip. “Just try to do your best.” A bright blue sheen blazed through the haze of her cloudy eyes. “That’s all you can do.”

She released my arm and I stood up and said goodbye, but I don’t think she heard me. She was gazing off again into the bustling crowds with her hand knotted around her frayed collar. I stayed there for moment, watching her search through the hordes of streaming commuters when a wave of, something . . . I’m not sure what it was, fluttered through me and I almost lost it right there. I’m not kidding, I thought I was going to cry. I thought, ‘This is it. You’ve finally gone bonkers.’

I hurried inside the oyster bar and suddenly felt out of place. My leather jacket, ripped jeans and running shoes stood out among the better-dressed patrons glittering in the shiny, silver and gold-mirrors. I didn’t care. I pulled my sleeve over my wrist and took seat at the bar. People were looking at me like I was homeless as I drained a few beers and some whiskey. It didn’t bother me one bit.

I stayed in the bar for a while getting hammered. I didn’t want to go home. I watched cable news on the big, flat screen television as the day’s events started to swirl, blend and bleed into one another. Finally, I slid off my stool and got out of there. I figured I’d take a cab home and started out for the street. As I passed the ticket windows,

I glanced over at the waiting area and was startled to see the old woman was still there. I thought, 'You can't depend on anyone.' I started for the escalator but stopped at a newsstand and picked up a Village Voice. I'd seen an ad in the back for a doctor who removed tattoos. Then I went to a payphone and called Walter at dispatch and quit.

## Untethered

I made it to the beach sometime close to noon, which was a good change. Usually I'd still be sleeping . . . one of the more dubious benefits of unemployment. The outing wasn't cheap. The Long Island Railroad plus the entrance fee to the beach was more than I spent at once in a long time. I didn't care. I figured I needed to get out of the city. I've always loved the ocean. Maybe it was the salty air or the soft sand or the hypnotic sound of crashing waves. Perhaps it was a combination of all those things. Whatever it was, the beach had always had a calming effect on me. I'd been out of work more than five months. It didn't take very long before I felt myself coming more and more disconnected from the world. I'd quit drinking and doing drugs more than a year ago. Because everyone I knew partied, I no longer had any friends. I hadn't gotten around to making any new ones. The people at my A.A. meetings were all nice, but there was no one I'd hang out with. My job in the kitchen was my only outlet. I went early and stayed late. On the weekends I watched television. Once I was downsized, I quickly fell out of it, staying up all-night and sleeping late into the afternoon. These days, a trip to the bank to deposit my unemployment check was a big event or a run to the grocery store for ramen noodles, rice and beans. I read a lot, but mostly, I just stared at the TV. It was if I were sleepwalking for weeks at a time. I even thought about drinking and had a few close calls. I was still feeling a little shaky. A day at the beach, I figured, was worth the investment.

It wasn't a perfect beach day but a dreary beauty lingered in the stainless steel sky. Thick, dark gray clouds glowed with a metallic sheen. Below, the iron-blue ocean bobbed up and down with gurgling white tips capping the waves. Every now and then, up on the boardwalk, a few joggers passed sleepy surf shops, restaurants and bars from each

direction. Other than them, the beach was empty. I took off my sneakers and walked out into the cool, damp sand towards the shore, careful to avoid any broken glass. Dry beige prints turned up under my feet as I went, marking my tracks in the wet sand. I felt like Crusoe. I scoped out a spot about twenty yards from the shore and dropped my bag, laid out a blanket and sat down. A couple weeks ago, I had bought a new book but I still hadn't read it. While I was preparing to leave, I picked it up but then tossed it onto my bed. I didn't care if I didn't have anything to read. I couldn't keep my mind interested in anything.

I guess I was sitting there for about an hour, just staring out into the ocean, watching the white waves float across the bubbling surface. It reminded me of a glass of beer. Every so often, I turned back towards the boardwalk to look at the bar that was directly behind me. It was a seedy dive. I started to consider stopping in. Anyway, there was no surf at all . . . it was way too choppy and the weather was getting worse. The ocean's spray mingled with scattered raindrops. My face was covered in a fine mist, which began running down my cheeks and neck. I didn't care. I was too busy trying to pinpoint where it all went wrong. A lot of different thoughts ran through my head before a stream of bad memories marched past my eyes. I suppose my biggest fault is that I've always been a coward. I was the youngest of seven kids. I had three older brothers who were all tough guys like our father and had no problem putting their hands on someone. My sisters also took no shit. At a very young age, I don't know, seven or eight? I quickly learned that in my house there was more disgrace in losing a fight than there was in starting one. A lost fight got you a second beating at home. My strategy was to avoid them.

I remember my mother never let me go to school early. She said I'd only wind up getting into mischief. That policy irked me to no end. I envied the other kids who arrived early and got in a game of basketball or football before the bell rang. Still, everybody has a weak moment. Early one Tuesday morning, I found a chink in my mother's thick, Irish armor. She was dead tired after working a double shift at the hospital. As soon as I finished my egg, I started to nag her as she prepared bag lunches for the other kids. Barely into her first cup of coffee, the dark rings on her bony face sagged under her liquidy eyes and she sighed. She made me promise I'd stay out of trouble. Then she gave in.

When I got to school nearly a half hour before the first bell, there were only a few kids in the yard. One boy was sitting on the monkey bars. Around the bend of the small path that ringed the school, two kids were on the swings. It was a dark day. Gloomy gray clouds loomed in the sky threatening rain. The kid on the monkey bars waved to me. I looked closer and realized it was Brian McGreevey. McGreevey had managed to secure a small fame for himself for having been left back not once, but twice before landing in my third grade class. He was also the meanest kid in the school. He even picked on the sixth graders. We were classmates but we certainly weren't friends. I thought about my promise as I slowly approached the monkey bars. Each step I took forward, I could feel a lump tighten in my throat.

"Let's go, White," McGreevey shouted. "Get over here!" He jumped down from the bars and hit the ground with a thud. He was more than twice my size.

"Hi, Brian," I said. "What are you doing?"



McGreevey grabbed me by the neck of my shirt and pulled me closer to him. “I’ve got a way we can make some money.” His crooked grin exposed his jagged, yellow teeth. He was considerably taller than me and solid, like two kegs of beer stacked on top of each other. “See those books over there?” he motioned through a space between some trees to a small stack piled on the steps, next to the flowerboxes at the main entrance to the school. “There’s a field-trip slip sticking out of one of them. Go over there and get it. I’ll keep watch. We’ll split it.”

I had never stolen anything before and didn’t think this was the best time to start. There were only four of us in the yard. When whoever of two on the swings discovered their field-trip money was gone, it wouldn’t take much to figure out what happened, or who stole it. It never occurred to me before that McGreevey was left back because he was stupid, but honestly, that was the first thing that came to me. “I don’t know, Brian,” I started, but McGreevey was having none of it.

“You don’t know what?” he demanded, and once again he closed his fist on the neck of my rugby shirt. He raised his other fist close to my face. “I’ll give you five good reasons why you better do it.” I looked down and saw my corduroys shaking. McGreevey thrust his meaty arm into my chest. It sent me backpedaling before I fell onto the crackled asphalt on my butt. My mind raced as I searched for a way out. McGreevey croaked, “Get up off your ass before I kick it inside out.”

I attempted to bargain with my palms pressed towards him. “Wait a minute,” I figured there couldn’t be more than four dollars in the envelope. I still had some money left over from my birthday. “Why bother? I’ve got three dollars I can give you.”

McGreevey scoffed at the suggestion. “What are you afraid, you big chicken.” He pulled me up on my feet and shook my skinny frame at the shoulders with both his hands. “You’ve got two seconds to get moving before I break your face.”

“OK, OK,” I said, as I started slowly along the path. McGreevey took off and stationed himself a few yards away near the trees. When I made it to the steps, he signaled all was clear. I knew what I was about to do was wrong, but I also knew what would happen if I didn’t. I could see the end of the flimsy, white envelope sticking out of a book. It fluttered in the breeze and a chill ran down my spine. I sauntered closer then reached down and snatched it before I could think about it. I remember how it felt like the time I put my finger in a wall socket. I shivered and stammered then took off on the path. I figured I’d just give the slip to McGreevey and be done with it. I didn’t want a dime of that money.

We regrouped at the monkey bars and I turned over the envelope. McGreevey grabbed it and stole a glance all around before he stuffed it in the back pocket of his soiled jeans. By this time, the schoolyard was starting to fill. When I saw a few of my friends, I drifted over to them and played stickball before school started. Then, just after the bell rang and we were entering our classroom, the principal marched in with a little boy in tow. It was one of kids from the swings. He pointed at me and McGreevey and we were asked to come out into the hall. McGreevey glared at me and flashed a fist when no one was looking. The principal positioned us against the green tile wall, then he launched into his investigation. Our teacher, Miss Weissmueller was a staunch disciplinarian herself. She looked on with a scowl draped across her fat face as the details of the crime came to light.

Once the facts were gathered, McGreevey pleaded innocent. “I didn’t know what he was doing.”

I suppose I was in shock or to be more accurate, scared to death. I couldn’t get a single word out. I just stood there, dumbly looking up at the principal with my mouth wide open. McGreevey was excused and he went back inside the classroom. The principal said he didn’t mind telling me that he was extremely disappointed and that I was a very bad boy. That’s when I realized the seriousness of the situation. No one in my family had ever gotten into this type of trouble but I knew an offense of this sort would merit the most severe punishment imaginable. There was no way out of this one and my eyes welled up as I thought about the beating I was going to get once the news hit home. I could have told the principal that McGreevey was in on it, but that would only get me in more trouble once my father knew I’d stolen because I was afraid to fight. Not to mention what McGreevey would do. I was then told to go back inside the classroom and when I did, I saw McGreevey near my desk. Miss Weissmueller stayed outside talking to the principal. A few minutes later, she walked back into the classroom and went straight for me. She brushed my arms off the desktop then opened the lid. When she discovered the envelope in question, which was sitting on top of my books, she let out a gasp. Shocked just at the sight of it, Miss Weissmueller picked up the envelope between two fingers and held it away by the length of her arm. She was standing directly over me, all seven hundred pounds of her. I could feel her heavy breath on my neck.

Her scowl grew worse as she shook her head. “Stealing,” she said loudly, “is totally unacceptable.” The folds of fat around her neck pulsed steadily with boiling blood. “Do you want to go to prison some day?”

My heart sank deep into my stomach when she said that. I knew I was in big trouble but the thought of going to prison was more than I could bear. I folded my arms on my desk and put my head down.

“Don’t cry now because you’ve been caught.” Miss Weissmueller had consistently shown a disdain for crybabies. No matter what happened in our class, if you cried, she’d put you out in the hall. I knew that but I’d never been in this much trouble. “You should have thought about the consequences before you stole that little boy’s money.”

I looked up and saw all my classmates, their little mouths agape as they stared at me with a mixture of disgust, horror and disbelief. Someone said, “You stole it?” then the others began to whisper. I put my head back down. A minute later, the principal came in and I was told to go with him. You could hear a pin drop as I skulked out of the room.

The principal pointed to an empty chair and I took the seat next his big, shiny desk. Up on the wall there were diplomas that validated his authority to try and convict children without due process. On his desk an electric pencil sharpener’s chrome top gleamed under the dim fluorescent light. I had never been in the principal’s office before. I was terrified, completely unable to utter a single word. It didn’t matter. I knew if I said anything in my own defense, McGreevey would kill me. I just sat there and nodded as the principal walked through the awful scenario, “...for the record’s sake.”

He had a sheet of paper in front of him and noted all my silent answers. “You saw the envelope and decided to take it? You waited until the boys were playing on the swings? You took the money because you wanted it or was it just for the thrill of stealing?”

Like a mute, I remained silent with my mouth wide open. The situation had quickly spiraled out of control and I was lost in the onslaught. As the charges and motives continued to fly about the tiny office, I shook with fear as I stared at the gleaming pencil sharpener. Moments later, the principal picked up the phone and called my mother. “Mrs. White,” he said looking straight at me, “we have a little problem.” His eyes sharpened then he corrected himself. “A large one, actually...”

When I arrived home for lunch my mother was waiting for me at the front door. She didn’t say much . . . she just glared at me with her icy blue eyes. She told me that I wasn’t going back to school after lunch. She wanted me to stay home. That news made me even more nervous because I didn’t know what it meant. There was a ham sandwich and a glass of milk waiting for me on the kitchen table. When I finished, I was told to go to my room. At first, I was somewhat relieved to know I wouldn’t have to face my classmates, but then I quickly realized this had to be a bad sign of what was to come. Usually when I got in trouble, I could play one parent off the other to mitigate my punishment, but in this particular case, it was clear from the get-go that I faced a united front. I knew my mother would be leaving for work in a couple hours. I remained silent and sat on my bed thumbing through the World Book Encyclopedia . . . the K volume, one of my favorite pastimes. I guess I dozed off because when I woke up, my mother had already left for work and my sister was home from school. Within an hour, the rest of my brothers and sisters were home and the ugly news had spread. One by one, they all filed through my room and asked me why I did it? Why didn’t come to them if I needed money? And didn’t I realize what Dad would do to me? My next older brother, Tommy shook his head as he looked at me in disbelief. “Dad’s gonna kill you.”

Tommy's prediction brought on another burst of waterworks and I cried and writhed in fear until I had no more tears to spend. I couldn't even eat my dinner. Slowly the hours ticked by as I waited on pins and needles. Finally, at around seven thirty my executioner arrived. I kept my ear pressed to my bedroom door listening for him and about a half-hour later, I could hear him bending the creaky wooden planks as he climbed the stairs. A second later, my door flew open.

"So," he said as a matter of fact with a weird look on his face. "I hear you're a real wise guy. A regular Al Capone."

I remember saying, "Who?" but that's as far I got. In an instant, his belt was off and he closed in on me. My father was a mountain of a man. When he slapped me, I flew across the room and hit the wall with a bang. He picked me up with one hand and let loose with the belt. I must have blanked out because I can't say how long it went on or really anything else, other than when he was through I had welts all over my body, a fat lip and a big bruise on my cheek. My mother kept me out of school for two weeks. Soon enough, everything seemed to go back to normal but from then on, whenever my brothers or sisters misplaced or lost something, I was always the first suspect. The same reputation followed me at school.

I was still out there on the rainy beach, wondering why I never said anything about McGreevey when a squawking bird grabbed my attention. After wiping the water away from my eyes, I saw a lone seagull standing near the edge of the shore. He seemed to be looking directly at me. I was immediately impressed by the bird's neat appearance.

His head and belly were an immaculate white, flanked by light grey feathers with black tips on his wings. He moved his head and I noticed something in his mouth. I stood up on my blanket to get a better look. When the seagull turned his head and walked a few steps, I could see his yellow beak was cut up and what was probably fishing line was strung right through. The seagull let out a loud cry and began to dance. Then he bent over and struggled with the line and let out another anguished yelp as he continued to pull, step on and gnaw at the line.

I dropped back down on my blanket and propped myself up on my elbows and watched the seagull wrestle with the fishing line. Suddenly, he leaped into the air and soared in my direction, landing only a few yards away. The dark center of his eye, ringed in yellow and outlined in orange drew me in like a target. For a few moments, we both remained motionless, locked inside each other's stare. Finally, the seagull broke the silence. He flapped his wings, danced and squawked. I sat up again and watched him continue to grapple with the line. He stopped writhing and looked straight at me. I had the distinct feeling he was trying to tell me something like, 'Hey buddy! Are you blind? You see this goddamn fishing line running through my beak?'

I stood up but I had no plan or a single idea. What could I do? It wasn't like the seagull was going to wait patiently while I unstrung the line. I stepped off the blanket and the bird began to backpedal. I stopped still in the sand and pulled focus into the bird's eyes, or at least the sides of them. He looked back at me and squawked. I fixed my stare closer and closer upon him. Random raindrops had increased to a light drizzle and the wind had picked up, but I shut it all out. I continued to stare and let my eyes do the talking.

The seagull stopped moving and stood still and looked back at me. I stepped one pace forward and the bird didn't move. I waited for at least five minutes before I took another step. The seagull remained still. I settled my feet in the sand for another prolonged stay. If I was going to get anywhere near enough to get a hold of the line, I was going to have to take it slow . . . very slow. Now that the seagull was closer to me, I could see the exact nature of the problem. One end of the line was heavily knotted and a hook was tied off at the other. His bright yellow bill was cracked and had a small, rough hole in it . . . like the hook had been pulled through. I winced at the thought and the bird peddled backwards.

We remained locked in each other's stare for a long while. When I finally decided to make a move, the seagull stayed put as I advanced. At that point, I was no more than ten, twelve feet from him. Very slowly, I crouched down and got on my hands and knees, still looking straight into his eyes. I remained motionless in that position for a painfully long time with the chilly rain and wind swirling around me. Then the seagull stepped toward me. I carefully slid forward, which somehow hurt my back. I had been frozen on all fours for so long, it must have gotten knotted up. I swallowed the pain and again, for a very long time we both remained still, studying each other.

I was in striking distance but I continued to hold still. I wasn't sure how long this had been going on. There wasn't any discernable change in the rainy sky but it had to be more than an hour. I continued to wait before I made my move. His little eyes were still fixed on mine as I slowly stretched out my arm. My hand moved closer and when it was directly above the fishing line, I lunged at it. The seagull panicked and beat his wings against the sand while he squawked sharp, agonized shrieks. In one hand I grabbed the



line and in the other, I had the struggling bird by the back. I pressed him against the sand for a few moments until he stopped scuffling. I had no way of cutting the line. On one end, the knots were too tight and numerous and there was nothing I could do with the hook. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the green glimmer of a broken shard of glass . . . probably a Heineken bottle. It was just out of reach. I needed to free one hand and slide to the right about a foot. I rehearsed the move in my mind then I gripped the bird tighter and he let out a squawk as we slid together toward the glass. The sudden move panicked the seagull and once again, he flapped his wings and struggled. I stabbed the fishing line a few times with the jagged edge of the glass but it didn't cut. The seagull was still panicking beneath my grip. I dropped the glass and reached for the line and the bird took off. He only got a few inches away before the knotted end stopped him with a jerk to his bill but he continued to fight. I hopped up on a knee and stomped down on the line with the heel of my foot. I pulled the slack end tight underneath the hook and slowly but firmly, sawed the shard across on the line. After a few good strokes it snapped in two and the seagull cried out and scurried away. Near an empty lifeguard stand, he wrestled with the remains of the line before it slipped out of the hole in his beak. I stood up and walked closer to the shore. The seagull looked straight at me and raised his head and squawked over the crashing waves. Then he turned to the roiling ocean and started running toward the surf. He vaulted himself into the offshore bluster and with outstretched wings, he piloted away. The seagull grew smaller and smaller as he sailed into the murky grey. When he vanished from my sight, I felt a sharp pang in my stomach. A stiff breeze whipped by and I noticed I was drenched but I stayed near the water's edge a little longer. I wondered what hell I'd do now.

I was packing up my blanket, ready to head back to the city when I noticed two guys coming my way. They looked close to my age, probably in their thirties. A couple of longhairs in T-shirts and board shorts.

“Yo, dude,” said the taller one. “That was some incredible shit. Better than the nature channel.” There wasn’t a single soul on the boardwalk.

“You saw that?” I asked. “The thing with the seagull?”

“Saw it!” the other guy replied. “Shit, all two hours! How did you stay still so long? Amazing!”

“Yeah, man,” the tall guy said. He reached for a cigarette from the pack tucked into the waist of his checkered trunks. “You’re like the new Jacques Cousteau.”

“What are you talking about?” said his partner. “Jacques Cousteau hangs with fish. You mean the Birdman of Alcatraz.”

The taller surfer thought about it for a moment before he objected. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. The birdman was a crook. A murderer who hung out with birds because he was in solitary. This guy’s a hero.”

“I’m not saying he’s not a hero, but he isn’t like Cousteau. Cousteau didn’t hang with birds.”

“I never said he did.”

“You said he was like Cousteau.”

“You know what I meant.”

The taller surfer shook his head. “Drop it. We’ve got some drinking to do.” He turned to me. “Our friend Mike is tending bar up there at the Beach House. He wanted us

to come down here and grab you for a drink. He said he was going to get you *way fucked up*.”

I looked at the surfers’ wide smiles and considered joining them. It had been a long time since I sat in bar with a bunch of thrashers. And these guys seemed cool. Still, I knew I’d never let myself enjoy the fun so I quickly pulled the idea out of my mind before it could stick. “Oh, man, I’m sorry guys,” I said. “I have to get back to the city.”

The train pulled into Penn Station on time but when I made it to the subway there was red tape blocking off the turnstiles. It took a few minutes for me decipher the announcement screeching through the station on the tinny P.A. A water-main break had flooded the tracks at Fulton Street and service was suspended. I decided to walk home and took the stairs out, up to Eighth Avenue. By then, the bad weather had spread to the city and a light rain was falling. It was nearly seven, but there was still a lot of action on the busy sidewalks. A steady stream of umbrellas was surging toward Penn Station and the Port Authority bus terminal. Everyone was in a hurry to get somewhere. I watched all the faces pass and it occurred to me I had nowhere to go. No one was waiting for me. It didn’t matter when I got home.

When I reached the Music building, up on Forty-fourth Street, a guitarist I once knew spotted me. He suddenly emerged from the racing crowd and stepped out into my path with his gangly arms open wide. His dug-in black eyes cast a shadow on his pale skin.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed. “Jimmy fucking White! I thought you were dead.”

I looked straight through him with a vacant stare. "I am." Then I sidestepped him and went on my way. He called out but I didn't turn around. At the corner I waited for the light to turn red before I crossed, then I walked into the first bar I saw.

### A Newsflash from the Spanish Harlem Front

I pushed my key into the lock then slowly turned the knob. I could hear music playing in his room. I winced when a long squeak wrung out from the hinges as the door swung open. He didn't hear it. I stayed where I was and waited a moment before I took a single step. Light was pouring out his open door. I figured he was in his "office" . . . a tiny room that was originally a walk-in closet. He had a desk stuffed in there and a row of rickety, wire shelves nailed into the drywall. I crept through the hall on the balls of my feet and peered inside. I could see him in the long gold mirror across from his bed. He was slung over the desk in his big black chair. "*Hasta Siempre*" was blaring from his computer's speakers and a half-gallon-sized bottle of gut rot brandy was stationed at his feet. Scattered around the desk and shelves, every item powered by electricity was turned on: printer, scanner, two sets of speakers, several hard drives, three tower computers and lights of all sorts . . . bendy lights, clip-on's, LED's too. I carefully bounced on my toes two long paces to the entrance and settled back on my heels. He still hadn't noticed a thing. I raised both arms over my head and at the top of my lungs I shouted, "*Viva Che Guevara! Viva La Revolution!*"

Comandante de la Cruz sprang to attention. He pivoted on his worn, blue slippers to face me with his skinny fist in the air. From out of the haze coating his foggy glasses, as though he were searching for his leader, he looked at me with a faraway stare. Coarse black hairs stuck out from under his pilled beret in uneven patches like bent bristles on an old shoe-brush. His T-shirt was filthy, the aftermath of a weeklong struggle with cigarettes, black beans and booze. He shook his shriveled arm and shouted, "*Viva Che! Viva Fidel! Viva Raul! Viva La Revolucion!*" His stringy figure snapped forward and he

threw his long, bony arms around my shoulders. He reeked of alcohol and smoke. “My son!”

Sometime after the sixth month I’d lived with him, I was promoted to the Comandante’s inner circle. He was in front of the television, eating a plate of boiled *plátanos*. During a commercial break he told me, “You are my son! And I am you father!” It used to give me the creeps when he said that but I’d gotten used to it. He cradled my head in his veiny, blue hands and kissed both my cheeks. “You so quiet! I didn’t hear you. How are you, poppy?” I stepped to his desk and pushed aside the ashtray. His breath was flammable. “*Todo bien?*” A tired grin sagged to one side of his thin, brown face. I nodded. “Good.” He slapped my shoulder then struggled a moment to regain his footing before he turned to the desk and seized the bottle. He poured himself a triple and renewed his creed with a wiry energy that surged out both frantic hands. “*Viva Che! Viva La Revolucion! Down with the capitalismo, imperialismo systems of opresion y dominacion, conyo!*” He slammed his fist against the desk. “Down with the illegal government in Washington, *conyo carajo!*” He wiped the spittle that had gathered on his chin then savored his drink like a man before a firing squad. He passed me the bottle then reached for the mouse and turned the volume higher. He loved communist folk songs.

Comandante de la Cruz had been drunk since I moved into the place. This particular bender had been going on for months. From about eleven or noon until four, five in the morning, the Comandante sat at his desk, drinking and smoking with the same half dozen songs playing in a continuous loop. Still, despite the fact that his cardboard figure was now old and gray, the Comandante was a real commie . . . and I’m not talking about membership in some jive group of students or burnt out hippies. Comandante de la

Cruz was the real deal, still red but rusted like one of those statues in the Baltic that was never hauled away. He came from a small village in the Dominican Republic. Even as a kid he was a radical. Every few weeks, the residents of La Bocama would wake to find political slogans spray-painted across the walls of the market, billboards near the *playa*, sidewalks, even the sides of barns. He waged a one-man war, never once caught, but someone had to have known the identity of the elusive revolutionary. One day, while walking home from school, a Soviet operative came driving along and offered him a ride. It ended with a full paid scholarship in the Soviet Union, part of a greater plan to train Latinos in the motherland than send them to the Caribbean and South America to foment revolution. Within two weeks, for the first time in his life, young de la Cruz was on a plane, jetting off to join his comrades. One time, as he rationed his dexterity between lighting a cigarette and opening a can of beans, he told me, “When you live in a place where you can’t do nothing, you go away anyhow you can do it.” Comandante de la Cruz spent more than ten years in the Soviet Union before he defected from the plan and came to New York. “I didn’t want to kill nobody. For what I kill somebody?” He spoke fluent Russian and had studied economics. To support himself, he taught math in a public school before a heart attack reduced him to his current status. He maintained an unabated bitterness for his island homeland since he’d been expelled for his disappearance behind the iron curtain. Whenever the subject came up, he’d furrow his brow and curse the DR with a tight fist and blazing eyes.

The Comandante’s favorite song was blaring. It didn’t take long for me to learn the words. When it reached the reprise, I clapped my hands and gave him a high five. A little red dot of light from the scanner flickered in the silver star on his beret when we

connected. The Comandante clapped his hands and harmonized, “*De tu que-rida presencia...Co-man-dan-te Che Guevara.*” He pumped his arms and marched in place. “*Aquí! Se queda, la clara . . .*” And that’s when the banging started. The Comandante stopped singing and craned his neck toward the hall. When he confirmed the assault on the front door, he turned the volume down and reached for a cigarette parked in an overflowing ashtray. He knitted his brows and pushed his glasses further back on his cauliflower nose. He pointed the glowing end of his cigarette forward. “Let’s go.”

A hollow, metal thud clanged steadily through the narrow hallway. We took our positions. The Comandante nodded and I opened the door. It was the upstairs neighbor, Miss Knox. She was glaring at us with a hand on her hip. The tied-up ends of her turquoise headscarf stuck out like antennae. She looked like an angry ladybug in her pink bathrobe, with its round black buttons and her puffy, powder-blue slippers. “Jose, are you crazy? It’s two in the morning.” Her little head moved horizontally from shoulder to shoulder with each syllable she uttered. She straightened her hair. Actually, I’d never seen her real hair . . . she always wore a wig. She had a lot of them but all decidedly the same cut and style, best described as short, bouffant . . . like a mushroom cap. She pressed on. “Do you have to talk politics so loud?” Her shrill voice scratched against the stairwell’s smooth green tile. Comandante was searching for words when Miss Knox stepped closer with a pointed finger and continued the offensive. “And you,” she rolled her head to a shoulder, turning her bug eyes on me. “Why do you have to rile him up? He was quiet all night until you started yelling . . . like a damn mental patient.” Miss Knox had a window above the Comandante’s office. She let us know on several occasions she could hear “. . . every damn thing we said.



Comandante de la Cruz pushed forward and inserted himself into the doorway. “Hey, hey,” he growled, pointing with an unsteady hand. “Don’t speak to my son, like that.” Sweat beaded on his brow and his nostrils were dilated. He thundered, “Respect my son!”

Miss Knox was incredulous. She removed her hand from her hip and placed the opposite on the other. “He ain’t your son,” she returned as her head slid forward and backward the same fluidity it had going side to side.

The Comandante was livid. “He is *my* son!” His skinny frame writhed and shook like a brown jumping bean. “Respect my *son!*”

Miss Knox slung her head to the opposite shoulder with her big round eyes opened their widest. She jerked her head and flipped her wrist and pointed to me with a single finger and both antennae. “He’s your son?” She shifted her puffy blue slippers and grabbed hold of her hips with both hands. “I got news for you, Jose,” she said with a blank stare on her little, round face. “He white.”

Comandante de la Cruz stamped his foot and narrowed his eyes and repeated his demands. “He *is* my son! *Respect* my son!”

Miss Knox’s antennae swayed one way and her pointed hand went the other. “You two is both crazy. Grown men acting like children.”

I nudged the Comandante aside and took command of the situation. “I’m very sorry Miss Knox.” The sour look on her face made it clear she was not impressed. “I didn’t realize it was so late. We’ll keep it down.”

Miss Knox gave us a venomous stare. Her antenna fluttered as she turned her round pink body toward the stairwell. She cracked, “You both too old for this nonsense.” Then her big blue feet climbed away up the stairs.

I went into my room to get ready to bunk. The Comandante went back on duty. He was watching old videos of Che on his computer, clapping and cheering as though he was seated between Raul and Fidel in the front row of the National Assembly. I tried to block out the noise but around three, I went into his room to see if I could get him to turn the volume down. When I rounded the corner into his office, I found him sitting in the dark. His elbows were on the desktop and his head was in his leathery hands. His slack mouth had dribbled down to the bottom of one cheek. I shifted my feet and a floorboard squeaked. The Comandante looked up and spotted me in the doorway. When he took his glasses off, I could see he was weeping. Tears were running down his hollow cheeks and dripped from his chin. He reached for a box of tissues and dried his beleaguered face. The blue bags under his drooping red eyelids were glistening. He stretched his arm toward me and slowly balled his fingers into a fist. “I wish to have this man’s life.” He slammed the desk and a shard of light cut across a point of his beret’s silver star then darted off into the wooly black. “I wish to *be* Che Guevara.” He put his elbows back on the desk and his beret fell into his hands. A moment later, he was sobbing uncontrollably.

I hated when he got like this so I left him where he was and went back into my room. He was so distraught, he didn’t notice the video had ended which was fortunate. I fell into bed and passed out, but around three-thirty he woke me up.

“Yeemee! Yeemee!”

I jumped out of bed and hurried into his room. I thought he'd set himself on fire or something. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"Yeemee," he slurred then an airy his followed when he fell back into his seat. "Come to me with the liquor store."

I should have known. "Jose, you've gotta be kidding me." I motioned to the bottle . . . it wasn't empty. "You're still good. Forget it," then I went back to my room.

Undeterred from his mission, the Comandante staggered in after me. "But I need cigarettes." He steadied himself against the doorjamb and thumbed the air over his chicken wing shoulder. "Let's go now, they closing soon."

"Come on, Jose," I moaned. "Knock off 'till tomorrow."

The silvery whiskers on his bristled face shifted and his mouth fell open. "You let you father to go alone with those crackheads outside?"

A long row of bare dogwood trees lined the block on each side and the streetlamp's dim light cast an orange glow on top of their knitted branches. Long, black shadows from power lines and street signs crisscrossed the pavement and striped the bodies of parked cars on one side and the faces of brownstones on the other. In the distance, tiny fits of light sprang up from shards of broken glass scattered on the sidewalk and street. Their shiny luster was a constant frustration for a select group of crack zombies, who endlessly circled and weaved their way through these same two blocks with their hopes aimed high and their eyes pointed low. Comandante de la Cruz's apartment was on the north side of the street, in a building nestled between four others

that were exactly the same. Opposite was an elementary school. Next to the playground, in a recessed side entrance, a yellow ribbon of butane light cut in and out of the darkness and all along the block the faint strains of a grotesque song sailed through the air. From the grottoes underneath each Brownstone's front steps, a skein of dry voices murmured and groaned with the business of hookers and busy drug addicts. On the street, luxury cars with out-of-state plates were doubled parked on each side of Madison where dealers slung both powder and rock.

We were approaching the corner when the Comandante's mouth fell open. He tilted his head forward and livened his step. He headed straight for one of the dealers. The guy had on a Detroit cap and a brown leather jacket with a big patch of a feathered Indian's head on the breast. He was leaning against a car, looking into his cell phone. I hurried behind but the Comandante had already stepped to him and growled, "Hey, listen." Then he motioned to me. "This is my son. Don't mess up with him!" I thought my heart was going to beat through my chest.

The guy looked confused. He was looking at the silver star on the Comandante's beret. He stuffed his phone inside his jacket and pushed himself off the car. He was tall as he was wide. The brim of his cap was two heads higher than the fuzzy beret. He didn't blink once. His strong face was cold as steel. He studied the Comandante for a moment more then smirked. "What's up, Pops?"

I grabbed the Comandante's shoulder and tried to hurry him along but he shook me off. He pointed to me and repeated his orders with the same authority. "This is my son. If you see him around here, don't mess up with him." His shaking arm and wagging

finger upset his balance and he staggered across the pavement into the hood of a parked car.

I rushed to the Comandante and the guy in the cap stepped aside. His smirk had bent further to the top of one cheek and pushed his eyebrows closer to the brim of his cap. He juggled a toothpick between his teeth as he watched me help the Comandante get back on his feet. He walked out of the streetlight's glow into a shadow off the curb and nodded. "You better get your Pops to bed."

I said, "I think you're right," as I attempted to direct the Comandante forward.

We hadn't gotten more than ten steps when the Comandante swung his head around and issued one last warning. "Remember what I tell you. Don't mess up with him."

He made a scene in the liquor store, too. When he introduced me as his son to the guy behind the glass, naturally, the clerk looked skeptical. The Comandante had no tolerance for dissention and after a volley of insults and threats, we left the tiny sliver of a store with a fresh gallon of brandy, three packs of Marlboros and a bitter pledge to never return.

I went straight to bed as soon as we got back to the apartment. The Comandante wanted to chat and have a few drinks but I was wiped, besides, I had classes the next day. The thing about the Comandante was he had nothing to do. Since his wife left him and he'd been on disability for his bad ticker I don't know how many years, he'd been sitting in that little room listening to those same songs like a scratched record stuck in it's groove . . . at least since I arrived two years ago. In any case, things were getting worse. Lately, he'd been waking me up at some point each night and as far as our little trip to the

store went, we were lucky that guy on the corner was cool . Still, I couldn't afford to move and the place was only a short walk to the college . . . which helped since I didn't have to pay for the subway.

I was sound asleep when a steady rap on my bedroom door woke me. "Yeemee," clack, clack, clack, "Yeemee," clack, clack, clack . . ." I reached for my cell phone. It was ten minutes after seven. I dragged myself out of bed and pulled the door open. The Comandante was slouched to one side with all his weight on one arm and a hand on his chest. "Yeemee," he gasped, "I have chest pains." He dropped his chin against his pointy shoulder. His breathing was labored. "I have to go to the emergency room."

The Comandante reasoned that since we were so close to the hospital we didn't need to take a cab. We walked up Fifth Avenue. He smoked the whole way there. "Are you crazy, Jose?" I scolded him, but he said he needed a cigarette to calm his nerves. The entrance to the emergency room at Harlem Hospital was just like a supermarket's. There was rubber matting on the ground and big glass doors that opened and closed automatically. Inside, a half dozen rows of orange chairs were lined across the back and there was another couple rows on one side. In front, the admissions desk guards the swinging doors that lead to the area where they keep the beds. A thick, antiseptic smell permeated the air and the pale lime walls looked as sickly as the patients. Comandante de la Cruz limped across the yellow and black checkerboard floor to the admissions desk and signed his name on the sheet attached to the clipboard. A girl in her twenties with black, shoulder-length hair tied back with a thin gold headband and wearing a neat, navy blue suit inspected the sheet then gazed into her computer screen. Her eye shadow was smoky blue and her lipstick bright red. She reminded me of a disco diva from the

seventies, the type you'd see on an album cover with suspenders and roller skates. "Have a seat sir. We'll call you shortly." The Comandante started to tell her about the pains in his chest but the diva didn't lift an eye off the screen. "We'll call you shortly just have a seat."

We found a couple empty chairs together in the second to last row. There were people waiting ahead of us but it wasn't too crowded. There were a few homeless guys sleeping nearby. The rest were neighborhood types. After an hour's wait, the Comandante struck up a conversation with a girl who was sitting in the row in front of us. She wore a heavy, pink parka, had a scarf on her head and a ring pop in her mouth. The strong scent of strawberry hovered all around her short round frame, which was evenly distributed across two seats. She said her name was Latrice. She opened a can of diet soda and gave us the rundown on her mother, who had a wicked cough and had been hacking all night. As Latrice went on about wheezing, phlegm, and vivid descriptions of her mother gasping for air, all I could think about was class. It was starting in an hour. I wasn't happy about the prospect of missing it. At first I thought the Comandante was funny but the truth was, he was becoming a first class pain in the ass. When I snapped back to my surroundings Latrice was saying she and her sister brought her mother in early that morning. She'd been back there for three hours. Her sister was with her.

Latrice savored the bright red diamond as the Comandante gave her every line he could think of . . . she was pretty, she was smart, how much he liked her coat. When he took a break from his dreams of conquest and introduced me as his son, her big brown eyes rose to their rims like the bubbles in her soda and her thin eyebrows tightened. She popped the ring out of her mouth and shifted her eyes between us. "But he's white."

By the time the Comandante's name was called it was clear I was going to miss class. Still, I just couldn't bring myself to leave him even though I was convinced there was nothing wrong with him. The disco diva took the Comandante's information with both style and flair. Her long dark fingers danced across the keyboard as she entered his stats. A minute into the interview, she asked him if he'd been drinking. He replied in the affirmative but grossly underreported his actual intake. "Yes ... I had one . . . to calm my nerves."

A moment later, the diva looked straight at me and stopped what she was doing. "Sir," she asked with her smoky eyes focused. "Are you. . ." A tinny squelch bleated across the PA system, then two doctors were paged. "Are you related to the patient?"

The Comandante sat up and spread his hands across the legs of his grimy jeans. "He is my son."

The diva turned back to me with her head tilted and one eye closed. "Do you have any identification?"

The Comandante was insulted. He shifted violently in his chair and shouted, "You no believing me?" That's when the policeman stationed at a podium at the far end of the room came over and asked if anything was wrong.

"No, no" I said. "We're not related . . . I'm just a close friend. I rent a room from Mr. de la Cruz."

The Comandante hopped out of his chair and swayed on his thin denim legs. He put both hands on his heart and cried out, "You denying me?" His tired, bloodshot eyes opened wide and a torrent of tears rushed out from under his glasses and down his thin cheeks. An explosion of laughter erupted from the seats when he wrenched his arms from



his chest and thrust them toward the spongy, suspended ceiling and cried, “My son is denying me!” He did a spastic dance on the checkerboard floor to the further amusement of the crowd and shrieked, “Why does he deny me?” Finally, he dropped his head on his chest and covered his face with his hands. The twig-like bones tented his sagging skin just enough to cover his agonized face. He wept uncontrollably as the policeman and an orderly took him by each arm and poured him into a wheelchair. Then they rolled him through the doors and he was gone. The diva told me to take a seat. She said she’d keep me posted.

I was completely mortified. The Comandante had pulled some pretty weak maneuvers in the past but this was by far the most skeletal. I marched back to my seat and looked up at the big, flat screen television on the opposite wall. I was dead tired and annoyed I missed class. I thought, once they release him and we get home, I’ll start looking for a new place right away . . . broke or not broke. Jose was a nice guy and the room was a good deal but I was tired of his drama. He regularly phoned the police and complained about neighbors. And every so often he almost set fire to the place, when he’d fall asleep cooking and that crazy music was always blasting. Something had to change.

I was stewing in my seat for about an hour before I went back to the desk to see what was happening. The diva had nothing to report. I went back to my seat and then, intermittently, every moron present for the Comandante’s performance came over to me and asked if he was my father. They all confided they had wondered about it because it seemed strange, since, “. . . you know, you white.”

Time was quickly creeping forward. I tried my best not to look at the clock but how long can that last? The Comandante had been back there more than four hours. That's when I started to wonder if there was really something wrong with him. I hadn't noticed the diva's shift ended, but it must have since an older woman with short gray hair done in a bob and big black glasses that looked like goggles was now in her chair at the admissions desk. I asked her about the Comandante but the only thing she said was, "He's still under observation." She told me she'd let me know when she had any information.

Throughout the morning there was a steady flow of customers and screaming ambulances. I looked around the waiting room. It had gotten pretty crowded. Almost every seat was taken. People were leaning against the walls on each side of the room. I looked back up at the television. A commercial was playing. There was a guy in a flannel shirt and jeans, wearing a yellow construction helmet. He was saying something I couldn't hear. From a tiny tube, he pinched out some goo onto the top of his helmet. Next thing, they show the guy press his helmet pressed against a steel beam and he's suspended in midair with his legs dangling. Some kind of superglue. I suddenly got a bad feeling in my stomach. I wondered what they were doing back there. It was almost one-thirty. I told myself he couldn't really be sick . . . he drank and smoked all day and never missed a beat. I thought, no matter how thin he looked, he was a hearty guy. Then I started thinking about the first time I met him. How friendly and generous he was from the start. "Do what you like brother," he chuckled. "This is you home." While I was looking at the television I suddenly felt like the guy hanging by his helmet. It was the

same feeling I had when Irene kicked me out . . . before I moved in to the Comandante's place.

A whirling siren sounded followed by a series of tinny beeps. "Code blue, ER-nineteen," blared over the intercom. The siren whirled again. "Code blue ER-nineteen," rippled out again across the room. I looked toward the front and could see a flurry of doctors and nurses in suits and scrubs scurry in every direction. Goggles glanced over her shoulder and when she turned back to the room, an uneasy expression was fixed on her face. The buzz of conversation abruptly died. A muffled clatter of running feet, jingling keys and medical equipment going beep-beep-beep undulated and rose with the tide of voices. And then, as quickly as it sprouted, the noise withered into quiet and the general interest waned. Minutes later the buzz in the waiting room was back to a steady hum.

I was staring up blankly into the television at a talking head delivering the news wondering what was going on. I figured they had to be getting ready to discharge the Comandante by then. I glanced around the room and noticed goggles in conference with a tall doctor wearing green scrubs and what looked like a shower cap. A moment later, they both turned toward the seats and my heart stopped. Goggles pointed straight at me. The doctor made a grave face and tucked in her lips. She removed her cap and started to approach. A million thoughts were racing through my mind, crashing into one another. As she slowly came closer, some invisible force pressed my chest and knocked the wind out of me. The doctor stopped a couple steps away and looked down at me from the tops of her eyes. I struggled for a breath. "Are you here with Mr. de la Cruz? Are you his son?"

I looked at the doctor and my heart skipped a beat. With all I had, I pushed myself off the chair and stood up on my feet. My knees shook and my stomach ached. “Yes,” I replied. “That’s me.”