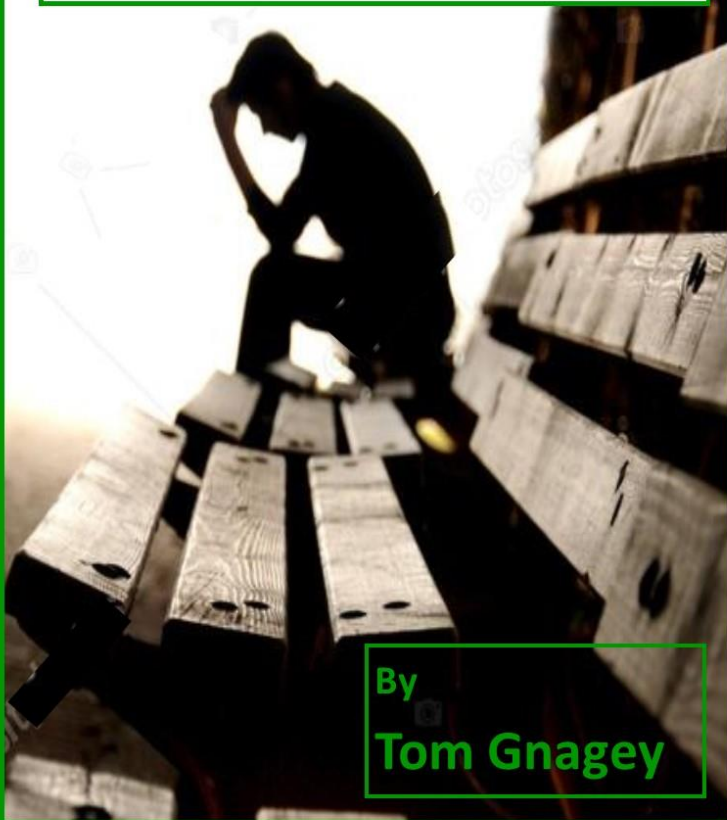


T.J: a teen boy In search of himself



By
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T.J.: A teen boy in search of himself

The sequel to:
David: a teen boy in search of meaning

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NOTES

Background: *It is best to have read the novel, DAVID: a teen boy's search for meaning, before beginning this one* since it provides a wealth of essential background about the main characters in this story. In the first book, David, a brilliant, loveable, take-care-of-everybody-sort of 17-year-old had been unable to cope with his depressing concept of how life would be for him after high school and he ended his life. T.J., the main character in this new story, was one of David's two best friends. David and T.J. were as dissimilar from each other as any best friends had ever been. In this story, T.J. begins to cope with his friend's death, his loneliness, and to evaluate his own disordered, depraved, chaotic approach to living. Sue, David's best friend since preschool, and David's family members also continue in important roles in this story.

A Note for Parents, Teachers, Librarians: This is a book for teens fifteen and older (as well as adults). It deals openly and frankly with issues that are important to teens – education, class differences, life, death, love, intimate relations, alcoholism, addiction, and its primary focus, the loss of a loved one and the guilt and emptiness that often accompany it. Those same topics can also be disturbing for some teens. The presentation is intended to meet the PG-13 rating, although the author intends it for 15 and older.

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Chapter One

Shock

David's grave was piled high with flowers and other tributes, spreading an irregular circle fifteen-feet across. The funeral had been two weeks earlier. It was as if time had stopped there in Thomasville. Most struggled to move on. It was early January, which brought with it the unending gray skies, blizzards, biting winds, and freezing cold typical of the depths of a northern Minnesota winter – dreary and disheartening by itself. The residents of the small community did their best to manage the fundamentals of living, but thoughtful folks understood, life would not soon recover.

School had been canceled during the week following the tragedy. More devastating than the sadness and grief they all felt, was their guilt. There was but one important question: Why hadn't anybody seen the problem and taken steps to fix it?

T.J. had seen the problem. He had done his best to fix it. His best had not been good enough. David's parents had seen the problem. The measures they initiated had not come in time.

Although lots of folks near David, 'missed it', and they are certainly not without responsibility, David shared in the blame – he held a core belief that he must not share his problems. It would make him look weak, but more important to him, it would burden those around him. *He* took care of others *and* himself. *Others* did not take care of him.

Sue and T.J., David's two best friends, had been avoiding each other, making sure they would not be where the

other might show up. Although they had each been close to David they had never been close with each other. Neither had any idea what to say. There was no comfort to be offered. Neither had yet found their own way to cope, so neither had useful suggestions for others.

It was noon on Saturday. T.J. was sitting on a bench in the little park in the town square. It was 23 degrees, but with no wind and an uncharacteristically clear sky and bright sun, that was considered a pleasant January day in northern Minnesota. His sweater and skimpy winter coat probably kept him from being cold – he hadn't noticed nor did he care. Sue had done a lot of walking those past few days – it was something she and David had often done together. She spotted T.J. on the bench. Her first inclination was to turn around and dodge an encounter.

'That's certainly not what David would have done,' she thought. 'A human being was hurting. He would have waded right in and tried to fix things.'

She breathed heavily, crossed the street and approached him. He was sitting, slouched forward, with his elbows on his legs, chin in his hands, looking at the sidewalk. Sue seated herself on the opposite end of the small, green bench. She didn't speak. He turned his head and saw her. He offered a feeble nod. She returned it. He again looked forward, sliding his bare hands between his knees for warmth. They sat in silence for many minutes.

Presently, T.J. spoke, still not looking at her.

"Thanks for stopping."

"Yeah. Sure. I see you got the cast off your arm."

"Yeah. Yesterday. It's really weak. Feels weird – so light. I got used to the weight. Doc says it healed perfect – ly. Largely due to David's skillful first aid."

"I'm glad about that."

Silence, then T.J. spoke again.

"I guess we've been avoiding each other."

"I guess. Understandable, I suppose," Sue said.

T.J. shook his head, slowly.

"I got no useful words, Sue. Sorry."

"Me either. Mother says guilt won't solve anything."

T.J. offered a minimal shake of his still lowered head.

“I’m afraid it’s all I have – guilt. I saw what was happening, but nothing I knew to do helped. I should have known better than to tackle a David-sized problem with my T.J.-sized head.”

“You did what you could.”

“That’s just it. I didn’t. I should have spoken with his mom and dad. I knew I was in over my head. Like a fool I went along with David’s fairytale, not wanting to put him down by making him think I believed the problem was beyond even his humongous brain – sorry – he’d have called it his *mind*.”

“His *thinker*,” Sue said able to manage the hint of a smile recalling words with him from her childhood.

T.J. turned his head toward her and managed one as well. He sat back and sighed, hands folded in his lap.

“This is good – the two of us together,” he said.

Sue nodded.

“Have you gone back to the woods?” she asked.

“Hell, er, heck no! My plan is to never go in there again.”

“I understand. Just wondered if it might provide some closure.”

“Seeing his casket lowered into the ground was all the closure I needed.”

Sue shrugged and re-wrapped her long scarf around her neck.

“Aren’t your hands cold, T.J.?”

“David took cold showers when he thought he needed to be punished. I guess I’m not wearing gloves for the same reason.”

“You must not believe that – that you need to be punished.”

“Fat chance of that.”

“You must not let yourself become depressed.”

“Crossed that bridge a week ago, Sue. Usually when I feel down I find a bottle and wash it all away ‘til the next morning. I opened one that first morning after . . . I couldn’t even put it up to my lips. That damn David got inside my head and now I don’t have any way to call him out about it. Sometimes I hate him for that. And then I feel guilty about hating the only person who ever really loved me and I go

looking for another bottle so the cycle begins all over again. Still haven't touched the stuff, but I feel like I'm going to fly apart. Friends aren't supposed to die on you. It's not fair."

"You're really angry."

"Damn right I'm angry. It's my Ma all over again."

"I don't understand."

"She died on me before I could make her love me. She just left me all alone – unloved."

Tears found their way down his cheeks. He made no effort to deal with them. Sue removed a tissue from her coat pocket and placed it on his lap. He took it and just held it making no other response. She removed a second one for herself. She scooted close to him. He reached his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. They understood nothing about the true nature of the other's relationship with David. They did understand the profound loss they shared.

"I expect to see him hurrying along the walk over there," she said looking across the street toward the bank.

"He was always hurrying," T.J. said. "I used to tell him to slow down or it would kill him – sorry, a very poor choice of words. I used to tell him he was missing out on so much by just running through life. He'd say in that fatherly voice he'd put on, 'On the contrary, young man, that way I just get to see twice as much'."

More silence. More private thoughts.

"School starts back up on Monday," Sue said at last. "I hear there's going to be an assembly first period. Anybody who wants to can stand up and take thirty seconds to say something."

"Thirty seconds? I couldn't even clear my throat to get started in thirty seconds."

"I suppose it's because so many will want to say things. Maybe it will force us to ferret out the most salient kernels of our important memories."

T.J. offered a genuine smile into Sue's face.

"Ferret? Salient? Kernels? You even sound like him."

"I suppose I have reason to. I can't remember a time that I didn't know him."

"He and I talked about that – how long we'd really known each other," T.J. said. "We pretty much agreed it had

just been since September, even though we'd been around each other since fifth grade. He had a profound effect on me in that short time."

"Profound?" she said as a question, just letting it lay there.

He grinned.

"One of his favorite words, wasn't it? He had a lot of favorite words. It was two of them that were giving him fits the past few months – altruism and compassion – well, actually, the lack of those things in our society. He saw the problems. He knew the solutions. He just couldn't make them happen all by himself. He wasn't used to that. Here in Thomasville he always could – make things happen."

"Reverend Coffelt says we have to be thankful for the time we had with him," Sue said.

"Sorry, Rev, but I'm still being angry about all the time I *won't* have with him. I just don't understand how he could have done this to me – to us. I suppose that's selfish, isn't it? At best, it was going to be three more semesters and next summer that we'd have together. Then he'd be gone to college. I've seen it all my life. A kid goes off to college and all his old friends fall by the wayside."

They sat in silence. He realized he had probably just voiced one of Sue's main concerns, also. He hoped he hadn't made things worse for her. He didn't pursue it.

"Can I tell you something terrible about myself, Sue?"

"You can. Just be very sure you really think it's the right thing to do – not something you'll be sorry or embarrassed about later."

He sat in silence, clearly thinking about her comment.

He nodded and continued.

"In my entire life, he was the only person I ever loved. I'm 17, for god's sake and he's the only one. He hated the way I lived. I couldn't understand the way he lived. But we still became best friends. And now that *only one* is gone."

"Wow! I didn't know. That really leaves you feeling alone, then, doesn't it?"

She wished she hadn't said it, but his comment had stunned her.

"I'm used to it – a lifetime of just being me all by myself

in the big stinkin' world. I'd be better off if I'd never known him. That way I wouldn't understand how terrible it is to have lost him."

"You don't dare look at it that way. You really do have to be thankful for the time you had with him."

"Easy for you to say. You had a lifetime with him."

"And you think that makes his loss somehow easier?"

He looked away and then back at her.

"Sorry. Of course not. I haven't been thinking straight since that morning we all found out about it."

Sue wanted to tell T.J. she loved him – as a friend – but at that moment she had no idea what love really meant outside of her family members – and David, of course. She remained silent.

"This is a horrible thing to say, Sue, but at this moment I really do hate him for what he did. The worst part of it is that I'm more concerned about how it affects me than how it affected him. The forces behind hate probably can't get any sicker than that."

"I'm upset, too, of course. I don't hate him. I feel really guilty that I didn't see the signs – well, I did, looking back. I just hadn't paid proper attention to them. I put too much confidence in David to handle things. That's more what I'm feeling guilty about, I suppose. My own inaction."

"How's his family doing – little Tommy?" T.J. asked.

"Like you'd expect, I'm told. I'm sure the parents are trying to hold it together for the younger children. I hear Tommy just sits tossing a ball into David's old mitt. Hard to tell about Megan. She's just clammed up – reads a lot. I don't think any of them has been back inside his room. I take it you haven't seen them."

"No. Like I told you, I got nothin' to say. Poor Tommy. He idolized his big brother. He must be going through hell. I really don't know Megan. I don't know how parents can go on after something like this."

"They go on for the other children."

"I suppose."

"I talked to Mr. Carter – not intentionally, but I ran into him and his wife at the grocery," Sue said. "He says for the rest of the year David's first chair in the trombone section is

going to be left vacant. A faint tribute, but maybe it will help the other band members.”

“I’m never going back to band,” T.J. said.

“Dumb!”

“Maybe. The best part of band practice was seeing him across the room. I always knew that afterward while we put our instruments away he’d have some new wonderful something to lay on me – a new word, a new book, a new question. No, I’m never going back.”

“You know David would not approve.”

“Well, too bad, *David*. You took yourself away from me so you no longer have any say in my life.”

“You know that’s not true – you’ve already admitted it. Nobody ever spent any amount of time with him without taking some useful something away from him, tucked deep down inside them.”

T.J. gave her a quick glance and then withdrew it. He intended it to mean, ‘stop saying things like that’. She received the message but wouldn’t stop. They all needed to reach the point where they could be happy about the parts of David that lived inside them. She understood that would be a long time coming.

T.J. spoke, softly, but then T.J. almost always spoke softly.

“When I woke up this morning, the first thing that came to mind was David, alive and well and calling me a doofus. Then it all rolled back on me and it felt like the world had been swept out from under me.”

“So, when do we stop feeling sorry for ourselves and begin moving on?” Sue asked.

“I guess I’m not ready for that question. I’m going to need to continue sticking pins in my David doll for a while yet. I am infuriated – that’s another of his favorite words. I just don’t understand. Of all the people I’ve ever known, he was the one who was always tuned in to other people’s feelings the best. Didn’t he have to know that what he was about to do would devastate us all. What if one of us ends up doing the same thing to ourself because of what he did to himself? How would he have felt about that?”

“You’re not . . . “

“I suppose not. I’m really down, but I’m a coward at heart. When I’m gasping for my last breath, dying from lung cancer, I’ll be scared silly about dying. I have nobody to talk to about it – now that David’s not around.”

“You know what he’d say.”

“I thought I did until he did what he did. Did I say I was furious with him?”

It hadn’t required a response so Sue changed the topic.

“I heard you had stopped smoking.”

“Yeah. David’s fault.”

“And that you were drinking less?”

“He tell you that?”

“No. Word gets around about popular kids.”

“Popular? You got the wrong idea there, lady.”

“I don’t think so. Everybody knows T.J.”

“Being known and being popular are really different things. I’m probably the one they were making bets about whether or not I’d show up at the Winter Dance falling down drunk.”

“You’ll hate hearing this, but I’m going to say it.”

“I can just walk away before you can say it.”

“So, are you going to?”

He shrugged, gave her another quick look, and then away. He made no effort to move.

“Everybody knows you’ve been David’s best friend this school year. If David saw good things in you then everybody believed you must have them. And that would be true, of course. The kids like the way you joke around. They like the way you’re there for people when they need something.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. All that’s only because I was tagging along when David was wading in to fix something.”

“The kids saw you two as a team – not you tagging along.”

“They were greatly misinformed, then. I’m just plain old T.J. Jackson, the loser son of his loser dad born of an alcoholic mother who missed her booze so much while she was pregnant with me that within a month of giving birth she died of alcohol poisoning.”

“I didn’t know. You know for sure she didn’t drink while

she was carrying you?”

“Dad swears to it.”

“Can you imagine how difficult that had to be for her – if she was an alcoholic – to give it up so you would be born healthy?”

Another look. Another look away.

“Guess I’ve never looked at it that way. It will take further consideration, as somebody we both knew once would say – would have said – geez.”

“Yeah. Once he said it you can bet he did it, too – consider it ‘til it wore thin.”

T.J. nodded.

“At least you have your father,” Sue said. “That has to be a good thing, doesn’t it?”

He threw Sue a long look. She couldn’t decode it other than sensing it represented great discomfort.

“Sorry if I raised a sore spot, T.J.”

“Just think about this, Sue. I’m told my mother’s eyes were blue. Dad’s eyes are blue. What color are mine?”

“Brown. Oh! I see the problem. Brown eyes can’t come from parents who both have blue eyes. I’m not sure what to say.”

“Nothing needs to be said. Dad has always taken care of me, in his own way. I don’t know why, or who he really is. I remember once when I was three or four and a terrible thunder storm came up one night. He had a bedroom. I slept on the couch in the living room. I was scared and was crying – just to myself I thought. He came out and scooped me up in his arms and took me into his bed with him. I don’t know what his motivation was, but I’ve always held onto that as meaning I am important to him. It was one of a handful of times he did anything like that.”

Sue did her best not to allow tears. Her best was not enough. T.J. continued.

“I doubt if we love each other, but we are important to each other. I’ve necessarily been willing to hold onto that and treasure it – that may be the wrong word – more like *appreciate* it, I suppose. Maybe more like just afraid I might lose it.”

“If I shouldn’t ask this, just say so, but don’t you plan to

try and find out something more about your parentage?"

"Why? I'm here. I have a life to live out. None of that will change just because I learn about them. My birth certificate says Boy Jackson born of Mary Doe. Dad's last name is Jackson. Can't explain that. Jackson is a common name in Georgia where I'm from. I can assume several things about my parents. They were smart – I'm smart – not David smart but smart. Dave made me take some tests from the counselor. They said I could easily handle college. They probably also came from smart parents. Somehow, Ma must have strayed from the coop – got off the straight and narrow – and at some point, discovered she and somebody had made a baby she didn't want. Clearly my father didn't either since he . . . well . . . you see where I'm headed. What more do I need to know? Thanks for the brains, parents. I hate you for everything else."

"And like you said, here you are. All As and Bs on your report cards. One of the two best musicians in the band – he best, now. Number one player on the tennis team. Probably the best-looking boy in school – that was one thing David never topped you in. You're caring and compassionate. You could have your choice of most any girl in school – well, if her father didn't find out and shoot you first."

T. J. chuckled and smiled, offering his sheepish look and a shrug.

"You paint a picture of a guy I don't know, Sue. I determined long ago I would live my life according to my own rules and I've never varied from that in any major way. I don't expect to make anything of myself, so I'll never be disappointed in how I turn out. Your description suggested options I don't allow when I think about my life."

"I'm sorry."

"That's what Dave said. He never explained because he knew I didn't want him to. Let's us just leave it at that between us, too."

Sue shrugged.

T.J. squirmed a bit.

"There is one thing I really need to tell you, Sue."

"Okay. What's that?"

"My arm has fallen asleep laying across your shoulders

so I *really, really* need to move it.”

They managed smiles.

“Well, as somebody we once knew would say, ‘That doesn’t rise to the level of monumental, but it is important’.”

Sue leaned forward. With his right hand, he pulled his other arm onto his lap. He jiggled his legs up and down.

“How I hate those prickly shock waves. Dave used to study them – probably kept notes on them.”

They both chuckled. It had been a useful talk. They stood, T.J. still shaking his right arm.

“I feel some better, Sue. Thanks. I’m sorry I’ve been such a doofus and avoided you.”

“I feel better too, a lot closer to you. You know I don’t gossip.”

T.J. nodded.

“Can I walk you anyplace?”

“I’m just waiting on mom to get out of the beauty parlor. I think I’ll go over there and get out of the cold.”

“I think this is the most you and I have ever talked, Sue. Maybe we can do it again.”

“I’d like that.”

They parted, moving in different directions.

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CHAPTER TWO

Tommy

T.J. had no destination in mind. He wasn't hungry – he hadn't been for weeks. He had lost weight, something his slender build didn't need. He wore bulky sweaters so nobody would ask. He felt the need to walk – get his circulation going – a phrase David had characterized as unscientific. The memory allowed a brief smile. He had gloves in his pockets – the one David had provided the morning of their knock-down-drag-out-fight in the woods. He hadn't worn them since the funeral so kept his hands in his pockets. He had no idea why he was so reluctant to slip into them.

Ten minutes later he found himself half a block away from the Baker house. He stopped and looked up at David's window. The drapes were pulled shut. David never pulled them shut. It brought on an involuntary deep and unsteady breath – the kind that often comes before tears or as a reaction to a sudden, sharp pain. Both applied in that case. The car was in the driveway. Somebody was at home. He found himself walking toward the house. He had no thoughts about it.

He was soon at the side door – the kitchen door. He sat on the steps that led up to the small entry stoop. It was where he waited all night for David on that final night of his life.

He heard the door opening behind him and turned to look. It was David's mother.

"T.J.! Come in out of the cold, won't you? How good to see you! Have you eaten? We have left overs I'd be happy to heat up – or sandwiches."

“Not even sure how I got here, Mrs. Baker. I just started walking. Just left Sue down on the square.”

“Come in, now.”

He stood, kicked the snow off his shoes against the top step, and entered.

“So, food?” she asked.

“No thanks. Sort of off my feed I guess. I’ve been wondering about Tommy.”

She motioned to a chair at the table. He sat leaving his coat buttoned. Without asking, she poured two mugs of coffee and set one in front of him. They had often done it before while he waited on David. He nodded, momentarily wondering how many gallons he had downed there at that table. She took a seat.

“Out of your cast, I see.”

T.J. nodded and unbuttoned his coat.

“A couple of days now. Lost a lot of muscle tone, but doc said it’ll soon be good as new. I wanted to tell him what David would have said: that the spot of a mend in a previously broken bone is actually stronger than the bone itself, but I didn’t.”

“She offered a weak smile and shook her head ahead of speaking.

“We are all devastated, of course, but I think it’s worse for Tommy. He is just too young to comprehend what happened.”

“That makes two of us,” T.J. said.

“He doesn’t talk. He won’t see his friends. I let one go up to see him a few days ago and he ran away and locked himself in his room. He stays inside and sits with David’s ball and mitt. Adding to the problem for him, was when Ralph died a few days after the funeral. He loved that dog almost as much as David did.”

“I didn’t know about Ralph. Sorry.”

“Would you talk with Tommy? He looks up to you almost as much as he did his brother.”

“I don’t know what to tell myself. How could I possibly know how to be of any help to him.”

“Sometimes just showing up helps.”

“I guess I know how to show up – obviously, since here

I am.”

“You’ll find him up at the top of the stairs. He sits there with his back against David’s door.”

T.J. took a long swig of coffee, really wishing it were something stronger, and stood, removing his coat and leaving it on the back of the chair.

“This is going to be so hard,” he said looking Mrs. Baker in her eyes.

“Everything is hard these days, T.J.”

He sniffed.

She sniffed.

He turned and entered the hall. The stairway stood before him. From the bottom, he could just see the top of Tommy’s head, back away from the landing. With a deep breath, he started a slow and deliberate climb, having no idea what lay ahead for him. David would have called that a courageous act. He paused as his head and torso topped the steps. Tommy looked up. His face remained blank, but he offered a single nod. Briefly, T.J. figured it would have been easier if the boy had run away to his room. With his back against David’s door, his legs were stretched straight out in front of him. T.J. pointed to the floor beside the youngster as if asking permission to sit. Tommy nodded again. Through it all, he had not missed a beat, tossing the ball into the mitt.

They sat quietly for some time, Tommy focused on the mitt; T.J. focused on Tommy – the saddest appearing person he had ever seen. Presently, T.J. spoke. David would have called it ‘speaking from the hip’ when you needed to say something but had no idea what might come out once you opened your mouth.

“Dave’s glove, I see. He loved that glove.”

Silence.

“What’s with all the names on the ball?”

Tommy held it up for T.J. to see – clearly not to hold, but look at.

“Oh. The game ball from the championship game. I remember now. He’d be glad you have it.”

“He gave it to me, before . . .”

Clearly, Tommy wanted T.J. to know *that* – that he had come by it legitimately. T.J. nodded and began again.

“Dave was a generous person. You know, ‘generous’?”

“Selfless, kind, thoughtful, magnanimous,” came the boy’s response, trailing on in monotone.

‘David’s Mini-Me, I see,’ T.J. thought to himself.

It produced the second genuine smile in weeks.

Tommy looked up into T.J.’s face.

“Thanks for coming, T.J. It is a very lonely World without . . . him. I never thought about how it would be if he wasn’t around. I figure we seldom spent more than a half hour a day with each other, but I miss him like it was 24 hours a day.”

“I understand that.”

Silence. Then, Tommy spoke what was really weighing on his mind.

“I just can’t figure what I did that made him do that.”

T.J.’s tone was always soft regardless of his words.

“What? Whoa, young man. You didn’t do one thing that caused it. Never, ever let yourself even wonder about that. He spoke to me often about you and he loved you as much as anything else in his world. He couldn’t contain a smile just speaking your name.”

Tommy looked up into T.J.’s face and held it for the first time.

“Dave would have said *universe* – not *world*.”

That he would have. Dave always thought big, didn’t he?”

Tommy nodded and returned to the ball and mitt. After a long moment, he spoke, again. His voice was quiet as if to somehow hide the words.

“How can I be sure what you said is true – that I didn’t cause it? Sometimes I teased him about stuff – girls and stuff. I told him I hated his lavender tie. I was always on him for taking too many showers. On April Fool’s Day, I hid his deodorant and that really pissed him off. He didn’t like it when I said, pissed off. I spent a lot of time with Ralph and wonder if he didn’t like that. I knew Ralph was his dog. Sometimes I didn’t practice my trumpet every day like I was supposed to. He’d get on me about it. He said I had the talent to be a great player, but it was up to me whether or not I’d ever be great. I suppose when I skipped it I made him sad. I let it slip to the

family that I knew where his naked women magazines were. I guess I don't know if he ever found out I did that. I suppose you can have them now if you want them. Dad said I'll have to wait 'til puberty to understand about them. From all I've gathered about puberty, it seems to me it just ruins a boy's life."

Tommy was serious. T.J. muffled his chuckle and drew his smile off his face with his hand.

"Maybe you can think about it this way, Tommy."

Tommy interrupted.

"The last time I talked with Dave he called me *Tom* and said that's how I should be known from then on. He also said he was proud of me and loved me."

"That was a really nice last conversation, I'm thinking."

'Tom' nodded and spoke again.

"I guess no last conversation can ever really be nice. Go ahead and finish what you were saying about how I should look at things."

"Yes. Well, I was just thinking about what sorts of things really concerned your brother."

"Not sure what you mean – the big stuff, maybe?"

"Exactly! And what sorts of things did he just let slide by?"

"The little stuff, I suppose, given the continuum you set up."

"You really understand about continuums?"

"I think that's continua – the plural form. Dave and I talked about lots of stuff like that. Sometimes after mom or dad tucked me in at night he'd come and lay beside me on my bed and we'd talk. I'm going to miss that. Now, I don't even have Ralph. When Dave went to music camp in the summers, Ralph would come and sleep with me."

"You were really lucky to be able to do that sort of thing with Dave."

"What was the point you were going to make – about the big and little stuff?"

Clearly, Tommy was taking their time together seriously.

"You listed a number of things you are worrying might have bothered Dave. Do you think he figured they were big or

little stuff?”

Tommy nodded thoughtfully, and after a few moments spoke.

“Thanks. That really helped. I should have thought of that myself. Still, I feel bad I did those things.”

“Can I share a secret with you?”

“It’s ‘may I’ but that’s okay. If you want to, I guess.”

“One time – maybe more than once – I told Dave I hated him.”

“You did? Did you – hate him?”

“I suppose not, but at the moment I thought I did.”

“May I ask what it was about?”

“Maybe later. It’s after-puberty sort of talk.”

Tom nodded and made no attempt to press for more. He wanted to keep puberty as far away from him as possible. He went on.

“I never told him anything like that. I’m not sure I ever told him I loved him, either. He told me every once in a while. I guess I figured it was something big brothers say to little brothers and not the other way around. I really did love him.”

“And I’m sure he knew that.”

“How could he when I never said it?”

“I just imagine you said in a lot of ways – just not in words. I know you smiled your great smile every time he showed up – I’ve seen it. That was one way of saying I love you. When he helped you do something – cub scout projects and things like that – and you thanked him – that was another way. I know you hugged him on a regular basis. Hugs are one of the best ways of telling another person you love them.”

There was a long silence. T.J. let it go on. Clearly, Tommy was working on important thoughts. T.J. understood about silence and how it was often helpful. Presently, Tommy looked up at T.J.

“May I hug you?” he asked, at last?

T.J. hesitated. He had never thought of himself as being loveable – well, not until David had entered his life, and then it had been a fight – he lost. Receiving a hug, when the intent was clearly to say, ‘I love you’, was a really big deal in life for T.J. He and David had not ever really shared a hug – not *that* kind of a hug. There had been hugs a few times when

he'd won a tennis match or David had won a cross-country race, but those were more congratulatory-based and not love-based. He hugged girls often – every day – but that was for his selfish pleasure and had nothing whatsoever to do with love. So, agreeing to a hug like the one Tommy had proposed was no small occurrence.

“I would treasure a hug from you, Tom, and I just happen to have one waiting inside me for you.”

T.J. was surprised at the words he had spoken – well, at most of them he had been speaking. He had been sitting next to Tommy on the floor, mimicking the lad's legs out-front position. In a fully unexpected move, Tommy lifted himself so he was sitting on his big friend's lap. He draped his arms around his neck, laying his head on his chest. His young, exhausted body fell limp. T.J. wrapped him in his arms. Tommy began to sob. T.J. allowed his own tears to flow. That – tears – was an unfamiliar event in T.J.'s life – more in the past few weeks than ever before. He pulled Tommy closer and they sat together for a long time.

Sitting there like that brought a wash of emotion-laden memories back for T.J. How many times he had wanted, needed, strong arms to hold him close – they never had. How often he had felt the need to cry – tears were not allowed in his home and would be met with the back of a hand, which, when young, had sometimes sent him flying across the room. How often he had needed somebody to help him take his fear or sadness away – but nobody ever did – well during that previous three months there had been David. With David, it was always intellectual hugs rather than physical ones. He treasured them, of course, but they weren't the same.

He didn't want that time with Tommy to ever stop. He had never experienced such an authentic feeling of meaningful closeness and caring. For several wonderful moments, it became T.J. as a frightened child, there in the arms of some strong and caring adult. Although he understood it was not the little boy's place to fulfill his emotional voids, he knew he would seek such times again – when they seemed appropriate to the boy's needs and proclivities. He smiled at his use of the word – proclivities. Dave would always be with him, not fully and completely like he had been, but he had left

his mark for sure.

Tommy fell asleep in T.J.'s arms. Sometime later, Mrs. Baker inched her way up the stairs with a tray holding sandwiches and milk. As her head appeared, T.J. motioned quiet with his finger to his lips. He pointed to the floor close by for the tray. Mrs. Baker took a long moment to take in the scene and mouthed the words, 'thank you'. T.J. nodded making no attempt to disguise his wet cheeks. She sat on the top step, turned so she could keep watch over her son and, just perhaps, his guardian angel.

Twenty minutes later, Tommy roused. He saw his mother. He followed T.J.'s arm up to his face. He addressed his mother.

"T.J. and I had a good talk. I'm going to be okay now – probably not right away, but I know you and dad and I are not alone anymore."

His mother nodded, forcing a smile from her taut cheeks.

"I am so happy to hear that, Tommy. I brought sandwiches in case you boys are hungry. I'll get fresh milk – that's probably warm by now."

He looked up at T.J. as if asking about the sandwiches. T.J. nodded. Tommy moved back to the floor and picked up the dish with the sandwiches. He held it out to his friend. T.J. took one.

"I actually like warm milk, Mrs. Baker," T.J. said.

Tommy handed him a glass and took one for himself. Warm milk and sandwiches with his special friend – like a rite of bonding.

"There's more sandwich makings if you need more," she said.

"David would say, 'Wait 'til you're finished because your eyes might be bigger than your tummy,'" Tommy said managing something that resembled a smile.

It was the first time he had used his brother's name in his mother's presence – it had been *him* or *he*. She began to cry softly. Tommy looked up at T.J.

"Mom needs me now. You understand?"

T.J. nodded and managed a smile. Tommy moved to sit beside his mother on the top step. He extended a skinny

little arm around her waist and they leaned head against head. The scene roused important questions inside T.J. Important? Downright terrifying!

“Well, thanks for the sandwich and milk, Mrs. Baker. And thank you, Tommy. . . er . . . *Tom* for the really good conversation. I look forward to more.”

“Me, too. I’m sorry I got your shirt all wet. You can borrow one of Dave’s if you want to. You are like identical in size and shape.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I am fine.”

“When are you gonna come back?”

T.J. smiled to himself. The kid knew the plural of continuum, but still said, ‘gonna’.

“How about Tomorrow – maybe after you get home from church.”

“That will be great. Come for dinner – he can come, can’t he?” he asked looking up at his mother.”

“Of course. We love having you come and eat with us, T.J.”

“I hadn’t intended to invite myself for dinner. I meant like maybe 1:30 or so.”

“We’ll set a place for you in case you change your mind,” she said.

“And I hope you will,” Tommy added.

They made their way down the stairs together. T.J. set the tray on the table. He put on his coat, thanked them for letting him come over, and left. He had huge things to think about – no, not just think about, to work out. It was after three. He started in the general direction of his house.

He spoke out loud, as if David were walking alongside him.

“This is going to be new territory – me having to think heavy stuff through all by myself. It isn’t fair, you know, leaving me with all this to handle. I have no idea how to handle it for myself, and now I seem to have given a ten-year-old the idea I’ll be there for him. Probably a huge mistake, huh? And with your brother to boot. Me, be there for somebody else? That has never been included in my résumé. I regularly submerge my problems and frightening wonders in hooch. I have to stop referring to it that way. It’s like I’m trying

to downplay its clear perils by giving it a cutesy, less serious nickname. It's alcohol, liquor, spirits – the killer of brain cells and vital organs. It kills people every day. It killed my mother, for god's sake. You'd think I could at least learn that from her – that ONE thing. I suppose you'd say I should thank her for that. Am I supposed to thank her for dying on me? For never holding me. For never being there for me when I needed a Ma. There is no way I can do this.

"You know how well I managed trying to help some damn fool who was in over his head the last time. Why should I even consider trying to help anybody now, especially such a . . . precious little kid? I think that phrase would have garnered your approval. Garnered? What have I become?

"What? No suggestions. No pointers. No cautions. Not even a simple, *doofus*? Seems I can't depend on you anymore – best friend I ever had or hope to have.

"I spilled my guts to you about how I was going to miss you when you left for college, but clearly that didn't mean anything to you – my needs and my feelings and my future, alone. Man, I hate that. Hmm. 'That' instead of 'you'. I'm going to take it as some degree of progress.

"I really do hate it that I messed up helping you. I really did try. I must admit I didn't see coming what you must have seen. If I had, you can bet I'd have handcuffed you to my bike and dragged you to a shrink. I did come over that night. I was going to stay with you whether you wanted me to or not. Your dad didn't think it was a good idea. I'm sure he wishes otherwise, now. What I should have done was climb the trellis up to your room and bang on your window until you let me in. I hope you knew I'm sorry I didn't do that.

"This may be as dumb as those conversations I used to have with Ralph in your presence for your benefit. I never really knew if they made any impression on you or not. If they did, obviously not enough. You know what your problem was – you always knew that *you* knew best. Well you didn't, so there.

"I got really scared up there outside your room this afternoon. I suddenly realized Tommy might be considering me a substitute for you. I don't want that. I can never be that. I have to help him see that I'm only me and that's a whole lot

less than you. I suppose that means helping him fully accept that you are gone – forever from his life – from our lives. Damn, I hate what you did to us! For a guy who preached compassion you sure crapped out at the end.

“I suppose I’ll need to read up on depression and suicide before I can begin understanding. The disheartening thing about that is that you had probably done that. You probably knew everything about it – how it started, how it progressed, how a person in that state thought – and *still* you went ahead and did it. I suppose that proves it doesn’t matter how humongous a person’s thinker is. Not encouraging for sure.”

He arrived at his front door. There was a belt secured around the outside doorknob. It was his father’s signal he had a woman inside. He wondered how many times he’d been declined entrance for that reason. His dad didn’t allow him whole house privacy when *he* had ‘company’. He did indicate he was proud of him each time, however. T.J. supposed that was in some way positive – maybe not. He did realize it shouldn’t have been positive, but through the years he had taken any hint of positive he got from the man.

He sat down on the porch floor next to the door to wait. The roof shielded him from the snow and the tall, untended shrubs around it formed a barrier against the wind. It was seldom more than an hour.

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CHAPTER THREE
He reached for a beer,
then moved on to a can of pop

T.J. had been sitting and thinking there on the porch for some time. None of his thoughts raised a smile. He was home so they didn't dare raise a tear, although during those past several weeks that rule had been violated in private on a daily basis. He had come to an uneasy realization; he was jealous of Tommy. At ten, Tommy was loved and well cared for. He approached his life from trust, not mistrust and fear. He had immediately accepted the advances T.J. had offered without any apparent reluctance. When T.J. was that age he trusted no one. Love was a fantasy – the stuff of fairy tales kept locked up in libraries. If somebody had offered a hug he would have felt threatened, pulled away and ran. Tommy just expected the people in his world to be good and helpful and compassionate and caring and trustworthy – the same way David had. It reflected the parents and the family feeling they had grown within those walls. That in no way reflected what T.J. had learned by that age. He wondered why God had singled him out to be mistreated and neglected and raised in poverty instead of plenty, in fear instead of safety, in anger instead of love. If there were a god, he could just keep his nose out of T.J.'s business from then on.

He figured those were things he would never be able to answer. He needed to start over. He had begun reconsidering his lifestyle during his time with David. What was the saying: Old habits die hard – old habits, old beliefs,

old values, old needs, old reaction tendencies, his entire, well-established, approach to life.

The uncomfortable, overriding thought that intruded on him since he left the Baker house was that he dared not present himself to Tommy as a substitute for David, and he dared not allow Tommy to see him – need him – in that role. T.J. was certain he could never fulfill it, but more to the point, he was not David and that needed to be kept clear. The mere possibility of such confusion was terrifying.

The feelings and revelations that had come to him during the time the boy was on his lap allowed a grand first in his life. It was difficult for him to list all the wonders it presented. It was like every need and desire he had been denied as a small child rushed in on him. He felt the emptiness begin to fill in ways he had never experienced. It was not until his time with David that he had come to assess and accept the existence and nature of that emptiness within himself. Merely feeling empty does not suggest what is missing. An unfilled hollow has no way of knowing what it is meant to hold. It was only as those new feelings began pouring into him while he sat there cradling the precious youngster that he could finally recognize what those life-long voids represented.

It had been both wonder-filled and terrifying – all those new, unexplored feelings. It was wonder-filled to experience them for the first time. It was terrifying to recognize he had never known they could exist. Perhaps, disappointing was a better term. It needed to be more powerful than disappointing. Dealing with the unknown had always presented discomfort for the human family. When things could not immediately be explained, fantasy-based explanations – lore – evolved to relieve the fear and provide purpose or meaning. David had explained that. A god driving a chariot, pulled the sun across the sky during the day. A gargantuan man named Atlas balanced a flat Earth on his shoulders so it didn't fall into the depths of space. A silver-haired, frost-covered god with chubby cheeks blew down onto the world providing wind and the cold of winter and cool relief from the summer heat. Lightning indicated a god's anger or wrath, probably as retribution for man's wayward ways. Man must have had

wayward tendencies right from the beginning.

T.J. was determined to understand what was happening – a fact-based understanding, not one he would slap together out of convenience in his imagination. He had begun to characterize the nature of love – David had offered it and T.J. had begun to understand and even offer his own leery, feeble attempts in return. He had determined that to love, made a person vulnerable. It seemed to him that loving meant you dropped all defenses. His entire life – often his very survival – had been based on having his defenses constantly at the ready. Offering love was, therefore, discomfiting if not frightening. With David, it was relatively easy. He soon grew to know David would never have taken advantage of him, so defenses gradually became irrelevant. He wondered if that were a prerequisite for love – that the other person first proved himself to represent safety and dependability. Probably not – the reverse relationship from David to him had certainly not offered David any guarantee of safety.

T.J. had no reason to believe he loved the man he called, Dad, or that the man loved him. They had some sort of ill-defined arrangement – an understanding. Up to then, T.J. understood he had been on the receiving end – having been sheltered, clothed and fed, when there was money or opportunities for such things. He had spent far less time being grateful for that, than he had making sure he followed the man's rules and expectations so those things would not be withdrawn. That had been the perennial threat – sometimes stated and sometimes merely implied by the nature of the relationship.

He remembered a time before he was in school when he had spilled his drink at supper. He had received a beating and then his dad said he had had enough of 'the boy' and was going to leave him. The implication to a child that age had been, 'leave him forever'. He removed the two fuses from the electrical box so there could be no light in the house, put on his jacket and left, remaining out all night. T.J. retreated to a corner, a blanket drawn up about him, sobbing and trembling in terror until the man returned the next morning. The incident was never mentioned. It had demonstrated a dire possibility,

however – ‘the boy’ must be perfect or else.

T.J.’s thoughts returned to the present when the woman who had been keeping his dad company left at 4:30. He removed the belt from the door knob, entered the house, lay the belt on the kitchen table – a signal he was home – and went straight to his room. He removed and carefully hung up his hat and coat and returned to the kitchen. He was suddenly hungry. The refrigerator offered an open can of beans and half a loaf of French bread. He reached for a beer, then diverted to a can of pop.

The man entered the kitchen for his belt. T.J. had taken a seat at the table and pointed to the food as if offering some of it. The man shook his head. Typically, words did not pass between them. It was to be different that afternoon.

“I’d like to talk with you,” T.J. said. “I think it’s time you leveled with me about several things, okay?”

The man got himself a beer and took the chair across the table.

“So?”

“Things about me. Talk to me about my mother and father and grandparents. Who are you – I mean I know you aren’t my biological father? Why did you take me in? Why did you keep me? How soon do you expect me to leave?”

“It’s taken you a long time to ask.”

“I’ve been afraid to ask up to now. You have a history of knocking me across the room when you don’t like to hear what I have to say.”

The man nodded and lit a cigarette. He turned some sideways in his chair and crossed his legs.

“I suppose you need to know.”

“Thank you for agreeing with me on that.”

“You been pleasein’ and thank youin’ for months now. Where you come by that rubbish? No real man uses words like them. Ya didn’t learn them from me. They’re signs of weakness.”

“From my friend, David.”

“Oh. That crazy genius kid that blew his brains out or somethin’ a few weeks back.”

“That’s a terrible way to put it. And, he never would have touched a gun. He was my best friend – probably my

only friend ever. I miss him something awful.”

The man gave no indication that he was moved one way or another by T.J.s words. He continued.

“Your ma was my only sister – kid sister. That makes me your uncle. She got pregnant with you by a college professor – she was a friend of his secretary.”

“You told me she was an alcoholic.”

“She was. Began hittin’ the booze in college. I guess she was one of them what can’t stop drinkin’ once they start – like me and you.”

“I haven’t had a drink in three weeks.”

“Really? Interesting. Anyway, our parents were teachers – Ma fifth grade and Dad Jr. College Physics. They didn’t have time for us – busy with this and that. I hated her students since, year after year, they were plainly more important to her than me and sis. I spent time fantasizing about terrible things I could do to them. By the time I was a teen ager, I’d been in Juvie a half-dozen times. I ditched school so much they finally stopped lookin’ for me. I was fifteen and sis was fourteen when they was killed in a car wreck. I clapped when given the word. The cop slapped me for doin’ it. It was worth it. Our aunt Mildred took us in, but it was soon plain she didn’t want us. When I was your age I took sis and we ran away, way down to Georgia. She had a scholarship fund for college. I saw to it she took advantage of it. She was the smart one between us. I never laid a hand on a penny of that money for anything else.”

“Where had you lived before Georgia?”

“Here in Minnesota – a bit south of here. I got to missin’ the four seasons down south. It’s why me and you moved up here. Anyway, and this is the only decent thing your Ma ever done once she started drinkin’ – I think I may a told you this – was she stopped drinkin’ cold-turkey all the time she was pregnant. Then, the day she got out of the hospital she started up again and in six weeks she was dead. I hated her for that because I’d worked hard to take good care of her. I’d always been her father and mother even before we ran away. It left me with a baby to take care of. I couldn’t hate you, though. You had nothin’ to do with it all. So, I’ve done what I could to muddle through.”

“Wow. Thank you for that. Just one question.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Is the story true?”

For the first time T.J. could remember, the man looked him straight in his eyes.

“I swear it is.”

“Who gave me my name – T.J.?”

The man broke a weak smile.

“A nurse in the hospital. She was a old nun.”

“You’ve always refused to tell me what the initials stand for.”

“Because it’s dumb, T.J. It’s just plain dumb. I will, now, if you want, but it’s dumb.”

“Yes, please.”

The man shook his head – T.J. understood it referred to his disapproval of the ‘thank you’ and ‘yes, please’.

“You was born in St. Terrance’s Hospital. The nurse said the initials stood for *Terrance’s Joy*. The staff apparently fell in love with you right off. You hardly ever cried and when you was awake, you made happy sounds. You loved to be held. I suppose that’s where the Joy came from. She said your mother needed to update the temporary birth certificate right away with whatever name she wanted for you. She wouldn’t do that and I’ve never done it – figured T.J. had a nice ring to it. You can always do that if you want to – update it. Not many kids get to name themselves.”

“Hmm. I like Terrence or Terry I guess. I would not have picked ‘Joy’ for a boy’s middle name, however. I think David would have loved it – well really liked it in the way he talked.”

“You say you were real close to that kid, huh?”

“The only best friend I ever had.”

The man nodded.

“I’m sorry for your loss, then.”

There would never be an apology for the crass statement he had made about how David left the world, but T.J. would take what he was offered. He had always taken what he was offered because he knew that was all there could be. It was the only time he had ever heard the man say he was sorry about anything. T.J. would hold onto that forever.

“Thanks for the talk, dad, er . . . Uncle Frank. How shall I handle that, now?”

“I always liked dad, but it’s up to you.”

“I can continue the ‘dad’ thing – seems appropriate considering how things have always been between us.”

T.J. made a move to stand. Frank spoke.

“Ain’t you gonna yell at me?”

“For what?”

“I been thinkin’ for years that when we finally had this talk you’d let loose with seventeen years of anger and outrage at me.”

“There’s been anger, alright, but in some way our talk just now seems to have made it unimportant. I want to thank . . . scratch that. I want to tell you how much I appreciate all the good things you’ve done for me. . . .”

He had intended to say more, but Frank got up and went into his room. The man couldn’t give thanks. He couldn’t take thanks – even when it was rephrased in a way T.J. hoped would be acceptable. He remembered something his dad’s dad had reportedly said: *Once said, said for always*. He figured what he had just said could never be dismissed. Interestingly, that dad’s dad would be T.J.’s grandfather by way of his mother, and most likely not a fourth-grade dropout like he’d been depicted, but an educated man who most likely held a Ph.D. How history could rewrite itself in a matter of moments.

“Dave would have been fascinated by that idea,” he said out loud as he moved into his room with what was left of the loaf of bread.

“So, it seems I have a bit of resetting to undertake.”

He lay back on his bed and began thinking.

‘I come from smart stock back two generations. That means I need to revisit the possibilities my future can hold for me. I’ve always assumed I was a bastard – in a biological sense – so there’s nothing new there, although now, it seems, I have reason to believe I’m legitimately a *smart* bastard. Dave would have loved that: a legitimate bastard. I have always questioned the accuracy of the tests the counselor gave me – at Dave’s insistence – his *relentless* insistence. How could I be smart considering the limited background I

believed was mine? What I learned just now seems to have cleared that up. It also verifies another of Dave's sage observations. If I am as smart as he thought I was, I am doing myself a disservice by not getting the best grades I can – really meaning, learning as much as I possibly can. Of course, *he* wouldn't have just stopped at *me* as the loser. He'd have said I was doing mankind a disservice. That boy did think big.

'*That* was fascinating. The last thought just shouted *responsibility* at me and that evoked my old knee-jerk response to reach for a bottle. Can you believe that? I am genuinely fascinated by it, instead of being so terrified that I have to drink myself unconscious. I sure wish Dave could be here to know that. He wanted that for me, so much.

'I am beginning to see why Frank took me in and cared for me. I am his only family. A nephew. Clearly, family had been important to him once – the family that consisted of him and his sister – my mother. Hmm.

'It brings me to another big deal. Somehow, I have to cope with losing Dave. That means learning *how* to cope with losing him. Up to now I've mostly just been sad for myself, angry at him, and terribly confused about why he would have done such a stupid thing. Once I stop hating him for what he did, and blaming myself for what I didn't do, and coming to grips with the fact I will never know why he did what he did, I'm going to have another huge hole to fill up. I will have a choice: to fill it up with depression and retreat into drink, or to fill it up with some kind of helpful plan for my life.

'I've always resisted putting myself on a plan. Dave was always planned up to his hairline. It seemed to me that put all kinds of pressure on him – nothing I would have wanted for myself. He relished it, calling it motivation or striving toward reasonable goals. I suppose I'll have to revisit all that, also. One thing I have learned from this tragedy, is that if I ever find myself really down – I mean more than the normal every once in a while, teen age blues – I'll go talk to some responsible grown-up immediately. I might even risk talking with a minister. That would have made Dave smile and probably chuckle. His first thought would have been, "That poor minister." Dave had about the best chuckle I ever heard.

Even old Ralph would make the effort to perk up when he heard it.

‘I can’t imagine accomplishing all this by myself – without Dave. Well, one thing is for certain right up front, I have to find ways to avoid depression – *that* will send me back to the bottle, sure as I’m laying here. I’ve battled depression most of my life, I suppose – not having recognized it. I never took time out from drinking to label it. I suppose staying active doing meaningful things is the best approach to evade depression, although it didn’t seem to do it for Dave. What do I have that meets those criteria? I can return to band and make more of an effort to help the younger players – admit to being the damn role model Dave used to preach at me about. I can hit the books – I never have, so that should present a time-consuming challenge. I feel like I have to work something out about Tommy – somehow of becoming his friend while avoiding the whole thing about becoming a substitute for Dave. I keep saying that. It must really be eating at me. I loved Dave and I will freely take on the responsibility to be there for his brother – his ‘precious brother’ he said several times. Dave was always saying to himself, “I need to read up on ...” something he’d run across that he didn’t fully comprehend. I need to read up on depression in kids. I’m sure Tommy has to be at risk.

‘I suppose Dave was the only person I ever held to be precious and even then, that revelation arrived after the fact – mostly, just now, in fact. I’m sure I never once sat myself down and said, David is a precious person to me. And then there’s Ma. How should I feel about my mother? That question just sent a chill from end to end. She gave me life and I’m finally coming to believe that’s a pretty awesome thing. That’s a change in myself I hadn’t recognized until just now, either. I imagine it snuck into my mind some time ago – before it popped up in my thoughts – because in some ways, I’ve been living like it was important since Dave . . . I’ve never said it. I suppose it’s about time I faced the words – since Dave committed suicide.’

He turned onto his stomach, sunk his face into the pillow and sobbed on, uncontrollably. At some point, he fell asleep and when he awakened it was dark outside. There

was no light from under the curtain that covered his door. He reached for his phone – 9:35. He had slept over four hours, finally making up for some of those he'd missed the past few weeks. Dave would have told him a person could never make up for missed sleep. He wouldn't argue. He really wasn't rested, so he undressed and turned in for the night.

His recent dreams had been strange. They often contained a faceless boy about his age – they did things together – often reckless things – in the manner of the life T.J. had always pursued. The boy followed his lead without comment. Most of them ended on the brink of catastrophe. He would awaken before they played out. Sometimes he dreamt that he saw David off in the distance or ahead in a crowd, but no matter how hard he tried to catch up he was never able to reach him. They were the typical sorts of dreams that accompanied such losses in a person's life.

It was the 22nd night in a row he had gone to sleep without a bottle. It was the 37th day without a cigarette. He had been keeping track. What was that feeling? Could it be, pride?

CHAPTER FOUR

So many decisions to make

T.J. awoke on his back – unusual since he was a side to side sleeper. His sheet and blankets were a tangled mess on the floor. It probably accounted for the waking up dream about riding the polar bear – bare. Clearly, it had been a restless night. They had all been restless in recent weeks. He believed it was a good thing that few of his dreams followed him into consciousness, mornings. The shadowy, lingering impressions were disturbing.

He did feel good – physically at least. No head ache. His vision was clear. There was no longer an enduring morning cough. He could take a deep breath and feel his lungs filling right down to his navel. Those early morning sensations had become a true reward for his efforts to clean up his personal habits. There still were the girls, but he sensed his attitude toward them had taken a positive turn that David would have admired – if not admired, at least come closer to approving.

It was going on eleven o'clock. He had more than slept the clock around. He was hungry – in recent weeks, that was a new morning sensation. He recalled with some appreciation, the invitation Mrs. Baker had given him for lunch – called *dinner* on Sunday noons at Dave's house. He had no idea why; supper was usually called dinner there. He smiled. Perhaps Dave had come by some of his idiosyncrasies genetically.

He took as long a shower as their tiny water heater allowed – nine minutes, tops. He figured that might warm up

his shivering form. It didn't. He noted the temperature on the weather channel – 19 degrees – and dressed accordingly – T-shirt, long sleeved wool shirt, sweater vest and pull-over. The Bakers would be home from church by 12:15. They lived on the north side of town – T.J. on the south – the older, poorer section. Those who were inclined to do such things, looked down on South-siders. Those who counted, never made the distinction. Most certainly David and his family never had.

He remembered the first time he had accompanied David to his home and his mother asked where he lived. He said, "Southside", as much to test her as to provide the information. He would always remember her response: "I just love the wonderful tall old trees down there. You're so fortunate to get to live in among them." Whatever chip might have been balancing on his shoulder when he arrived, fell by the wayside and never found a reason to return while he was in the Baker's company.

His winter coat was more a fall coat – a flimsy fall coat. It came from the clothes basement run out of Baptist church number 2. At the time he needed it, it was the only one they had that fit him. It was knee length like most others in that part of the world. He was appreciative. He had two pairs of jeans – no dress pants. For the band concert the month before, David had loaned him a pair. He had tried to give them to him, but that was not T.J.s style. Truth be known, it had been the pants problem that kept him from joining the church choir – not the excuse he voiced about not being a Methodist.

He wasn't a Methodist, which was true. He figured he wasn't an *anything* when it came to religion. He had read Dave's Bible and his copy of the Koran. Something David had said not long before, prompted him to become interested in Buddhism; sometime in the future he would borrow David's books relating to that.

He arrived at the Baker's house right at noon and took a seat on the back steps – a place he had often waited for his friend to arrive home after a meeting or a rally or a whatevertheheckitmayhavebeen. Sitting there had always produced good feelings, safe feelings, feelings of happy anticipation. That day, it produced a sense of uneasiness. Not willing to accept and have to contemplate such feelings,

he made a decision. He let himself inside – the doors of houses in Thomasville were never locked. He removed his wet shoes, hung his coat in the entry closet, and proceeded to set the table. He knew the good dishes from the everyday dishes. By the time Tommy burst through the door in a pell-mell rush toward the bathroom, the table was ready, right down to the neatly folded linen napkins and the second fork for the salad. T.J. had not known about that fork until he met David. He still thought was one of the most absurd things he'd ever heard of. It wasn't like a regular fork could get worn out on lettuce, tomatoes and shredded carrots. Perhaps salad dressing is corrosive! He managed a smile.

Tommy gave no indication he had even seen him on his initial beeline toward the ultimate relief – there is nothing like a very full, very small, ten-year old's bladder to focus one's attention. The other three followed. Megan, being the blunt, tell it like she saw it, often sullen, twelve-year-old, spoke as she entered.

“T.J. What are you doing here?”

“And it is good to see you, too, princess,” he replied with a smile.

Usually Megan was overjoyed to see her not-so-secret crush. She had embarrassed herself so hurried on up to her room to drop off her coat.

“My, my. What have we here?” Mrs. Baker said surveying the table.

“Hope you don't mind. I let myself in.”

Although that seemed obvious they let it pass. T.J. tried to redeem himself.

“I thought about cutting flowers for a center piece but realized it was January.”

“We're so glad you came, T.J.” Mr. Baker said – “even without petunias. Tommy has been fretting over it ever since you left yesterday, and I got the idea Megan would in no way mind if you came over.”

“The table looks beautiful,” Mrs. Baker said. “Things will be ready in fifteen minutes. Hope pot roast is acceptable.”

“Oh, yes. I've been enjoying the aroma since I entered. I've had yours before, you know – pot roast not aroma. It seems all I can do is stumble over my tongue today.”

Tommy returned before any response needed to be offered.

“Hey, T.J. I hoped you’d come.”

He administered a waist busting hug. Not sure how to react, T.J. patted the boy’s back. It seemed to have been appropriate.

“We got time for me to show T.J. my new Indian stuff?”

“You should say, ‘Native American, not Indian,” Megan corrected re-entering the kitchen.

“Whatever. We got time?”

He was looking at his mother.

“Wash up first and there should still be time.”

Why the washing should come before handling the ‘Native American’ stuff, which was undoubtedly lousy with germs, Tommy couldn’t understand, but obliged. He took T.J. by his hand and led – pulled – him toward the stairs. T.J. looked back at Mr. Baker as if asking if it were okay. He nodded and smiled.

They washed their hands according to Tommy’s meticulous instructions. It tickled T.J. and he went along with it. It was as if the boy didn’t think he would know how to proceed with soap and water. Tommy then pulled his friend down the hall to his room where he explained about the bow and three arrows he had made as a Cub Scout project.

“There’s a diagram about them in my handbook, but Dave said it wasn’t authentic so he downloaded better plans for me. He wouldn’t do any of the work because it’s supposed to be my project. He was like that, you know. This wrapping right here means it’s Cherokee. I think that was Dave’s favorite group of NA’s.”

“NA’s? Oh. I get it.”

T.J. examined the items with some thoroughness.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think you’ve done a great job. I don’t believe anybody would expect a ten-year-old would be able to do this well.”

“Last summer a doctor told me I’m more like a fourteen-year-old inside my thinker – I had some tests. But I’ve noticed what’s inside my head doesn’t necessarily control what’s outside my head – like my fingers trying to smooth the arrow

shafts with a knife, I mean. They came out sort of uneven if you look close. That make sense?”

“It sure does. Still, you did a great job.”

“Thanks. I was going to surprise Dave after I got them done. I never got a chance to do that.”

“He knew you so well, you have to know he knew what a good job you’d do.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I suppose you’re right. Still I wish, you know?”

“I sure do know. I have lots of wishes like that, too.”

“Maybe someday we can talk about our wishes that didn’t get to happen. Thinking about him makes me sad. I don’t think I’m ready to do that, yet.”

“Me either, Tom. But later on we really should do that.”

Tommy beamed up into T.J.s face.

“You said, *Tom*. Thanks for remembering.”

“I may slip sometimes – old habits, you know. But I’ll get with the program after a while.”

Tom’s father called them to eat. It was Tommy’s style to run everywhere. He tried to pull T.J. along at his pace, but T.J. lagged behind.

“Older guys don’t run inside,” he said.

Tommy nodded and accepted T.J.s pace wondering at exactly what age that no running rule went into effect. He would avoid asking since his inclination was to believe it, too, had something to do with puberty.

There was an awkward moment in the kitchen at the table. The others were seated. That left two chairs – Tommy’s and David’s.

“You sit at Dave’s place,” Tommy said.

It was obvious to the adults that T.J. was uneasy about that. T.J. spoke, looking back and forth between Tommy and his father.

“I’m just wondering if maybe it would be better if Tom sat in Dave’s place and as the guest today, I can sit where Tom usually sits.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Mr. Baker said, glancing at his wife. “David would have liked that.”

“Really? Me in Dave’s chair. Thanks.”

What to Tommy seemed like a grand privilege, to T.J.

would have seemed like the acceptance of a whole lot of responsibility for which he was not ready.

With that taken care of, Mr. Baker, glanced toward T.J.

“Would you like to say grace, T.J.?”

“I don’t pray, sir. Sorry.”

Without missing a beat, Tommy suggested that he would. He folded his hands and closed his eyes,

“Lord, thank you for this food and for these wonderful people, and please, Lord, take good care of our David. Amen”

His mother sniffed.

His father sniffed.

T.J. sniffed.

Megan passed the salad bowl.

A long silence ensued. It was broken by Tommy – who else?

In Sunday School this morning we heard the story of Jacob and his coat of many colors. Dave said not to take it literally. I still went ahead and colored the picture the teacher handed out. I folded it up and put it in my hip pocket. I’ll show you after dinner. I believe I did an exceptional job.

It brought smiles and helped quiet what had wanted to be tears after his prayer. T.J. tried to do his part.

“Have you seen Tom’s most recent Cub Scout project? He really did it up fine – very authentic looking.”

Inside he smiled – it could have been David speaking – certainly not the T.J. from a few months before. At least he wasn’t startled when things like that burst forth from him anymore.

With those two pieces of conversation, it naturally veered away from the sadness and feelings of loss they shared. That felt right.

“I’ve decided to begin practicing my trumpet every day, so if I don’t, kick my butt for me, okay?”

His father responded.

“It’s a fine goal, son, but if you are old enough to set it, you must also be old enough to stick to it by yourself.”

Tommy set an ear to ear grin as he looked into his father’s face.

“I would have been greatly disappointed if you had not said that, Father, dear.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it tells me things are getting back to normal around here. No kid gloves. No pussy-footing around things. We’ve had enough of that lately. Just honest relationships again. I think that’s exactly what we need. Now, about that raise in my allowance I mentioned some time ago.”

Tommy was an astute negotiator. T.J. bet he’d get the increase and several perks as well.

Out of the mouths of babes, it has been said. T.J. nodded thoughtfully. For him it meant life needed to continue on schedule, beginning with the reopening of school on Monday morning. For Tommy’s parents, it posed a delicate balancing act between keeping an adequate watch on Tommy – brilliant Tommy – and making sure they didn’t smother him the way their protective instincts were urging them to do. The three grown-ups privately shared a concern for Megan who was yet to even publicly acknowledge the death of her brother.

“How about if T.J. and I do the dishes?” Tommy asked.

“Maybe Megan would be willing to help us,” T.J. said.

Megan beamed for the first time in weeks. She nodded.

Unlike the time T.J. and David did the dishes, the kitchen floor and the youngster’s socks remained dry. It was not an easy memory for T.J. but he understood there were going to be many like it. He had to find ways of dealing with them. Some would spark sad feelings at first, but he had to make a determined effort to infuse them with the happiness they had held originally. He smiled again, inside; *infuse* – to fill with – a word he hadn’t known existed B.D.

He had used that abbreviation once with David when trying to account for some of the changes in his outlook on life and beliefs – *Before Dave*.

With the dishes done, T.J. moved into the living room where Mr. and Mrs. Baker were sitting with sections of the Sunday paper.

“Dishes done. Dishes put away. And, remarkably, dishes totaling the same number of pieces as they did before the Three Musketeers went to work on them. I better be going now. Still have homework for tomorrow. I appreciate more than I can say, being included in your meal today. I promise

not to become a pest.”

Mrs. Baker responded:

“The day you see the can of Raid sitting on the kitchen table, you will know you have become a pest and not one moment before. We love having you here, T.J.”

“We certainly do,” Mr. Baker continued. “And, in case you are concerned about it, we all understand you are *T.J.* and nobody else.”

Tommy nodded, feeling his father had not made a full enough explanation.

“We all talked about it and we will carefully avoid letting ourselves be fooled into thinking you are some sort of replacement for David. There was only one David and we loved him for being David. There is only one T.J. and we love you for being T.J. If any of us become too . . . what’s the word?” he asked looking from one to another.

Megan supplied it. “Clingy.”

“Yeah, thanks. If any of us become too clingy you must promise to let us know. And in case you missed it, I’m probably the one who will be that way first. In this house, we often have whole, big deal, family discussions when *I’m* really the only one needing it.”

His parents shared a smile. The best laid plans of parents . . .

T.J. smiled, and felt the need to say something.

“As you have probably guessed, I’m not one to make promises of any kind to anybody, but in this case, I will do my best when the *Clingommy* attacks.”

The parents smiled and nodded.

Tommy grinned.

Megan said, “We like having you come over.”

“You have all become precious people to me and if you don’t recognize who THAT sounded like, I don’t claim to know you.”

They could smile and nod. As Tommy had observed, things were beginning to heal within the Baker family.

On his way home, T.J. detoured down the street where Sue lived. He had no plan other than to walk the street. It was out of his way so some part of him clearly thought it was important. He stopped half a block away and surveyed the

house from across the knee-deep, blanket of snow that was settled in there for the remainder of the winter. The house was two stories, white brick with red trim – a lot like he thought the house of a mother and daughter ought to be. With a pair of pine trees cozying the front door, and a low, evergreen hedge hugging the base of the front wall, it was a winter holiday card just waiting to happen.

Their car pulled into the driveway along the south side. Sue was driving. She was one of the youngest members of their class so her license was relatively new. T.J. had been driving since he was twelve – the older model pickup Frank owned – but had not made a point of getting a license himself. It gave him a new entry for his growing list of things he probably, maybe, perhaps should possibly do sometime provided there might be time. T.J. was not a list sort of person. Because of the hard time he had given his best friend about all *his* lists, he felt sheepish about actually starting one.

Sue spotted him and called to him as she got out of the car.

“D.J. Hi. Come on over.”

He shoulder-shoved himself away from the tree against which he had been leaning. He moved toward her somewhat tentatively, managing a smile.

“I don’t think you’ve ever met my mother, Norma Woodward. This is David’s best friend, T.J. Jackson.”

Mrs. Woodward offered her hand for a shake.

“We share a big empty spot, then, don’t we? Good to meet you. Won’t you come in. We did Chinese for lunch. Have leftovers if you’re into that.”

“Thanks. I ate at the Bakers’ this noon.”

For some reason T.J. didn’t feel comfortable going inside.

“I really need to be on my way. Just really came by to check on Sue.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two young people to check each other out – scratch that – well, you know what I meant. Don’t freeze out here. Coffee or hot chocolate just minutes away inside.”

She left with two Styrofoam containers in tow.

“Your mother seems very nice. I like her.”

“I’ve always – well, mostly – thought so, too.”

They shared a knowing smile – parents!

“So?” T.J. offered.

“I’m making it. You?”

“About the same, I guess.”

“How’s David’s family?”

“They are on their way to coming back. I didn’t say that very well.”

“I understood.”

“I’m sure they’d really like to see *you*,” T.J. said. “When you’re ready.”

“I know I should go see them. I just have no idea what to say.”

“I stumbled on the secret. Tommy. Begin with Tommy and the rest will follow easily. In some way, he seems to have a better grasp of things than any of us. I just hope that’s really like it seems – genuinely how he is.”

“He and David were so close – closer than he and his parents, in some ways.”

“I know. Every time I’ve seen him, I’ve learned good things to help me through it.”

“You’ve been there several times?”

“Just twice. I became really concerned about Tommy and thought maybe he could use somebody – a guy – outside the family to talk with.”

“That was really great of you. Thank you. Tommy is a special person. He’ll probably be president someday.”

“My money is on Secretary of State. He’s a natural diplomat.”

Sue nodded.

“Sure you won’t come in? Mom was serious about a warm drink.”

“I’m sure she was, but I have homework to get done before tomorrow.”

“What did you decide about attending the assembly?”

“I know I should go, but as you’re aware, ‘should’s’ have never meant a whole lot to me. I really don’t know. I think it’s mainly for the kids who loved him but really didn’t know him – up close and personal, as it is said.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll go. I don’t plan on saying

anything. I'll get there early so I can get a back-row seat. I'll save one for you in case you decide to come."

T.J. nodded without really offering a commitment.

"I better go. Good to see you. You know you can call me anytime. I understand how it seems to be worse right before bedtime."

"Okay, thanks for that, and thanks for dropping by."

He turned back toward home. Clouds had rolled in from the southwest and the temperature had fallen to near ten degrees.

"The western edge of a low-pressure area," he said, immediately recognizing it had been exactly what Dave would have said – needed or not.

He buttoned his coat collar and picked up his pace, hoping to keep warm. He soon found himself jogging south down Cherry Street. It dead-ended into the street on which he lived. He was there within ten minutes.

As he began unbuttoning his coat in his room he felt something in the right pocket. It was a book – David's precious *Hayakawa* book. A slip of paper extended from between pages. On it was a note.

T.J. – David mentioned you had been reading this book – one of his favorites. I know he would want you to have it. There are other things as well, but I understand that is up to you and I won't press that conversation until you are ready to have it. Thank you for having been such an important and valuable part of our son's life.

David's father.

"Wow! How nice – I guess. Somehow it gives me the Willies. Not sure why. From this deluge of tears, I have to assume it has a good-sized emotional component."

He removed and hung up his coat and sweater and sat on his bed, back against a pillow he had fluffed and propped up between him and the wall. He began thinking.

'Interesting feelings holding this book. Things I never took time to consider before. David used to hold this just like I'm doing right now. His DNA is all over it. Parts of what's in the book became parts of him – his mind. Parts of it have and

will become parts of mine. That sharing of a book with somebody else forms an automatic bond. Here I am holding a book that thousands of other people have held and read and have taken insights from, and I have no idea who they are, but I know I share a bond with them. I wonder if David ever had that insight. It's the sort of thing he used to delight in.

'Mr. Baker's note is bothersome. I can believe the family wants me to have some of David's things. I can even believe that David would have wanted me to have them. I can't take his clothes and I'm sure they will be offered, but the kids all know his clothes and mine. I can't just show up as the sole beneficiary of David's private Salvation Army Store. Anyway, I wouldn't be in any way comfortable wearing them. It was uncomfortable enough wearing his slacks to the concert. I'll have to do a lot of thinking about the offer – maybe some of his books – he'd have wanted that. Maybe Tommy and I can split them between us. I need to sleep on it – maybe for weeks. We'll see. I appreciate how Mr. Baker phrased the offer without putting any pressure on me. He is a kind and wise man. I wonder how differently I'd have turned out if I had such a man in my life. There is no margin in that sort of, 'what-if', wondering.

'I will hit the books for a while then feed my face and more than likely cry myself to sleep, later. I'm going to believe that is not a bad thing, since it comes so naturally, recently. I won't decide about the assembly until morning. At one level Dave would have hated it. At another he'd have probably understood its therapeutic value for the kids. I really want to just go to sleep and make it all go away.'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Assembly

Since September, one of the best things about waking up mornings for T.J. had been the happy realization that he would get to spend time with his best friend. During those past several weeks, morning after morning he had awakened to the disheartening reality that was no longer how it could be. It was met with a thoroughgoing sense of sadness and frequently by a smattering of tears.

“You’d think by now I’d be accustomed to that new fact of life – but clearly I’m not.”

It had been his greeting to the world that Monday morning. He sighed and allowed his shoulders to slump as he sat up on the edge of his bed. He checked his pillowcase. It was not wet, meaning his tears had stopped once he had fallen asleep the night before. He hoped that represented some sort of progress. He remembered very early one Saturday morning several months before when the band was going by bus to a regional contest. He had entered David’s room through the window, to keep from waking the others. While David showered and dressed T.J. had noticed the pillowcase was wet, but didn’t give it a second thought – the first having been a tidal wave of sweat. He wished he had, of course. He had come to understand what he never could have, back then.

He would give himself the length of his shower in which to decide about the assembly for David. The decision came sooner than that. He would attend. Any way you sliced it, it was meant as a tribute to his best friend. Of course, he

needed to be there. Fortunately, most of the things he had needed to say to David he had been fortunate enough to have said to his face during their friendship. He would lend his presence even though he would not speak. It would be expected that he would be there, but *that* – an expectation by somebody else – would not be the reason behind T.J.'s attendance.

He downed a glass of orange juice and then a second as he slipped into his school clothes and coat. As he added the homework papers to his backpack he had to smile. 'His teachers just might faint dead away, receiving homework from T.J. Jackson.'

He approached the outside kitchen door. Hanging from the knob was a long, heavy, knitted, neck scarf, with a fringe at each end – light blue and medium brown – his favorite color combination. There was a note pinned to it.

"Can't afford to have you catch newmonia."

Frank had just come as close to telling the boy he loved him as the man would ever be able to. T.J. understood. He turned the sheet of paper over and wrote, "Perfect!" He left it on the kitchen table.

That scarf, eventually little more than tatters, would follow T.J. well into adulthood.

He arrived a few minutes before first period began. After stowing his coat, backpack and new scarf in his locker, he located Sue at the rear of the auditorium and slipped into the seat she had saved for him. Although the assembly was optional, it appeared that most every student was there. There was dreadfully depressing music playing softly in the background.

Presently, Mr. Hays, the principal, parted the dark red curtains from behind and stepped out to center stage. The students had already set a quiet, somber tone. He said a few predictable and unremarkable words about the nature of the assembly – nobody would remember them. It had included something about a time for personal reflection. He finished by saying when any member of the student body felt he or she wanted to say a few words about David, he should just stand and share what was on his mind. He asked that the remarks be kept short – a half minute or so – so everybody who

wanted to speak would have time.

“So, who would like to begin?”

As if according to a well-rehearsed plan, they all turned and pointed toward T.J. A few even voiced his name. THAT was not the way the morning was supposed to begin. He looked at Sue. She leaned her head close and whispered to him.

“Everybody knows you were his best friend. Like it or not, that rubbed off on you. They expect to hear from you. Apparently, they *only* want to hear from you since nobody stood to speak.”

“Whew! I hate this. I don’t know how to begin.”

Perhaps worse than that, he had no idea how to continue, if, in fact, he found some way to begin.

“In your entire life have you ever once been at a loss for words? I’ll answer that. NO! Now go. In a way, I suppose, it’s your duty.”

Under normal circumstances, anybody telling T.J. Jackson something was his duty would have been cause for a bloodied nose and black eye or in the least a string of creatively, personalized profanity. The other students made no move to turn away.

T.J. stood. A hushed, group sigh was evident as they tuned forward, their eyes following him down the aisle like a school of fish performing their underwater ballet. Clearly, none of them had been sure he would do it – after all it was live-by-his-own-rules-never-take-a-suggestion T.J. Jackson who was the focus of their attention.

Mr. Hays motioned for him to come up to the stage. Not at all T.J.’s idea of a good thing, but he complied. Mr. Hayes stepped aside. On stage, T.J. took a long minute to look out over the gathering. He knew virtually every student by his full name and in more than a few cases had enough dirt on them to blackmail them and make himself rich. He motioned for the music to be turned off. Before he uttered his first word he took a determined step forward and landed his hands on his hips with some authority.

“If you aren’t the sorriest excuse for a student body I’ve ever seen. Sad faces, slumped shoulders, red eyes. Did any one of you ever see David sad, with slumped shoulder and red

eyes? What would he think of you? You know damn well what he'd say to you. 'Get your sorry butts in order'."

It produced many nods and even a few smiles.

"If David had a motto, I think it was, 'Let's get this thing done'. Right?"

There were more nods. Many moved back in their seat and sat up straighter. Some, mostly girls, dried their eyes.

"You know what David's favorite song was – the *Thomasville High School Fight Song* – and that was not *entirely* because he wrote it."

There were chuckles. Several managed a few claps.

"One way we can remember and honor David is to put our hearts into that fight song like our team was about to take the field for the national championship. Miss Bradford, get us started. I want to feel this old building shake. I want the neighbors to call 911 because they think something outlandish is happening in here. I want my ears to ring for the rest of the day. Everybody, now, up on your feet."

He urged them along with vigorous arm motions.

"Go, Bradford!"

They stood. They sang. T.J. paced the stage shaking his fist in the air. It was not the quiet mannered T.J. they all knew. What began as a fairly sedate offering, quickly morphed into a top of the lungs rendition the likes of which had never before been experienced there in the small town of Thomasville, Minnesota. They waved their arms and wiggled their fingers in the traditional Thomasville salute to the players. They stomped their feet where feet were to be stomped. At the conclusion, an ear-splitting chorus of finger whistles pierced the air. They took their seats with a wave of high fives and back slapping. When the eruption calmed, the demeanor of the student body had greatly improved. T.J. had a few more things to say. He walked back to the center of the stage.

"There are so many ways we can each honor the memory of our good friend and leader. Think about what David would do. Take the new kid under your wing. Make it obvious that those of us who live here in Thomasville will never tolerate bullying in any of its forms. Nobody ever strove – strove – strived – I don't know – for excellence more than David. Maybe that isn't your thing. David would have

understood that. He basked in the fact that we are a collection of individuals with unique needs and skills and goals. Just look at him and then look at me. How many times have we all heard him encouraging one of us to do our best at whatever our thing happened to be. David was never known to put others down. If I asked for a show of hands from those who David had personally encouraged at one time or another, I'd see a sea of arms out there. Right? I don't know if any of you know this, but when he was winning a cross country race by a sizeable margin he'd often slow down so the guy in second place wouldn't have to feel so bad about how much they had been beaten by. That meant he didn't achieve all the school and regional records that could be his, but personal records were never his thing. People and their welfare and safety and happiness were his things. Not a one of us here today doesn't know that. And, there isn't one of us here today that can't follow his example in those things.

“Our real tribute to David is not going to be what we say here today, but the manner in which we live our lives from this moment forward. I think I may have just paraphrased that from Able Lincoln, but it seems to apply. Nobody could be touched by David and not be changed if they truly paid attention. I have no idea if there is a heaven, but if there is, don't you know he's already up there playing an unscheduled trombone solo at the dance he organized so the newcomers could get to know each other.

“As one of David's close – well, closest – friends, I want to personally thank each of you for being here this morning. From here we're to go to second period. I'm going to suggest we leave now and as we do, we fill these halls with one more rousing rendition of *'Fight On, Thomasville High'*. Who knows just how high those sounds might rise and who might hear them?”

That time Miss Bradford was not needed. T.J. led the song. He jumped down from the stage and beckoned the others to follow. He set a quick pace. At the rear of the auditorium he offered his arm to Sue and together they turned right, down the main hallway.

After a few minutes, the exuberant chorus of voices came to an end. T.J. and Sue stopped at her locker. Her eyes

were filled with tears.

“That was wonderful. How in the world? You were eloquent and articulate. We each felt like you were speaking just to us. You touched every single one of us. ‘Thank you’ seems way too little.”

“As I walked down the aisle toward the stage, I said to myself, ‘I’ve been preparing for this moment since the day I met David. Just say what you know he would have said in some similar situation and it is bound to be fine. Just don’t ever put me on the spot to repeat what I said because I have no idea.’”

“Fortunately, Mr. Hays had things set up to record the mini-tributes the students were supposed to give. It is to be a gift for the family.”

“I guess I’m just glad you think it came off good enough.”

“Good enough! David himself – eloquent, well-organized, always on top of everything, David – never rose to the level of your remarks. If he was looking down on us today, you can bet that he’s the proudest angel that ever wore a halo.”

They parted on the way to their classes – Sue to American History and T.J. to Geometry. Quite unexpectedly, it became an uncomfortable three minutes for T.J. As he moved down the hall he received a ‘Hi’ or ‘T.J.’ or a thumbs up or an offer of a high five from virtually everybody he passed. He was used to the scene – such things were commonplace when he walked with David, but never when alone. It was unnerving. He was just T.J., the nobody he had always worked hard at being, and that was how he wanted things to remain.

David had said it before: being popular brings responsibilities – want them or not. T.J. had no intention of being popular. He had been David’s friend; he was not David, he was most certainly *not* going to become David’s stand in there at the school. The bell rang. Conversation in the classroom quieted and the students turned to face the teacher, who spoke.

“Mr. Jackson. We all appreciated your words earlier. Thank you.”

Many of the students turned to look at him. There was a smattering of applause. T.J. sunk down in his chair as if to disappear. Even his usual back row seat had not come to his rescue that time. He managed a forced, faint smile and nod in the teacher's direction. Class proceeded with this proof and that proof. T.J. could only think about 90 proof – make that 200 proof.

During the five minutes between second and third period, he hurried to Sue's locker. His discomfiting encounters in the hall continued.

Several boys required a high five just as he approached her.

"What the hell is going on here? Nobody's ever offered me a high five in my entire, scudsy, life. Seldom has anybody ever even said 'hi' or called me by name. I hate this. What shall I do?"

"Can you come sit with me at lunch? We can talk."

"If I last that long. I have English next period and then Sociology."

"You better get your English book then. Times about up."

"I carry all of them in my backpack. Locker's just for my coat – and my new scarf."

"Okay, then, I got to go so I'm not late to Dear Mrs. Haskel's Government Class. I'm not looking forward to it in case you didn't notice. See you at lunch. You be there, you hear?"

T.J. offered no assurance. He understood her message – do not ditch school and go in search of a bottle. He could offer no assurance about that, either to her or to himself.

Sue was finished with her lunch, sitting alone at the table she and David had shared for two and a half years. She was determined to do that – to face what she knew would be one of the most difficult parts of moving forward. Several of her girl friends had asked her to join them as she moved along the line, but she was determined. The other's understood and, in truth, were relieved. They had no idea what to say.

She knew the other students were sneaking glances in her direction. It had not been her intention to fashion a

melodrama for general consumption. Conversation was much subdued over what was generally the norm during lunch. She understood that was not for her benefit. Lunch was a natural time to let off steam and bolster themselves for the final four classes of the day. Nobody really felt like exhibiting their usual animated, noon-time, nature that day.

Sue spotted T.J. tagging along at the end of the line trying to look inconspicuous. She was relieved he had come. He had thought waiting until last might curtail the barrage of greetings. It didn't. He joined her with his tray and took a seat – across the table, not beside her like David's preference had been.

"I hoped you'd come, of course, but I hadn't expected you'd be eating here. This is nice. You so seldom show up at noon."

"Now that I've reduced the smokes and the devil spirits in my life, I suddenly have money for such frivolous things as food at noon."

"How nice on both of those fronts."

"What am I going to do? I really need a plan. Without a plan, I'm fairly sure I'm going to lose it. How do I get out of the spotlight? It just can't be that the few words I said were all that good. I'm not a public speaker. Sure as . . . heck, I've never made it a point to try and convince anybody to change their ways in my whole life. I guess what I'm saying is, I don't want that fifteen minutes this morning to ruin my life – my privacy and my independence."

"Your *anonymity*, is what you're trying to say."

"Yes. That's it. On the head. Thank you. Nowhere in my life's plan does it list, 'Be a leader'. I am not a leader. I hate the very idea. I've always struggled just having to be responsible for myself. How could I possibly ever be responsible for anybody else?"

"So, you are asking for a way to undo everything you did this morning."

"I suppose so. That's just it. I can't see how I *did* anything."

"I believe at this point in the conversation, David would have bopped you on the back of your head and called you a doofus."

“What? Why?”

“Here’s the what and why the way I see it! In a matter of just a few minutes you turned hundreds of teenagers from a motley mass of despondent, purposeless young souls who had lost their mooring in life, into a once again proud army of young people with a purpose – a purpose to pick themselves up, make themselves better people, and take the good and positive things from their relationship with David and move forward, rather than wallowing in the tragedy and allowing it to destroy their lives. Don’t ask me to diagram that sentence. Enlisting the patriotic bond to Thomasville High School was brilliant – it made it clear that even though we have lost one of us, we still have the rest of us and our traditions and we have our loyalties to hold onto. Nobody in that auditorium will ever sing our fight song again but what they will return to those moments and reaffirm everything positive and uplifting you raised for them – that *you* framed for them when *they* had been unable to.

“What I’m saying is, you demonstrated yourself to be the new leader. You held out a promise that you were now the wise one. You provided hope. More than the mere suggestion of hope, you used David’s life to point the way toward hope. I do understand none of that was your intention.

“David frequently talked to me about your ‘grand potential’ as he labeled it,” she went on. “He also frequently related to me things you had said or phrases you had turned that clarified important things for him and pointed his way for him. You need to understand that you affected him in profoundly positive ways. Your decision is not between becoming a leader or not. Your decision is between accepting your inborn talents and benefitting your corner of mankind, or shrinking back into a bottle and squandering the gifts from what David called the most magnificent class of beings in the known universe – mankind.

“You asked for the why and what. There they are. It’s not just my assessment. Every teacher and student in this building is thinking it if not talking about it. You want more?”

“Might as well make that bottle worthwhile. Go for it, I guess.”

“You and David are a whole lot alike, and yet this

morning you highlighted one really important difference. David assessed people and then gave them things to do that were within their demonstrated abilities and skill levels, and in that way, did wonderful things for most every student in this school. He never set anybody up to fail. T.J., on the other hand, presents challenges and motivates people to be more than they have been, to push themselves, to set their own dreams and find their own ways to work toward them. Both of those approaches are important. In David's approach, it left the final responsibility in Dave's lap. In T.J.'s approach, it places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of each individual. It's one thing David worried about in his leadership style – making everybody too dependent on him. He voiced it several times to me. I have to believe he did to you as well."

T.J. nodded and looked Sue in her face.

"Many times, during his last days, in fact. But he did so much good for so many. It was, like you said, him finding the talents and forcing them to practice them. Through that practice they became better at using what they had – something they could always carry with them. That has to be worth a great deal. It's what great coaches do, isn't it?"

"I think it's what coaches do when their main objective is winning. Those who are devoted to helping their young charges become the best people they can become, undoubtedly use both the David approach *and* the T.J. approach."

"What if the T.J. approach – my approach as you describe it – is really all just a scam so I don't have to be responsible for them – for anybody else? I put the responsibility on them so if they fail or have problems along the way it's their fault not mine. David's shoulders were wide. I'm afraid mine are quite narrow by comparison."

"I can't speak to those private concerns. You'll have to come to grips with them, yourself. Can I ask you a question?"

T.J. smiled.

"As somebody we both love would have said, 'I'm quite sure you CAN, and, yes, as far as I'm concerned you even MAY.'"

She offered her smile. One of only a few in some weeks.

“He would have said exactly that. I’m coming to see how wonderful it is that people who have been important to us continue to live on inside us. It’s what he really meant when he talked about how you had left your mark on him. You and I never really ever knew each other one on one. What we did know, was passed onto us from Dave – a third party. It tells me that not only did you affect him, but through him, you have affected me also – along with how many others?”

“You sound so much like David. I do understand what you’re saying. I may not like it, but I understand.”

“And you sound like him, too, T.J. I’m going to believe that’s a very good thing – a part of our short relationship with him that will always be important parts of us.”

T.J. suddenly became even more serious.

“The bad thing is, that I imagine down the line – months or years – we’ll be spouting some of Dave’s ideas and takes on things, and we won’t even remember they were his, first.”

“Think about it. Would David ever in million years see it that way?”

“No. He’d just be pleased something from him was still useful to us that far down the line. He’d even hope we could improve on it. He never took credit for anything he did. . . . Thanks, Sue. Our chat has been worth more to me than a dozen hours in a shrink’s office – and I’m sure the company has been far more attractive.”

“I’m glad to hear that from you – the helpful part – well, no girl could not like the rest, too, I suppose. I need to do one more thing before we go our separate ways this noon.”

“Do? I don’t understand,” T.J. said.

“Stand up and turn around.”

“Huh? Okay, I guess.”

He followed her instructions. Sue reached across the table and pretended to lift something out of his rear jeans pocket.

“Okay. I’m done,” she said.

He turned back around.

“What in the . . . what was that all about?”

“I just removed that bottle from your pants so it won’t be a temptation tonight.”

T.J. offered his wonderful smile and reached behind

him in the direction of the other pocket. He pretended to hand something to Sue.

“What’s *this* about?”

“My other bottle. I always have a spare stashed somewhere close by.”

Sue’s eyes teared as they caught each other’s gaze. They held it for some moments and nodded. It had been one of the most important conversations either of them could recall.

As he leaned down to pick up his tray he noticed that many of the other kids were looking in their direction. He whispered to Sue.

“So much for continuing my lifelong campaign to remain invisible – and it’s all your fault.”

He put his tray down on the table and mounted his chair so he could look out over the group. He spoke in an uncharacteristic, loud voice.

“Here’s the deal my friends. From now on, when we meet each other, you can expect me to ask you what you’ve done recently to make your little corner of the world become a better place. I will expect a sincere and honest answer – I have spy’s. When I find your response is less than it could be, I will sic Sue on you, and if you’ve never had Sue on your case you don’t understand the meaning of abject terror.”

He stepped down to light applause. There were chuckles – some outright laughter. Not one of them did not believe his message.

CHAPTER SIX

“I’m really not in favor of clothes.”

After school, T.J. altered his routine of leaving through the main entrance, and moved in the direction of the east door – the place Sue usually waited for David for their walk home together. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting. On his way, one of the new students caught up with him.

“T.J., may I speak with you for just a minute. “I’m Jake. You have no reason to know me. David befriended me my first morning here and really impacted my life in a positive way. In light of your two speeches today, I have an idea I’d like to run by you.”

T.J. smiled thinking, ‘speeches’, were they, now? He noted the boy was interestingly articulate.

“Of course. What’s on your mind? You walking east?”

“Yeah. I just live three blocks from you – me, my younger brother and dad. Lots of testosterone at our place, but very few skills when it comes to running a household. We’re just starting out without mom.”

Not knowing the situation about ‘mom’, T.J. wasn’t sure how to respond so he didn’t. Sue wasn’t at the door. They stopped just inside. Jake continued with a single word.

“Clothes.”

T.J. smiled and responded.

“Well, I’m really not in favor of them, but in public I give in to the social convention and wear them.”

Jake chuckled.

“I’m sure that would make for a fascinating discussion some time, but my head was going in another direction and I

have the idea you probably really nude that.”

“And the lad is a wag as well as inquisitive,” T.J. said offering a smile and chuckle.

Jake acknowledged the compliment with a quick grin and nod, then continued.

“Don’t take this as a put down about this school or the kids, but I’ve noticed that quite a few don’t have nice clothes to wear and those that they do have, they seem to wear day after day. I’m thinking, *clothes bank*, like a food bank but for teen kids clothing. It would be different from the clothes cellar at the Baptist church – I’ve had to visit there, myself. What they have is helpful, but it’s worn and much of it is out of style. What I’m thinking of is a place with newer, nicer things. You got a reaction?”

“I understand your concern, Jake. My coat, here, is a relic of that cellar.”

Jake reacted with surprise. T.J. always looked so good – the coolest of the cool. T.J. spoke thoughtfully.

“A fantastic idea. May I proffer an idea for you to consider?”

“I imagine you can, and if I knew what ‘proffer’ meant, I might even profit from it.”

Smile met smile.

“You’re a really neat kid, Jake. I’m glad I’m going to get to know you.”

Jake shrugged, appearing embarrassed.

T.J. understood his comment to the boy had been straight out of the David Baker playbook, but it had been sincere and he appropriated it without reservation.

“Proffer – to offer or volunteer.”

“It’s a word I’ve never heard in my sixteen years. Thanks for using it.”

“I don’t understand. Thanks for using a word you didn’t know?”

“For using the *proper* word with me as if you expected I would know it. That’s a real compliment. David told me that and I believe it. I’ve begun keeping a word list and when I can’t get the meaning from context, I look them up later.”

He removed a small spiral notebook from his shirt pocket as if to ‘proffer’ proof.

“Anyway, what was your idea?”

“It is more of an observation,” T.J. began. “Perhaps it will start your thinker on some useful path. If the kids who have nicer clothes in this school place their used things in such a clothing bank, won’t local students in need tend to shy away from them for fear everybody will know they had to take charity – Mary X coming to school wearing a top everybody knows used to belong to Ellen Y?”

“Astute – a word from Sue – one of David’s close friends, but you know that, of course. So, the problem becomes to find quality, used, clothing nobody has seen before locally. Hmm. Here’s an idea. Marysville High School probably has the same problem. How about if kids from over there sent us their discarded clothing and we sent them ours? Would that solve the problem you *proffered*?”

Another mutual smile.

“I think it would. Think about the nuts and bolts for a while and I imagine you’ll soon have a really great thing going. You might talk with Barry Davis, the Student Council president. Maybe he has connections with the Student Council over in Marysville. One more concern. Many – probably most – of the kids who need this kind of help are embarrassed to have to receive handouts, so think about how you can keep it quiet – unadvertised, low key, backroomish, so to speak. Even our great little Thomasville High School has a few catty girls and thoughtless boys who would be pleased to call attention to such things just to put those kids – us kids – down.”

“Thanks. This chat means a lot to me. I told David I’d always be ready to help when he needed somebody for a project, and I’m telling you the same thing.”

“I appreciate it, although you must understand that I have no intention of being a replacement David in this school. Anyway, never hesitate to run your ideas by me when you think I might be able to offer something.”

“Can I ask you one more thing,” T.J.?”

“Of course.”

“Does Sue have a boyfriend. I understand she and David were just friends but I mean a real boyfriend.”

“No. Not to my knowledge. She’s dated Billy a few

times this school year. She dates, but nothing serious as far as I know.”

“Thanks. I don’t have much money for dates, but she seems like the down to earth sort that wouldn’t break a guy.”

T.J. laughed out loud.

“You are an insightful kid, Jake. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Jake, his smile, and his testosterone, floated back down the hall toward his locker. T.J. had an ill-defined, unsettling reaction to the request for information about Sue. He would have to run that through his thinker later.

T.J. continued out the door, buttoning his coat against the cold and the wind. He began the six-block walk toward the hardware store where he helped stock shelves and bins, and swept up after school. It was a mindless job that took no initiative on his part and involved very little responsibility. Because of those things, he had characterized it as the perfect, T.J. job. That afternoon he wasn’t so sure. He put his new misgivings out of mind and picked up his pace.

Also, new to him, was his desire for the time at work to pass quickly. He had things to think through and the ‘WD-40 and faucet-washer atmosphere’ of a hardware store was just not conducive to such a serious undertaking.

Upon leaving work, he hesitated, wondering if he should put in an appearance at Tommy’s place. It was another odd reaction. That had always been *David’s* place. He wanted so much for it to still be that, but it wasn’t, of course. He decided an everyday diet of T.J. would not be in the best interest of Tommy – like the rest of them, the ten-year-old, too, had to find ways of moving on under his own steam.

Each day as he walked down the short lane from the street to his house, he still experienced the reassuring anticipation that there would be a bottle awaiting him for later. It had been an important part of his life since he was thirteen – four years. One didn’t easily kick such a mental routine. He knew what David’s solution would have been – change the focus of his reassuring anticipation, not on the presence of a bottle, but on his joy of knowing he no longer needed to have a bottle in reserve for later. Poor, innocent, *never-having-*

tasted-a-single-drop-of-alcohol-David, had no reference point for comprehending what a struggle it was to 'cold turkey' such a long-established dependency. The closest Dave had ever come to an addiction was the pleasure he experienced chewing on Strawberry Twisters, the penchant for which he had come by from over-identifying with Raymond Masters, the detective in a mystery series he loved and often quoted.

During the previous three months, T.J. had researched alcoholism – a more common a problem than he imagined. One specialist hypothesized that although perhaps 99% - more or less – of so-called alcoholics had developed physiological needs – body and brain-based dependency on alcohol – the other 1% most likely just had developed a *habit*, used alcohol for specific purposes. T.J. believed that was how he used it – to cloud his problems by reforming them into unintelligible far off blobs so he could sleep unencumbered by their torments. He had no reasonable way of knowing if he might be the second type, especially since his mother and uncle were clearly the addicted, the dependent kind. A few weeks before, he had mustered the courage and became determined to try it – going cold turkey. For some reason, he had never discussed the true *nature* of the problem with David and David hadn't really pressed it, although he was aware of the situation, like many other kids (and apparently, fathers of adolescent girls) in Thomasville.

His experience during those previous several weeks seemed to be confirming his belief. When bedtime approached, the idea *always* crossed his mind, but the statement of the idea had changed substantially. It had become, '*shall I drink tonight*', rather than, '*I really need to drink tonight*'. That realization had proved the most powerful realization of his life – well, there had been that first, fantastic moment when he realized he was a man, but that unforgettable event happened for every boy.

He and David had discussed the general process of making changes in one's life. They had come to believe that deciding to make an important change was always easier than making it, and that making it was always easier at the beginning than honestly keeping to the commitment over the long haul. T.J believed he had reason to be hopeful that his

changes – drinking and smoking – were well on their way to becoming stable and permanent parts of his life. The fact that he felt so much better physically should go a long way toward reinforcing and maintaining that.

The girl thing he characterized as naturally and normally essential to his happiness and wellbeing rather than as an addiction, so he had no immediate intention of considering a life of celibacy. He shuddered at the thought. He realized others had belief-based objections to his behavior and he honored their right for them to follow their beliefs. David had believed sexual relations were inappropriate outside of marriage. He cited both religious and social explanations in support of his stand. T.J. understood, but T.J. did not burden himself with social values or religious beliefs, even though it was clear to him that if everybody followed *his* example, society would one day collapse. He knew he would always be faithful to a wife – from that he would never waver. But until then . . . He had a good deal more thinking to do on that topic.

He walked through the door at 5:10 and was amused that he dropped his backpack on a kitchen chair with the intention of getting right at his homework for the next day. He always did his homework, eventually – it was how he managed to learn the material and make such good grades on the tests. He just never handed it in, believing the tests should be the proof of his accomplishment, not dozens of pieces of paper. It seemed most of his teachers held an opinion close to his about the purpose of homework – a guide for learning. With ‘A’s on the tests and ‘F’s on the homework, his teachers still, in some way, saw fit to give him high ‘B’s or ‘A’ minuses. They understood him as a student. They would never understand him as a person.

If he were a teacher, he would assign guidance exercises specifically designed to make sure the students were properly prepared to master the material (ie, homework and/or well organized and supervised classwork – especially the latter. He believed most time in class was a monumental waste.). Whether or not they did it, should be up to the students. If they wanted to remain ignorant perhaps that should be their decision. Hmm. The more he thought about it

the more he questioned it. A vital, working society required an educated – knowledgeable – citizenry. Dave had harped on it. Perhaps because of that, students *should* be forced to learn. Was education for the enlightenment of the individual *or* for the survival of society? It would require much more consideration. He understood it was because of the need for such very serious discussions that he would miss his dear friend the most.

He carefully hung up his school clothes. He had managed to acquire six basic sets, which met his rather specific standards. He then made himself comfortable, assembled a three-decker sandwich, poured milk and sat at the table – ready to do battle with the assignments. T.J. had no problem ignoring assignments that seemed irrelevant or that covered material he already knew or understood. That often cut the work in half. He had always read widely and arrived at seventeen already well educated in many areas. He used the homework to fill in missing pieces. Once he was convinced he had learned what he needed to know, a grade on his report card, assigned by somebody who didn't know his personal goals, was meaningless. He seldom examined them – he just signed his dad's name on the back and returned them like any other savvy student.

He figured he had been fortunate to have a neighbor lady – a retired teacher – who had taken him under her wing when he was a preschooler living in the city. She had him reading well by age five and continued to supply him with books until he left the city after fourth grade. He treasured the attention she gave him. In many ways, she had been his first, David.

His evening activities went exceptionally well according to his estimation, and he was asleep by ten.

When his phone beeped to alert him it was time to open his eyes and get on with another day, he felt rested and refreshed and ready. Recently, before rolling out, he had begun pausing to appreciate all those things – things that were relatively new in his life. At the conclusion, he always voiced the same words.

“David, this is a l l y o u r f a u l t!”

It referred to the great way he felt upon awakening, and

was offered with an ear to ear grin. He figured that signaled he was beginning to cope positively with his loss. It didn't mean there still were not occasional tears in his private moments, but there were also more and more good memories, which left less time for sorrow, grief and emptiness. He was coming to understand that some remnant of the empty spot would probably always be with him, but that was okay – he would do what he could to make it a repository for his love for his friend and for the dramatic new possibilities life seemed to be presenting him. Fascinating to him, was remembering the time David had said that in life, people had a choice about which things to remember – the good or the bad. The nature of that choice often came to define and direct their lives.

With that ritual behind him, he was soon in and out of the shower, downed a bowl of cereal, a glass of juice and dressed for the day. When your clothes were as precious as his were to him, you removed them immediately upon returning home and dressed at the last minute so they wouldn't wear out any sooner than necessary. He was a tad over five feet 10-inches-tall and weighed 145 pounds. He had the tennis player's body, generally slender with a well-developed torso and arms. His dad – Frank – was close to six feet and 175 so he figured he was getting close to his genetic potential in respect to height and shape. That meant his clothes, if well cared for, should last for some time yet.

Unlike many of the poorer kids at school, T.J. could have cared less about how others reacted to his limited wardrobe. He pitied few people, but snobs he pitied. Their sick need to make themselves feel better about themselves by putting down the less fortunate bothered him deeply. He kept his clothes clean and relatively wrinkle free. Between two pairs of nice jeans, six shirts, three pull-over sweaters and two sweater vests, he was able to assemble a variety of great looks. He often wore a brightly colored, old-west style neckerchief – it, along with his rumpled hair, had become his trademark. Like he had mentioned to Jake, he saw clothes mainly as a social requirement demanded by the insecure prudes of the world – *and*, of course, to keep from freezing certain vital parts during Minnesota winters.

In addition to arriving at school and handling whatever

met him there, he had two plans for the day. First, that morning he was going to pass by the corner where Sue and David always met on their way to school. He had no particular hope to meet her there. He had no particular hope not to meet her there. Second, he would stop to see Tommy after work. He was still confused about how to define his best role with the boy. He hoped he would be able to sense what he needed and that couldn't happen if he didn't spend time with him.

He smiled as he passed the refrigerator that sat next to the front door. On top, lay the laundered socks David had loaned him after the flooded kitchen floor incident. He rolled them into a ball and shoved them into his coat pocket. There he felt the gloves David had given him that strange day in the woods by the fire. For some unclarified reason, he had not been able to wear them since David's death. That morning it suddenly seemed absurd to walk the winter weather with freezing hands when he had warm gloves. He slipped into them. They did warm his hands. They also wiped away the several tears that demanded release at that moment. Perhaps it represented more than just slipping into his *gloves*.

"Two for the price of one – dry cheeks and warm fingers," he said out loud, managing an almost smile.

It was a day that presented a contradiction of Nature for a boy from Georgia. The sky was clear, the wind had stilled, the sun was bright and the sky cloudless, yet the thermometer sat at three above zero. His coat was dark blue so absorbed whatever heat the sun managed in his direction. Still, it was cold. He knew kids who had to walk miles to get to school from their farms, doubled up on the jeans until they arrived. Somehow the uncoolness of that kept him from it. It bothered him that he let maintaining his image keep him from doing the sensible thing. Another item to think about. Perhaps he needed to start a mini-note pad like Jake. His would be just for topics he wanted to consider – to run by his thinker, as David had said. David had surely kept one, only rather being made of paper, his had been a matrix of neurons and synapses.

A block from Sue's corner, he noticed someone loitering there. He was concerned. He only had a rear view.

It was male, not tall, in a brown coat and hat with the earmuffs tied around his chin. It hid most of his face. He stopped to assess the situation. About then, Sue turned onto the walk from her house. She clearly recognized the person. Soon T.J. did also as the boy removed his hat at her approach. T.J. figured that represented unreasonably good manners considering the temperature. It was Jake. T.J. smiled. The boy seemed to know what – who – he wanted and was going for it. Good for him, he thought. Still, his feelings were not entirely positive.

They paused and spoke for a moment while Sue took Jake's hat and tied it back into place. There was some finger wagging in his face over it. They turned and proceeded toward school. T.J. lagged well behind. He had played with the idea of trying to become close with Sue, but he was not looking for a relationship, or was he? He was not prepared to be faithful to just one and he would not tarnish her reputation by dating her, or would he?

He entered the building through the main entrance. Barry Davis, the student council president had clearly been waiting for him.

"T.J. Good morning! Got a minute?"

"Always for our revered student body leader. What's on your mind?"

"Sort of an awkward topic."

"I have no aversion to awkward topics. I was David's best friend, remember?"

It produced smiles.

"That makes it easier, actually. It relates to him – his absence from the student council. I've been talking with the Jr. Class sponsor about a replacement for him and she suggested that I nominate you."

"This school needs to get one thing clear, Barry. I am T.J. Jackson. Some of you – way too many of you – seem to be confusing me with the boy who is no longer with us – David Baker. Please stop doing that. I am not a leader. I do not want to be a leader. If that seemed rude I apologize, but this whole new, cockeyed way folks are looking at me is really unnerving."

"Sorry. Didn't have any idea it would upset you. It's

just after the way you touched all our hearts at the assembly I guess we made some wrong assumptions.”

“A guy can make a few remarks to a group without having the ambition to run the show. I’m 17. I struggle to just run my own show, let alone anybody else’s.”

“Okay, then. I do want to thank you for those remarks you made. They moved us from being a collection of sobby, teary-eyed teens into a remarkably cohesive force. I’ve had a dozen or more kids come up with really great ideas – regarding your suggestion. So, I will just leave it at, *thanks*. I hope you know I had no intention of making your life more difficult.”

“I do. Sorry for my cantankerous reaction. I’m finding it’s hard losing the very best friend I’ve ever had,”

“I was unsensitive about that. Sorry. Condolences and I wish you the best, *and* I understand that was probably the least impressive offering of good wishes ever made.”

“That sounded like something Dave would have said.”

Barry smiled.

“It had every right to. Dave was my hero and mentor. There will always be a sizeable portion of him riding along with me – like with many others. Have a good day.”

T.J. felt embarrassed and ashamed. He’d been so wrapped up in his own grieving that he had missed the effects on the other students. THAT needed to be added in capital letters to his imaginary note pad.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Agonizing Awkwardness

At noon, T.J. again tagged along at the end of the lunch room line. He spotted Sue and Jake sitting together, but at a different table from what he expected. He figured he understood what they were trying to do, but he thought it was stupid. David was not there – live with it! He took his tray to that empty table – David’s table. He sensed there were dozens of eyes watching. He paid no attention.

Among those eyes had been those of Sue and Jake. Presently, the two of them approached him, trays in hand.

“If you want to be alone we understand. If not, can we join you?”

It had been Sue.

His mouth full, T.J. motioned for them to take seats. They sat across from him.

“I’m glad you sat here. We felt odd about doing it – just the two of us, together. That was dumb. We shouldn’t have felt that way. David would have hated – strongly disliked – that.”

The two of them shared a smile. Jake didn’t understand the word play but didn’t intrude. He understood he was the newcomer with many things still to learn.

“Did you see Tommy yesterday,” she asked.

“No. Plan on stopping over at his place after work this evening. Have you been over yet?”

“No. I know that’s awful, but I just haven’t been able to bring myself to do it. I feel terrible. I’m a coward. I even baked a carrot cake to take over. Isn’t that the lamest thing

ever. Still just very confused. I can't even contemplate being inside that house without David there."

"Perhaps I need to leave and let you two talk," Jake said reaching for his tray."

"Nonsense," T.J. said, "but it was a considerate gesture. New friends need to be a big part of our getting on with our lives. If you can just allow a month or so of *agonizing awkwardness*, we'd both really like for you to stick with us."

"Oh, I know all about agonizing awkwardness – mom just up and left us with no warning. She took our car and all of dad's savings, and ran off with a doctor to parts unknown – she's a graduate nurse and Dad explained she always sort of looked down on his profession – a carpenter."

T.J. felt another pang of guilt for having been so selfishly wrapped up in his own grief. Everybody had stuff. He knew that. He had to loosen up and find his old sensitivity to other people's needs. Oh, that's right. He may have never had a sensitivity to other people's needs – well, perhaps to David's near the end. He *had* been engaged in a crash sensitivity course during that final week.

"I didn't know that, Jake. I'm really sorry. I have a tendency to be a very selfish bastard. You'll come to see that – probably sooner than later."

"I have no idea how to respond to such a statement. Thanks, I guess, for the concern I believe you 'proffered'."

He winked. T.J. winked back. Sue hadn't noticed.

"That is an excellent place to leave it," T.J. said.

Sue was chomping at the bit to correct the record.

"He really is *not* the way he just made himself out to be, Jake, believe me. He just tends to hide his soft side so people won't take advantage of him or intrude on his privacy. He has built a wall and frequently does or says dumb things just to maintain it. David always said T.J. was one of the most private people he had ever known and, understand, nothing about that was meant to condemn him in any way. People are different – David was upfront, social, gregarious, and aggressive. T.J. is private and lives by his own rules whenever possible."

"I suppose I'm somewhere in between, then," Jake said.

“Almost all of us *regular* human beings are.”

“Wow!” Jake said with some enthusiasm. “That comes as close to anybody declaring me normal as I’ve ever heard. It does raise the question about how you and David came to be best friends though, T.J.”

T.J. leaned in a bit in Jake’s direction and began a confidential tone.

“Well, you see, late one Friday night last summer we ran into each other while we were both strolling Elm street completely nude.”

“Really? Your joshing me.”

“I am, only to indicate I have no idea how it happened. That’s not entirely true. I once had the very good fortune to have been stupid enough to ask him to describe his sex life to me and from then on, we seemed to hit it off. It would have been more accurate to have said, ‘I have no idea *why* it happened’. My full intention was only to embarrass him into wet pants with that question.”

“Again, I have no idea how to how to respond.”

“No response is necessary. You didn’t jump to your feet and run away screaming in red-faced embarrassment, so I here-by declare you good friend material.”

“I can see your rules are unique, T.J. My rules would never allow me to use the words b-a-s-t-a-r-d and s-e-x in the presence of a high-class girl like Sue. I look forward to trying to decode yours – get a handle on them at least.”

“I wish you luck on that. Perhaps someday you can give me your take on them. It should be material for a great and prolonged discussion. Just say when.”

“I think you actually do mean that. Okay. I will.”

The remaining conversation that noon was mostly between Jake and Sue, as he picked her brain about the school and community. T.J. listened with interest to both the topics, which Jake seemed to believe were important, and the answers Sue provided. He smiled, deciding he must be from some alternate planet – neither those questions nor those answers would have seemed useful or accurate to him. Why the questions to Sue and not him, he wondered. Perhaps, having recently lost his mom he needed a wise woman in his life – well, that and a generous measure of hormone-driven

interest in a very pretty girl.

Jake left first, sensing the others might need time together.

“That’s one interesting kid – a nice, kind, gentleman,” T.J. said watching him move across the room to deposit his tray.”

“He seems to be all of those things,” Sue agreed. “He was waiting to walk with me to school this morning. Can you believe that? He lives way down close to you.”

T.J. didn’t want to disclose *that* had also been *his* plan, so he covered it as honestly as he could.

“Yes, I think I *can* believe that?”

On their way down the hall toward lockers, Barry again approached him.

“Can I have one more second, T.J.?”

“Since when was my permission needed for kids to talk with me?”

“Sorry. You have suddenly become an unknown entity for us – part of us and yet aloof from us. We know it’s a difficult time in your life and we don’t want to make things worse.”

“I suppose I thank you for your concern. It is unwarranted, so please, no more groveling. What’s on your mind.”

“Just came from a Student Council meeting fourth period. I relayed your message to them. They were disappointed and asked me to ask you to reconsider, so I guess that’s what I’m doing. We took time to talk about your concern – that you are *you* and not David. They understand and admitted they had been sort of mixing the two of you up in their thinking. They send their thanks for that. But their desire to have your input on things was because of how well you handled all of us at the assembly – it really has nothing, or at least very little, to do with your association with him.”

Sue jumped in before T.J. could issue another blanket rejection (or strangle the kid, whichever might come first).

“How about this, Barry? You agree to give T.J. some time, so he can think it all through realistically – thoughtfully – not on the spur of the moment – and I will agree to brow beat him into giving the offer some honest consideration.”

She looked back and forth between the two boys. Barry was there immediately with a, “Sure, of course.” T.J. frowned at Sue, initially thinking she had butted in where she had no business – but of course she did have ‘business’.

“This is Tuesday. Give me ‘til Thursday. I am giving you no reason to think I will change my mind, you understand.”

“I understand. Thanks. And you, too, Sue.”

He administered a gentle, fourth grader’s, tap to her shoulder and left them at Sue’s locker.

“You hate me for that, don’t you?”

“How could anybody hate *wonderful Sue* – that’s how Dave often referred to you when we were together. There’s something, Sue – something that I haven’t mentioned, yet, but, well, I know Dave was beginning to think about you as something more than a best friend. That must be making it doubly difficult for you. I understand that had been on *your* mind for years. Dave shared his feelings with me. He was beginning to care about you very deeply during that last week. I don’t know what more to say about it, but I wanted you to know that I knew.”

“What you just said was exactly the right thing. Thank you . . . very much. It is hard to grieve over losing something that I never *really* had in the first place. He kissed me one time and I will always have that. Like Jake, David was a kind gentleman.”

T.J. turned his head away to hide his suddenly quivering lower lip. Too much emphasis on ‘gentlemen’ – a category with which he believed he had not so much as a nodding acquaintance.

“Well, I better get on to class, Sue. We’ll talk again soon. Don’t hesitate to call.”

He had not turned back toward her. Sue thought it had been an oddly abrupt departure, but neither of them was back to how things had been.

He hurried off and took his usual seat on the back row of his 5th hour class. The room was still empty – he had arrived way early. Suddenly, several issues had forced their way to the front of his concerns. He needed time to deal with them.

First, he was certainly no gentleman – not in the

important sense of the term and that was clearly important to Sue. That quashed any thoughts he had about forming a romantic relationship with her – maybe with *any* nice girl until he started over in some other community where he could try to rise above his local reputation. He understood that rep as a womanizing, drinking, tobacco reeking degenerate was accurate. That side of his character had long been established in the minds of the other kids. He had heard from David, by way of Megan, that middle school girls sometimes crossed the street to keep safely away from him.

Second, he had never recognized or believed he was a leader, or if he had, he consciously avoided, dodged, evaded it. T.J. had always mostly been his own, complete, responsibility. There were periods of time growing up when, if he wanted to eat, he had to find a way, himself. As a very young boy – four to eight, maybe – he was typically able to count on his boyish charm to get handouts. From fourth grade through Jr. High those periods of need relied on his skill as a clever thief – which he was. He would work when he could and preferred that arrangement – work, earn, buy – but he never hesitated to make sure he was adequately fed and that his other needs were cared for. He had never been proud of such less than lawful activities, but it was what he had to do, so that was that. Even though he had always lived with Frank, there were frequently times when there was no reliable, responsible person there for him. When he was younger, Frank sometimes left the lad on his own for a week at a time as he binge-drunk himself into oblivion who knew where.

T.J. had, therefore, spent much of his life being scared, afraid, terrified. Before arriving in Thomasville, he had lived in every known sort of dwelling from apartments to wooden crates, from houses to tents – the summer he was four they lived just outside of the city in a cave. Life had been difficult, but he decided early on he would turn ‘difficult’ into ‘strengthening’ – that may have been his book lady’s suggestion. To his credit, he had, for the most part, done that. Having to be that strong, at such an early age, gave very little opportunity for a boy to develop what Sue had referred to as his soft side. He figured to become a gentleman a boy needed to have gentlemanly models. Those had never been

available.

His life since arriving there in Thomasville had been like paradise for him – a real house, the same one since they had arrived, his own room and his first bed, acceptable clothes that fit, food to eat on a regular basis, electricity, hot water for showers, mousetraps – his list went on. For some reason, not entirely clear to him, his dad – Frank – had been able to keep his job with the trucking company and virtually never drank to excess over periods of days. T.J. knew if push came to shove again, he was old enough and strong enough that he would be able to head out on his own and take care of himself. That had reduced his fear and insecurity.

Having feared most things about life since he was very young, had, understandably, bent T.J. in certain ways. Since tomorrow just might never come, live for the day, the hour, the minute you were certain you had. Never put off fulfilling your needs when they *could* be fulfilled at that moment, because the opportunity might never come along again. Trust nobody but yourself. He really hadn't even trusted his 'book lady' back in the city – one of the most important people in his early life. He never stole anything from her and he would listen to her advice, but he never really trusted her – after all, she was *not* T.J. and T.J. was the only person he trusted.

It was not until some weeks into his relationship with David that he began to trust him. There was an upfront honesty, a sort of straight shooting air about David that allowed, if not compelled, people to trust him. T.J. admired that about his friend. His own uncertainties about the stability and dependability of most aspects of life, would probably always prevent him from being able to present himself to the world the way David had. Without that, what kind of a leader could he become? A leader was confident and could easily convince his followers that his contentions and goals were good and proper and worthwhile – worthy of his followers' commitment and effort. If he could not do that very basic thing, he could not be a leader. Promising leadership would be unfair to them and to him. He figured if he had anything akin to leadership skills it was one on one. There he was able to provide insights and alternatives – like with David and Tommy, maybe even recently, Sue and to some extent Jake.

And yet, during his 'debut' at the assembly, he had done all those things with a sizeable group – he had even inspired the others, and if reports were true, it appeared he had turned some lives around. David had been one who saw great goals and directed others to achieve them. T.J. could also see goals – genuinely important social goals drawn directly from his impoverished background – but his approach would be to inspire independent action. He would be one to set things in motion and let others play them out. The only true leader whose inner workings T.J. had known well enough to understand, had been David, so David's ways were how he had characterized how leadership worked. Perhaps there was another way – one with which he was more comfortable and which he might be able to make work.

There was another obstacle. David lived for the benefit of everybody. T.J. had always lived his life only for his own benefit – basically, food, safety and pleasure. His sole experience trying David's more altruistic way, was during the time he tried to set David's life straight. He believed the result supported the fact he had been a complete failure at that. What counselor could claim success when his patient kills himself? At least he'd never *done-in* anybody while approaching life, following his own style.

That was when he realized the built-in fail-safe device in *his* method over *David's*. If David's followers failed it would have been David's fault because he engineered every twist and turn of every activity – even if he contended his committee system relieved him of carrying out the details of the plan. With T.J.'s approach, in which his responsibility would end with providing the kernel of an idea and perhaps a few pointers to consider along the way, if a project failed, he had no responsibility, because he had left the doing up to the others.

It had been a useful fifteen minutes alone with his thinker – beneficial at several levels.

As class was being called to order, he sensed a new feeling about and within himself – could that be confidence? Maybe there was even a hint of caring about others mixed in. He believed he wanted life to go well for Tommy and Sue and maybe Jake. And there was Megan and Dave's parents. Interestingly, that same feeling applied in no way to the 'girls'

in his life.

Could it be, T.J. was becoming a blooming altruist after a lifetime of me-first, damn everybody else, selfishness? He had never been greedy – wanting *more* than his legitimate share – but he *had* been totally self-centered. He figured if those revelations – or at least possibilities – didn't bring out a bottle that night, he had passed that test with a well-deserved, A+. It would have been a good night to stay with David – the added assurance that a slip could not take place. He would undoubtedly find somebody!

He was brought back to the real world when he realized the teacher had just asked him a question. Not having heard it, he said: “With all due respect, Sir, I must take the 5th on that today.”

The class roared and the teacher moved on with a smile. He had no idea what was going on with the boy, but he was willing to give him some slack considering recent events. His teachers liked T.J. They didn't understand him, but they liked him.

He found it hard to concentrate during his afternoon classes and was relieved when 8th period arrived – band. His intention had been to tell Mr. Carter he wasn't feeling well and ask to be excused. Mr. Carter had been known to do such things without the pesky paperwork required by the office.

When T.J. arrived – the first time he had entered the band room that week – he was met with a deluge of spontaneous, happy greetings including the ringer – “Glad you're back. The rumor was you had quit”. The fact was, his plan had been to claim illness, get his instrument, and leave for good – Mr. Carter's permission or not. He and David had discussed whether T.J. could consider himself just a sax player or had to believe he was a part of an organization – a band member. He held to the first – he just played his music; David to the second – it was everybody playing their music together that made it a band. David's points had offered more logical force; T.J.'s position was how he was going to view it regardless of logic and definitions and common sense. Admitting membership shouted responsibility.

Something about the abrupt change in the atmosphere as he stood there inside the room – from the subdued routine

when he had looked through the window in the door, to excited engagement after he entered – seemed to require him to break out his instrument and take his seat. As he licked his reed to make it ready, he glanced over at David’s empty chair in the trombone section. He wasn’t sure he like that. Actually, he was very sure he didn’t. One more thing for his nonexistent little spiral ‘things to think about’ notebook. He made a decision.

“Mr. Carter, I suggest we begin today by playing, ‘Slippin’ and Sliddin’.”

“But that’s the trombone solo, T.J.”

“I know. Dave told me he felt uneasy about always taking the solo himself when he knew Jason could play it every bit as well. I’m thinking it is time in the history of this organization to put Dave’s contention about that to a test.”

T.J. sensed that Mr. Carter understood what he was trying to accomplish – move on into their inevitable future as a band without David. Apparently, his ‘sense’ had been correct. How about that? T.J. correctly assessing somebody else’s feelings.

“Jason, it looks like you’re on. You ready?”

“I have absolutely no idea, Sir.”

“I will take that as a yes.”

They flipped through the music sheets in their folders and were presently at the ready. Misgivings hung heavily in the room. Mr. Carter tapped his music stand with his baton, set the beat, and they began. It sounded like it had always sounded, through the first sixteen bars before the solo began.

At the appropriate place, Jason began and continued with no appearance of confidence, frequent faltering through those next eight bars. At that point, he wavered and appeared to want to stop. T.J. stood up and began playing along with him – the solo part. Jason looked at him across the corner of his glasses. T.J. winked. Jason picked up the strain and was soon rendering a robust interpretation. T.J. took his seat and let him continue. They finished the piece just like they always had. When finished, Mr. Carter turned to Jason and led the band members in light applause. The *students’* applause was for Jason. *Mr. Carter’s* was for T.J. First chair trombone had just been passed on to the next generation. T.J. hoped that

would be the end of the empty chair. He would suggest a small, memorial plaque – pictures of Dave surrounded by the band members' signatures all behind glass in a nice frame. It sounded like a good project for Sue – with her hundreds of pictures of David – and Jake, the carpenter-in-training.

For the first time, T.J. could fully understand and accept David's description of a band and each player's essential contribution. Although he was on the tennis team, he never felt the oneness – the group comradery – the other guys seemed to feel. He showed up, dressed, did his thing, showered and then left. He played because he enjoyed playing not to become chummy with a grunting band of sweaty adolescents. That moment in the band room was perhaps the first time he had felt like he really belonged to – was an integral part of – any group. It was a fascinating revelation (most likely a phrase borrowed from David).

David spoke about his feelings of inclusiveness often – his class at school, the student council, the church choir, and, of course, his family. T.J. never got it, although that one choir practice *had* left him with an unfamiliar, pleasant feeling that lingered long after the experience. For some reason, he immediately felt at home among friendly, well-wishing, nonjudgmental people, who covered the spectrum in age and such. Maybe he'd ask Mr. Baker if he could go back with them on Wednesday evening – maybe.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Snuggling!

Mrs. Baker answered T.J.'s distinctive knock. Tommy was not far behind. He ducked under his mother's arm and worked himself into the lead position.

"I just knew it was going to be you, T.J.," he said.

He reached out toward his shivering friend's hand to pull him inside. With the door closed behind him – by Mrs. Baker, of course – T.J. removed the balled-up pair of socks from his coat and handed them to her.

"Borrowed on the evening of the great kitchen floor tsunami. Sorry to be so late getting around to returning them. They've been washed."

It presented more of an awkward moment than he had anticipated. He had tried to give it a light-hearted lead in. Mrs. Baker nodded and set them aside. It was the first of David's clothes she had touched since the funeral. T.J. had no way of knowing that, of course.

"Can you stay for dinner?" she asked. "It will be ready within the half hour. Tommy's father is at a Rotary meeting this evening so it would be nice to have another familiar face at the table with us."

"Please, please, please, T.J."

T.J. looked at the table. One chair had been removed – set back against the wall. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but then, it wasn't really his to feel.

"That would be very nice. May Tom and I set the table?"

"I'm not one to turn down help. We'll use the dishes in

that cabinet” – she pointed.

“Sue brought us *lame carrot cake* – at least that’s what she called it I think,” Tommy reported. “Just how an inanimate object like cake could be ‘lame’ eludes me.”

“*Eludes* you, does it?”

T.J. cast a quick grin toward Mrs. Baker. Tommy continued.

“Yes. That’s the one with the ‘E’. The one with the ‘A’ – allude – means ‘refer to’. I’m taking time this week to get those pesky homonyms all straight in my head.”

T.J. didn’t bother to tell him those two weren’t true homonyms.

“A worthy undertaking. You got *to, too, two* straight?”

Proving again that he really was just ten, Tommy giggled, pointing out that T.J. had just sounded like The Little Engine That Could.

The three of them worked side by side in the kitchen for several minutes. Something was on Tommy’s mind.

“The sox thing brought up something we need to talk about – with mom.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Dave had all those great clothes and now they’re just hanging in his closet and stuffed into his drawers. You’re like a twin of his in size. Dave would want his things to be used.”

T.J. spoke.

“It may seem strange to you, Tom, but I would feel uncomfortable wearing Dave’s things. There is a new inter-city clothing bank being started just for teens. I can put the head guy in touch with your folks if your parents approve. That way they will all go to kids in another town who really need nice things to wear.”

“Well, it still seems to me you should get them, but whatever you say.”

Mrs. Baker understood T.J.’s reluctance and she spoke to Tommy.

“There are lots of David’s things T.J. might like to have – CD’s, camping equipment, books, things like that.

“And Dave’s magazines, huh, T.J.”

His mother raised her eyebrows in T.J.’s direction.

“I’ll let the two of you negotiate any such items between you.”

“I’m sure there are things Dave would want *you* to have, you know?” T.J. said, looking at Tommy.

“I’m sure you’re right. Me and my parents just haven’t moved on to the place yet where we feel comfortable dealing with that, huh, mom?”

“I think we’re getting close, though, don’t you?”

Tommy nodded thoughtfully and dropped the topic.

“Dinner, such as it is, is served – pork chops, fried potatoes, peas and carrots. There will be pie for dessert. Tommy, please call your sister.”

He moved to the doorway that led into the hall and screamed up the stairs. She apparently heard and soon appeared.

“Why didn’t you tell me T.J. was here?”

“Because he came to see me – not you.”

“I always enjoy seeing everybody when I come,” T.J. managed, hoping to soothe any wounded feelings.

Mrs. Baker scooted the extra chair back to the table and they took the same seats they had the previous time T.J. had eaten there. Apparently, Tommy’s new place had become permanent. T.J. continued, thinking he needed to say what was on his mind before Tommy commandeered the conversation. He turned to Mrs. Baker.

“I was wondering if maybe I could go to choir practice with you and Mr. Baker tomorrow evening.”

“We would love to have you come. Several of the members have asked if you would be coming back eventually. You have been missed.”

“That’s nice. Thanks for passing it on to me. I had a good feeling when I was there. I’m not sure what it was. I figured there’d be more girls, though.”

“If you go regularly, I’m sure there will be,” Megan said.

Tommy, missing the implication, moved on to other things.

“Can we have scatter dessert this evening?” Tommy asked.

“Have what?” T.J. asked.

“It’s where we fill our plate with the dessert here, and

then take it with us to wherever we're going next – scatter to next – like me to my room or mom and dad to the living room, or Megan to her dungeon to play with her bats and mummies and shrunken heads.”

“It seems like a good ‘scatter’ evening to me,” Mrs. Baker said, speaking before her two children could come to blows.

The conversation, typically driven by Tommy's interests, moved easily. When the plates were empty, the boy made his final suggestion.

“I got stuff to talk about with you, T.J. so we'll head up to my room.”

“What about the dishes?” T.J. asked.

“Mom and Dad like to do them together after Rotary so he can fill her in on all the important Rotary stuff.”

T.J. looked at Mrs. Baker. She nodded, clearly delighted and thankful to see the complete turnaround in her little boy.

“You boys better take a glass of milk along – never knew a boy who didn't want milk with peach pie.”

“I think she adds milk just so I won't run up the stairs,” Tommy said in a confidential tone directly to T.J.

In his room, they arranged themselves on the large, circular, braided rug in front of his desk. Tommy left for a moment, returning with a towel from the bathroom.

“And the reason for that?” T.J. asked feeling very much like he was addressing David about some obscure aspect of *his* doings.

“I'm ten. Boys my age are known to spill milk when setting the glass on an uneven surface like this rug. It is just a precaution. Dave used to say, that one of the most important lessons to learn in life was to think ahead – find all the options, he would say. Many a time I, myself, have proved that to be right.”

It was one of several life lessons T.J. had purposefully avoided learning – or at least avoided acting on. David had pointed it out to him on many occasions – once having suggested he was amazed T.J. had survived to be 17, considering the haphazard, unplanned way he went about living. T.J. had not argued the point because he understood

David had no bases for understanding his position and how it had come to be.

T.J.'s take on it was that by not making plans, he could never be disappointed when they didn't pan out. His life had been continually darkened by far more disappointments than any child deserved. Why would he want to intentionally add in the possibility of more? It had become his *Personal No Disappointments Protection Plan*. In one way, it had worked exceptionally well. In others, probably not so well. T.J. suddenly found himself at a point in his life where he needed to make a commitment about which way to go – set goals with the possibility of both satisfaction and disappointment, or not set them, never achieving a sense of personal accomplishment, but never setting himself up for possible failure and disappointment.

Truth be told, he had always been a risk taker in the little things – I can probably jump from this ledge to that ledge, the pork chop is six days old but I'll bet it's okay, I know it's a dangerous alley but I'll be okay tonight, the only rubber we have is the one she's been carrying around in her purse, but I'll bet it's good. Those risks always involved immediate gratification of some sort. He would have his answer or satisfaction immediately. Long term plans contradicted everything he knew about life – his, 'tomorrow may not come' philosophy.

With the two of them at last *properly prepared* and situated on the rug, T.J. opened the conversation.

“So, what's on your mind this evening, sport?”

“Okay. Here it is. Mom and dad are very, very sad about David and they are trying to be strong for Megan and me. They don't let us know how they feel or see them crying, and I know they do cry. They tell us being sad and crying at a time like this normal for us – maybe even necessary. I knew that without them telling me, of course. I cry at night and sometimes late afternoon when I realize David isn't going to be coming home to talk to me or do things with me. Here is my question . . .

T.J. finished for him.

“How can you help your parents?”

“Yeah. You knew, huh?”

“I knew. In some ways, I have the same question – about them and about you and Megan. Here’s the first thing: you are the child and they are the adults. It is not your job to take care of them. Adults have ways of working out such things, of taking care of each other. Here’s the second thing: You’re only job is to take good care of yourself and as part of that you need to express your feelings about David’s death and not keep it all bottled up inside. I loved your Dave like he was my brother, but I can tell you he was a ‘bottler’ and you can see that didn’t work out well for him. I’m always available to listen when that seems best, but your parents should really be your go-to guys. Right now, they want to help you and Megan through all this more than anything in the world, so don’t close them out from your grieving – you know the word, grieving? Of course, you do.”

“You mean it’s like when I bring up how I’m feeling, *that* helps them, too?”

“Exactly.”

Tommy thought for a long moment.

“That really helps me, T.J. I had no idea. Thank you. When you finish your pie can I sit in your lap again. The other day when I did that, it was sort of like being halfway to David. I do know you are not David’s replacement. I get that. But, being close to you like that helped me feel closer to him. If I didn’t make myself clear I can go on.”

“You made yourself eloquently clear. You know eloq. .
.?”

He stopped, feeling foolish for having started to ask. If Tommy didn’t understand something, he would not be bashful about pursuing the matter. T.J. just hoped any birds and bees’ questions would be referred to his father. He could see to that, he was sure.

“I feel that same way about you, I suppose, Tom, although I hadn’t recognized it until you verbalized it. Thank you for helping me in that way. That’s an example of what I mean – you just honestly keep your feelings and questions out in the open and other’s will be helped, too.”

“You know, that was a ‘David conversation’.”

“Oh? Can you explain?”

“He’d always answer my questions with like the facts,

and then take examples from my life to demonstrate or illustrate them to me. I want to be able to do that, too – probably when I am older and more skillful, verbally.”

T.J. smiled. He had known very few children in his lifetime and he needed to caution himself that they all would not be as mentally skillful as Tommy. Someday, he would need to take time to learn about regular kids. His involvement with David had been abnormal, also, but he had already come to see that, and figured time with Jake might help provide a more realistic model of a normal teen.

His experiences with people had been unusual if not peculiar. He had never mixed much with other kids. They seldom invited him to their places and he was not inclined to invite them to his – never having any idea what might be going on there or who might be there and in what state of dress or undress they might be. All in all, his life had been sorely lacking in what is often termed socialization skills. Then, when he got older, his only best friend was a freak – when it came to intellect – so he had *never* had normal peer models. He had to be sure he didn't intrude where he might not be wanted with Jake and Sue. It suddenly seemed that might be difficult. Miracles of miracles, he had an urge to actually mingle – socially – with real people his age. What an unfamiliar and unsettling realization that was.

He had never seen himself as a legitimate member of the human race – well, that may be overstating it. He had always felt he lived on the margin of society and for most of his life, that had been true. He had no idea if his dad had true friends. He figured probably not. He never mentioned men's names or had them drop by the house. There were surely acquaintances who he worked with but not of the meaningful sort. His dad's female companions were no more than that either – pass in the dark hookups. The man had been a fully abnormal role model in most ways. T.J. *did* understand that he had done his best for him, considering his many problems, weaknesses and inadequacies. He had taken him in as an infant and had never really indicated he was displeased with that decision. *Why* he had done it was another matter. T.J. had given him credit for that even from an early age, when he had no way of truly understanding any part of the situation.

“I’m done,” Tommy said after draining the last drops from his glass.

T.J. understood it had been his signal to get on with things. His book lady had done the same for him. She called it snuggling. She had offered it after T.J. had finished reading a book or later, a chapter. It represented those times in his life when he had felt the safest and most important until he met David.

“Okay. How about setting the plates and glasses up on the night stand so we don’t risk breaking them or anything? I believe you and David would call that thinking ahead.”

Tommy grinned. T.J. had not intended to make a comparison between the two brothers but was glad he had. Maybe helping Tommy see some of the important ways the two of them were alike could help the boy realize those parts of David would never be gone – living inside him and always as close as a thought or feeling or memory. In fact, that was true for him as well. He had known that in a vague sense, but suddenly began to understand it and its reassuring implications.

Tommy had soon snuggled himself into the perfect configuration. It began as a quiet time. Occasionally, he would offer something out loud.

“What do you think about hate, T.J.?”

“I find it very uncomfortable when I let *myself* hate. What’s on your mind about it?” as if he didn’t know and hadn’t also been struggling with it.

“This will sound awful, T.J.”

He lapsed into silence. T.J. spoke in his soft, reassuring, voice.

“I think I understand. Sometimes I still feel like I hate David for what he did.”

“Really? You?”

“Yup. I know that just means I’m feeling sorry for myself. He took himself away from me and I guess *that’s* really what I hate. Like you, I’m sure, I love David. But it gripes me to no end that he left me. That’s probably at least a little selfish of me. I’m still not sure about that part.”

“I didn’t know anybody else felt that way. I hate it when I feel hate like that – like you said you do. Sometimes at night

when I think about him I scream at him inside my head and tell him I hate him for what he did.”

“I can understand that.”

“I hope he can’t really hear me when I do that. You think he can? I am very confused about Heaven and spirits and things like that. I am ashamed if he can hear me.”

“Two things: First, you asked me my opinion and my opinion is that he cannot hear you. Second, even suppose he can, he would totally understand your feelings, wouldn’t he?”

Tommy nodded, slowly and thoughtfully.

“You are really good with this stuff. Maybe you should talk with mom and dad.”

“They are the adults, remember. They can take care of themselves.”

“Are you an adult?”

“I have a body like an adult, but I understand I don’t have the skills and wisdom yet that I will need to really be an adult. Sometimes I hate that, thinking I have this adult body; why am I not considered by everybody else to be totally grown up. I’ve seen how that is a terrible mistake that way too many teen agers make and it ruins their lives – thinking they are grown up when they aren’t.”

“So, if you aren’t an adult, who is taking care of you?”

“That is nothing for you to worry about. There are people in my life who are becoming a big help.”

“I’m glad. Sort of like David used to be?”

“Yes. Very much like that.”

It was an odd realization, but the advice he had given Tommy to talk about his feelings with others was helping him, as well. He was, perhaps, consulting the youngest psychotherapist, ever. He could smile about it. Six months before, he would have physically attacked anybody making such an observation. It was all Dave’s fault – more smiles and good feelings.

Tommy had more to say.

“Mom suggested that it might help me if I would begin writing down things like my feelings and the questions I have about it. I began last night. I started out just asking some questions, like why do people kill themselves, why do other people let them kill themselves, how can people keep other

people from killing themselves? Before long I was bawling him out and like yelling at him on paper. I suppose the yelling was like my frustration about not being able to know the answers to the questions.”

Wow! A ten-year-old?

“I think your mother had a good suggestion. If you decide what you write is only for you to know about, I’ll bet you can be fully honest about things.”

“That’s what mom said – see you *are* wise like an adult.”

T.J. smiled but didn’t respond.

“I suppose I could let *you* read it, T.J.”

“I suppose you could, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Even just the idea that I might see your thoughts might change how you say things. How about this; when you have trouble writing about something, we can talk it over, or you and your parents can. After that, then you can get back to your writing and try it again.”

“I like that. Do you know that you and David say a lot of the same things?”

“We were very close. I have no doubt that a lot of how he thought rubbed off on me. I am appreciative of that. He had lots to teach me.”

“Did he ever tell you he had learned a lot of things from you – good things I’m sure is what he meant? He told me that.”

“I guess that’s not something we discussed – what we had learned from each other – but I guarantee we understood that we had, and we both treasured that.”

They fell into silence for a long time. Finally, T.J. spoke.

“As wonderful as this snuggling is for me, Tom, I need to be going. I still have some homework to do and have a friend coming over for a little while.”

“I’d like the snuggling to never stop. That’s a great word you know – snuggling. It’s fun to say. Do you ever snuggle with anybody else?”

Okay, T.J. Let’s see you honestly field THAT question!

“I can tell you for sure I never snuggle with anybody else in this great way I snuggle with you.”

"I'm glad, but I want you to feel free to snuggle with other people when snuggling seems to be the thing to do."

"Thank you. The same goes from me to you."

T.J. worked to maintain a sober face.

"I already assumed that. I do it with mom and dad still. I've wondered if I'm getting too old. What do you think?"

"I'm coming to believe that a person never really ever gets too old to snuggle."

"See! There you go, being wise again. I think I will call you my teen-grown-up. Will that be okay?"

"Sure. So long as you remember, it's your mom and dad who are the completely grown-ups in your life."

Tommy smiled.

"What, Tom?"

"If they are complete, that makes you incomplete, and I've seen you getting out of the shower nights you stayed over and I'm thinking you are pretty compete where it come to being a grown-up man."

"I think I will begin calling *you* my, *Tom the Amazing*."

"I don't get what that means."

"You just always do your best to be your honest self and that will be amazing."

"Thanks, then, I guess."

"You're welcome, then, for sure."

As Tommy was unwinding himself from his spot, T.J. leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the top of the lad's head. Why he had done that was fully incomprehensible to him. He had never kissed a person based on that unexpected, wonderful feeling in his entire life. He could not remember ever kissing his dad or ever having been kissed by him. He kissed girls, of course, but that was solely for his own benefit and was never accompanied by such selfless feelings. Quite the opposite, they were based only in fulfilling his self-centered, passionate needs.

Later, as he walked home, he wasn't sure if he were bothered or reassured by the transaction with Tommy. He had often seen David offer Tommy a kiss, just in passing for no apparent reason. Early in their relationship, that made T.J. very uneasy. Later, he grew to accept it as part of their brotherly relationship. Never in a lifetime had he considered

he might be moved to do the same kind of thing.

Either Tommy had not noticed the kiss, or he just accepted it as part of the normal routine of his life and felt no need to comment. T.J. knew that Tommy often returned his brother's kiss with one of his own – usually to his temple. T.J. was impressed that not only he had noticed that, but that he – completely self-centered, T.J. Jackson – had remembered those exchanges. Producing even more confusion, was that he had so automatically performed the same act – had felt the desire and need to perform the same act.

The homework and *maybe* even Janice, would have to wait for another night. David had often contended that *just thinking* was his very favorite activity. He could sit alone in the dark for hours on end just thinking and be happy as a clam. T.J. wondered if it were possible that such a thing could have rubbed off on him.

CHAPTER NINE

TJ.02

Nine o'clock found T.J. laying back on his bed. From time to time during the evening his mind had gone back to Tommy's new activity, writing about his feelings and questions. He had never kept a diary – who'd want to make a record of what had already happened when he was only willing to live in the present – the moment? The more he had tried to help Tommy understand how to keep the process true and honest, the more he came to understand how it might really be useful. He knew David often wrote about things – maybe not regularly in a diary or journal, but he had said it helped him think through tough stuff. On several occasions, he had asked T.J. to read parts of it.

Everybody knew David had left a lengthy note behind, but nobody, outside of his parents and the authorities, had access to it. T.J. didn't know if given the opportunity, whether he would opt to read it or not – he figured probably not. He wanted to remember his friend as the logical, clear thinker he had always seemed to be. That note, which clearly came to all the wrong conclusions, had to be riddled with faulty thinking – perhaps just the acceptance of some faulty premise – starting point. He had read that severely mentally ill people begin with a premise – a basic idea – that is inaccurate, but that from it, they build a logical thought pattern, which has to be inaccurate, of course, since it started with a mistaken assumption. It was difficult to believe David could have ever begun from a false premise, but T.J. had also read that depression clouds the efficiency and effectiveness of a

person's thinking. He would allow that explanation and try to avoid living his life needing to figure it out.

He picked up the spiral notebook from the top of the wooden crate that served as his night stand and blew it free of dust. He waved the gray cloud away from his face – how long had that notebook been there? He smiled looking at the front, which was labeled, 'History Notes'. When had he ever been so naive as to think he would actually take class notes? He paged through it until he was beyond page upon page of doodles – not all of them G-rated.

'It probably needs a title – David would have demanded a title,' he thought.

He soon found himself printing the word THOUGHTS across the top of the page. David had also said that all human activity was thoughts – words were just thoughts made oral, movements just thoughts activated, feelings just thought sensations put into words – he had gone on and on about it. T.J. had enjoyed times like that – seeing how his friend could become completely caught up in what he was contemplating. He sensed he had become more like that himself because of David.

He stared at the page.

"How about a subtitle? Surely, I'm not procrastinating. Hmm? How about this: T.J.: *a teen boy in search of himself*. I like that.

'How does one begin?' he wondered. 'Tommy started with the big questions that seemed important to him. That's probably a good way to begin. David used to say that no problem could be solved until the proper question had been asked.'

Before he closed the notebook that night, he had written for three hours. He just might have to agree with David that thinking was a great activity – not the *best* by any means, but then David had limited to no experience in several areas of life that had become of paramount importance for T.J.

Before leaving the house the next morning he tucked the notebook into his backpack, just in case great thoughts sprung to mind that called out to be captured and preserved.

As he entered the school building, it was as if kids were lined up to speak with him. Jake had already commandeered

him on the steps outside to catch him up on the progress of the clothing exchange program. It was no more than a few days from getting underway. The schools in three nearby communities were enthused and ready to cooperate. T.J. told him to make sure he contacted the Bakers because they wanted David's things to be a part of it.

"Won't that be awkward?" Jake asked.

"Knock on the back door. Speak with Mrs. Baker. Tell her I said for you to contact her about the clothing exchange. She'll take it from there. You will never have to utter the name, David."

"Okay, then. Maybe I'll take Sue along. She knows them so well."

"Think about that carefully – Sue's feelings?"

"Oh. Yes. Thanks. That would have been a certified boneheaded move."

T.J. moved inside. There, in the large entry hall, Barry was first in line.

"Not here to hassle you, T.J. Just wanted to tell you several of the girls have begun plans to organize a food bank aimed primarily at hungry kids here in Thomasville. Mr. Terwilliger, the sociology teacher agreed to work with them. He was actually the one who first broached the subject in class. He referenced your assembly speech. Apparently, it had been one of David's concerns. I hadn't even ever considered there might be hungry kids here in our town."

"That seems really important. Keep me informed."

Next were Kate and Sam.

"We've been thinking about how your assembly affected all of us, and we've been wondering about having the kids all assemble in the auditorium for a few minutes first thing every morning – say ten minutes before the five-minute warning bell – and have something like, 'Spirit Time', when somebody presents some short something that's uplifting and we end by singing the school song. Maybe like a poem or a song or a short skit. What do you think?"

"One. I really like the idea. Two, I suggest you make it voluntary – nothing could be more of a bummer for teens than being forced to go get happy first thing every morning. Three, I'd lean toward performances rather than readings or

recitings or is that recitations? Four, write out your plan in detail, showing that there is an adequate supply of talent available to sustain such a program and then run it by Mr. Hays, the principal. If there isn't enough, you might want to start smaller – maybe just two or three mornings a week. Get it started and you can count on me to perform at the first program. I will demonstrate how to properly seal socks in a plastic zip bag. It will be titled, 'Making sure you have safe sox.'

"We'll hold you to that."

"Mrs. Haskel would have me drawn and quartered if I were to do that, so, of course, count me in."

There were two others, then he moved on to Sue's locker. Jake was there – *of course*, Jake was there. Wherever Sue was, Jake was there. He wondered how they handled restroom breaks. T.J. was surprised at the irritation he suddenly felt inside toward the nice, kind, helpful, young gentleman. Hmm?

"Hey, T.J." Jake said. "Look at what we made. Just like you suggested I think."

He removed a picture frame from a bag.

"I guess you mentioned this to Sue and she mentioned it to Mr. Carter and then to me and here it is – the commemorative plaque about David for the Band Room. It just needs one last signature – yours – and I'll put the glass in it during shop this morning. Mr. Carter says we need to have some ceremony when we hang it. Will you say some words?"

Sue jumped in.

"Everybody will understand if you don't want to. We all just thought you should have first chance at it."

"Why not you? You've been his best friend forever."

"Maybe both of you," Jake suggested.

"I suppose I'm game if Sue is."

T.J. liked the idea of the plaque – after all it *had* been his – but he hated the idea of saying a few words, like Jake had put it. Still, to honor his best friend, he had agreed. He turned to Sue.

"David would hate this, you know."

"He'd strongly dislike it, you mean, of course."

They exchanged smiles. Jake remained silent and

sober. He was good at that – staying out of things that weren't his to be a part of.

'Then WHY the hell did he insist on taking custody of Sue?' T.J. wondered to himself – wondered to himself while screaming at the top of his mental lungs.

Nobody could have been more surprised at T.J.'s reaction than T.J. He was grateful that he had managed to confine that outburst inside his head.

With Jake holding it steady, T.J. signed near the bottom in a small hand, and offered the pen back to Sue.

"When thunderbolts are thrown at us from on high during the dedication ceremony, we will all know who's heaving them," he said.

Even Jake understood the humorous intent of that and offered an appropriate smile and nod. He really was a nice kid. It was probably the sole reason T.J. hadn't acted on his growing impulse to tell him if he didn't leave Sue alone, he'd castrate him with a chain saw at a public ceremony on the town square – and then, repeat it the next week!

It was the middle of the week. T.J. had a growing feeling that his position within the student body was changing in a way he might not be able to stop or slow down. Even more interesting, was his momentary question about whether he even wanted it to stop. Surely, important questions for his 'Thoughts' notebook that night.

He questioned going to the lunch room at noon, but discovered he was actually noon-time-hungry for the first time since – well. He took it as a good sign. Much to his pleasure, Sue was sitting in her usual spot – alone. He pulled in across from her.

"Room for a restless wayfarer, fair maiden?"

"Most certainly, Sir Somebodyalot."

They shared smiles. T.J.'s initial impulse was to ask about the young interloper's whereabouts, but thought better of it.

"Have a good morning?" he asked, instead.

"Yes, actually. I had a weird – scary, I guess – thing on the way home from school yesterday."

"What was that? Jake didn't drive up beside you in a van and try to lure you inside with the offer of chocolates and

red roses, did he?”

“I’m beginning to think you have a thing about Jake. What’s wrong?”

“Time for that later. What was your weird thing?”

“I was walking along, half a block behind a small group of boys and I was so sure I saw David with them. For a moment, I left reality and wanted to run to him, believing he’d turn back to me and say it had all just been a big misunderstanding. Then, when I came to my senses, I felt like my stomach was dragging on the sidewalk. It had been a moment of greatest joy, immediately dashed by devastating sorrow – what I knew had to be true.”

“I have read that is really not so uncommon, if that’s any consolation.”

“Maybe, but that extreme clash of feelings just seems to be hanging on.”

“I’m sorry. It’s like a wish fulfillment dream – experiencing a sequence that assures you will achieve something you want. I have dreamed about him – no, I’ve decided I am going to use his name – David – and not a pronoun. It’s like I’m trying to avoid the reality. Do you find it hard to say his name?”

“A little, I suppose. Do you understand you’re *still* avoiding it when you say David? You never called him anything but Dave.”

“Isn’t that interesting? Thanks for that. I’m beginning to become almost as much of a fan of the human brain as Dai . . . Dave was.”

They sent smiles back and forth. Things were mending – not mended, but maybe such a loss never really fully mended. Maybe those left behind just had to learn how to live with it – focus on the positive parts of the relationship that lived on, and stop feeling sorry for themselves. More stuff for his notebook that night. At that rate, he’d have to make sure Donna left by eight.

“So,” Sue said. “About Jake! You know you are acting like an overprotective jerk.”

“No. I’m not. I’m acting like a maybe-wanna-be-your-boyfriend jerk.”

“Your jealous – of Jake – you wonderful boy, you.”

"I'm confused, Sue."

"*First*, beginning the way one of my best friends often begins, I am flattered. Second, although I am certainly open to a boyfriend-girlfriend arrangement with somebody, I would have great reservations about that being you and me. Although I know better, of course, sometimes I see and hear David when I see or hear you. Right now, at least, I couldn't be sure if it was really T.J. I was interested in. Do you understand that?"

"It's probably the dumbest, most outrageous, most offensive piece of claptrap I've ever had to agree with, one hundred percent. I should have seen that. I think I did, early on, but then I came to feel – how can I put it – not so far away from Dave when I was near you. Tommy has said it about being with me and I have to admit I probably feel the same way about being with the kid. I am aware of it and I am keeping things in perspective. But with you, I clearly have an issue to work on. Can you believe it, that T.J. Jackson could ever admit he had an issue that needed working on? This week, life – or my perception of it – has begun revising itself at a pace I'm not so sure I can keep up with."

"Two things:" Sue began.

T.J. allowed an ear to ear grin, acknowledging she had borrowed his style again.

"First, here is something from a book David asked me to read several years back. I was going through one of the many crises a teen girl just normally goes through. He was wise enough not to try to give teen-boy, growing-up advice to a teen girl. The book said, 'Sometimes change just seeps fully unnoticed onto our being like a shadow or a growing coat of tan in summer. Other times it slams itself against our heads causing all manner of uncertainty and discomfort. We must not overlook the first. We must not rail against the second. Each has its necessary contribution to make'."

"Second, I can't see any problem about feeling closer to David when we are associating with someone who was close to him. The problem would be if we got to the point we couldn't get along without it. You see what I mean?"

"I do. This is the 'addiction kid' you're talking with here, remember. No need not to cherish what we had and to enjoy

revisiting it once in a while, but – like it always really was – we have to find our own way, be our own person, stand for what we each believe in. Dave would certainly have approved of that. And even if he hadn't, I do, and now, as I'm doing my best to move forward, *that* is what really counts – my approval of me. I do feel better. Now, back to the most important question of the day – are you and Jake getting kissy-facey with each other? If so I have to let him know I'll be watching for his first wrong move."

"Jake is always a gentleman. What we have or haven't done, or what we may do is really none of your business – big brother."

"In other word, kiss off, take a hike, hit the road?"

"Something like that but only where he and I are concerned. I can't imagine not having you in my life since Saturday on the square."

"Okay. Big brother it is."

They had talked so long it was necessary to hurry, not to be late for fifth period.

T.J.'s teacher, always open and eager for a chance to experience the humorous side of life, began by addressing him directly.

"Mr. Jackson. I just need to check to see if you are here to participate or if you're still claiming the fifth."

T.J. stood.

"Sir, I am here to proudly proclaim I have been almost eight weeks now without consulting a fifth of anything. You may applaud. In two weeks, I will be going cold turkey without my nicotine patch. Never ask me for advice about either one because I will never assume I know you well enough to meddle in your life."

There was applause. The girls studied glances seemed to indicate some renewed interest. He took his seat and then immediately stood again, half way.

"You have my permission to begin class now, sir."

The laughter lingered on for some time. He took note that the other students seemed to be genuinely pleased for him. That was nice. *Why*, he still could not understand. More to write about. Perhaps his lady of the evening should plan her exit by seven.

* * *

“Hey, T.J. Mr. Waters said he wanted to see you back in his office when you got here this afternoon.”

Mr. Waters owned the hardware store where T.J. worked. Historically during his life, such a summons was bad news. On previous occasions, that had seldom surprised him. He knew when his work had been sloppy or subpar. That time he was at a loss. He had been trying to pick up his game – work faster and pay attention to the details better. For those things, he blamed David. Before he went into the back room to change into his work clothes he knocked on the office door.

“Come.”

“You want to see me, sir?”

“Yes, T.J. Here, have a seat.”

He had seldom been offered a seat when about to be chewed out or fired. He was at a loss. He sat and opened his coat, having earlier figured if he were about to be given the boot, removing it beforehand would have been a waste of time. There was a natural efficiency about the way T.J. approached life.

“You have worked here for a little over two years. How have you liked it?”

“An honest answer, sir?”

It had plainly been a serious question.

“Certainly.”

“It is tedious and dirty – two things to which I have a thoroughgoing aversion. Still, I have mostly tried to earn my money – do my job adequately is what I meant by that.”

“And you have, and in light of that I have a proposition for you to mull over. Afterschool, you continue to do the dirty, monotonous work as you so aptly described it. On Saturdays, you become our Inventory Specialist – in charge of keeping up-to-date our need-to-reorder records. Before you leave Saturday afternoons you will have prepared a list for me of the what we need and when it should be ordered. If you agree, you will receive a two dollar an hour raise and next summer I can put you on 30 hours a week. Probably some register time, then.”

“My! First, I guess thank you for the vote of confidence. Second, I appreciate the time you seem to be offering me to

make the decision. Third, regarding possible summer work, I will need to have one week off for band camp and there is the possibility I will need one more week off – there’s a rumor about me going to Boys’ State. It seems only fair to get that out in the open right now in case it poses a problem.”

“I understand about boys and camps and things. We will work around those.”

“By when do you need an answer? Honestly, I have been contemplating some other job in which my brain might actually need to be engaged.”

Mr. Waters chuckled.

“I understand. I imagine inventory control – the bases of our entire operation – just might engage that mind of yours. Let’s say next week at this time. If it’s not to your liking, you continue to have the option to work the hours you have been working. I could probably manage a dollar an hour raise even for that.”

“You are being very generous. I appreciate it all more than I can tell you.”

He stood, accepted Mr. Waters’ hand for a shake, and left – some relieved and some stressed. The revised work description meant a billion times more responsibility, and responsibility was near the top of TJ’s ‘evade at all costs’ list. It was puzzling how people were suddenly seeing him as a respectable kid with possibilities. Where in . . . the world was that coming from?

It fascinated him that his work that afternoon was noticeably improved – more efficient, better planned, even more enjoyable. He took note of things that were running low. Hmm? Clearly, he would soon need a second spiral notebook, and, if he didn’t watch out, he might have to cut back to a four girl a week schedule. No. certainly not that! He’d learn to write faster.

The meeting with Mr. Waters had awakened a question that had been festering somewhere inside him since soon after becoming close with David. What did he want to do with his life? BD (Before David) he would have been content with work in a hardware store or something similar for the rest of his life. Work equaled nothing more than a means of support. You put in your time, you got your check and you spent your

money. That was pretty much his full expectation from life. AD (your guess) he was driven to reevaluate that position. Something called, 'making something of your natural born talents', kept eating at him. He had nothing against store clerks. Those he knew, he respected. It wasn't that. It was him.

The tests David had forced him to take, confused a whole lot of things for T.J. He was bright. He was equally talented in terms of verbal skills and spatial skills. The academic tests had suggested his general knowledge was that of a college junior. Those things painted the picture of a young man T.J. really didn't know. During his months with David, he had gradually become acquainted with that new T.J. – TJ point 02. He liked him. That person wasn't like most things in his life. None of them had been permanent – things he could count on to stick with him. But this new T.J. was different. David had explained it. Who he really was could never be taken away from him. Who he really was provided possibilities he had never envisioned for himself. Continuing to be who he had been, wasted what David called the grand potential of the *Remarkable T.J. Jackson*.

He verbalized a disturbing revelation as he walked home after work. "Life, back when I was a didn't-give-a-damn SOB, had been a whole lot easier and in some ways – different ways – less frightening."

///

CHAPTER TEN

That night he slept on a damp pillowcase

When T.J. arrived home after work there were two familiar figures in an unfamiliar location – Tommy and Jake sitting on his front porch.

“In a billion years, I’d have never expected to see you two, or either one of you, here. What’s up? Nothing’s wrong with Sue, is there.”

“As far as I know she’s fine,” Jake said. “You?” he turned to Tommy.

“I’m just a kid. I never know nothing.”

“You know better than to use a double negative,” T.J. said ruffling his hair.”

Tommy smiled up at him sheepishly. The boys stood.

“It seems we are here at the same time by pure coincidence,” Jake said. “I was walking home. Tommy trotted up alongside, said he was coming here and asked if I’d like to walk along. I said, sure, and here we are.”

“Actually, he said, sure, *why not*, and here we are,” Tommy said. “Since I am the only one on a mission, I guess I should deliver my message. Mom said I should invite you to dinner before choir practice. I couldn’t get your phone to answer so here I am – inviting you.”

“Sorry about the phone. I turn it off at work and I guess I had things on my mind and forgot to turn it back on. And, I’ll be very pleased to come. I seem to be at your place so much your dad is likely to start charging me rent.”

Tommy turned to Jake.

“T.J.’s kidding. Dad would never do that. I’ve been

thinking he should come and live with us now. There's room and we all love him at our house. Oops! Mom said that was something I should not bring up. I can't see why not, but I'm sorry if I did something dumb. At my age, I never seem to know when I do or say dumb stuff."

"Like a fox you don't, but this time it will be our secret, Tom, and if Jake here says anything we will tie him to the nearest railroad tracks and wait for him to be . . . Well, I suppose neither of us would really do that, would we?"

"No. Jake's a really cool guy. He's a carpenter, did you know that?"

"I did. In fact, I recently saw a picture frame he made and it was really nice. It is for a plaque the band is going to hang in the band room to remember Dave."

"That's nice of you, Jake. Did you know my brother?"

"Just briefly. I'm new to the town and school. He made a powerful impression on me, though."

"He had a way of doing that."

"I better skedaddle on home," Jake said. "My night to fix supper. Fried potatoes, pork and beans, with peas and carrots mixed together. Generic Twinkies for dessert."

"Sounds good. Thanks for walking and talking with me."

"Any time. You're a pretty cool kid yourself, for ten."

"Ten going on thirty," T.J. added.

It went over Tommy's head. Jake trotted off toward home.

He turned to Tommy.

"I need to check something inside and drop off my back pack then we can head back to your place."

Tommy understood it had not been an invitation to enter the house, so he sat back down on the porch. He could hear T.J. talking on his phone – sounded like he was canceling an appointment or something for later that evening. Before he even managed to work himself into a comfortable position against the pole, his friend had returned with a question.

"Do we need to call your mother to tell her I'm coming for dinner?"

"She's planning on you, so it really wouldn't change

anything for her to know.”

T.J. nodded, stowed his phone in his back pocket, and they started up the lane toward the street.

“Me and Dave used to always trot when we went someplace together. He liked to keep in good condition – his cross-country stuff. Do you trot?”

“I do. That sounds like a good idea, even. This is a friendly, nobody wins or loses sort of trot, right?”

“Right.”

“I did a few of those trots with Dave, myself.”

Tommy smiled and nodded.

“He used to say he couldn’t understand how I could trot and keep up a *running* conversation at the same time – it was like a pun – but it’s also true.”

T.J. noticed a remarkable change in his ability to take deep breaths from just a month before.

Twelve minutes later they entered the Baker’s kitchen door, laughing and breathing hard. Tommy had turned up the rpm’s during the final half block.

It was a build your own cheeseburger meal. There were eight burgers and buns with all the makings in the center of the table, along with a huge bowl of French fries and ice cream promised for dessert. T.J. sensed there was less strain than had been the case at the several recent meals he had been a part of there. David’s name came up several times with no gasps or sighs or looking away – just part of the matter of fact, honest, conversation. T.J. was pleased, but kept that to himself.

He told them about Mr. Water’s offer and asked for their input. Tommy made the first offer. Who’d have guessed!

“I think you need to do what you think will make you happy. Money is important, but it can’t buy happy – I’ve heard that all my life.”

The others each commented, but none of them strayed very far from Tommy’s thoughts.

Mr. Baker added a new topic.

“Have you given much thought about college, T.J.?”

T.J. grinned.

“College is not in the stars for me. I’ve always known there could be no money for that, but I’ll do fine. After I buy

out Mr. Waters and expand into the six nearby counties . . .”

He stopped with a smile, hoping that had redirected the conversation down some more comfortable path.

It seemed to have done that, as it turned to things going on in the lives of the two youngest entries at the table.

“One burger left, T.J.,” Mrs. Baker said at last. “Can’t invite you back again if you leave food on the table.”

He grinned and nodded.

“Thanks. They are great. You put something in the meat.”

“My secret recipe, but I suppose I can share it with you.”

“She means you’re like family,” Tommy added looking around the table for support.

She continued.

“A few dashes of A-1, a couple tablespoons of catsup, and a dollop of honey.”

As he assembled a mammoth sandwich – burger, two slices of cheese, two slices of tomato, a liberal sprinkling of shredded lettuce, with both mustard and catsup – he acknowledged her information with a smile and nod.

“Ice cream now or after practice?” she asked once T.J. had finished.

“I vote for both,” Tommy said figuring he would take a shot.

“If I get a vote, I’d vote now,” T.J. said. “It’s all quite selfish, because I need to head straight home after practice. Homework and, well, I suppose no reason not to say it. Like Tommy, I’ve begun writing about my questions and insights and feelings. I don’t want to miss a night. It is . . .”

Tommy, ever present with his version of everything, finished it for him.

“It is both *personally enlightening and mentally invigorating.*”

The adults smiled and chuckled.

“Thank you. I think you hit it right on the head, Tom,” T.J. said.

“I usually do. Ask anybody.”

T.J. offered his great grin and ruffled the boy’s hair.

“I have to imagine it is most reassuring to have a Sage

living in your midst, isn't it?" he said looking from face to face around the table.

It called for no response. Well, there were raised eyebrows.

Ice cream it was. Vanilla with a choice of toppings – strawberry, fudge, or caramel. Tommy and T.J. had all three.

"We have time to do up the dishes before we need to leave for practice," Mrs. Baker said. "Let's make it a girl's night, Megan. I'd like to hear more about that fieldtrip to the museum you mentioned."

Megan was happier than – no, Megan was *less unhappy* about it than anybody expected.

"I need to talk with T.J., Tommy," Mr. Baker said. "You make yourself scarce for the next fifteen minutes."

"I hardly got to see him at all this afternoon."

"We had the walk. That was nice."

"The *trot*, really. It *was* nice. I sort of forgot about that. Be sure to say bye before you leave. I'll be up in my room tackling the problems of the universe."

He ran up the stairs. T.J. offered a frown in Mr. Baker's direction.

"The universe thing? David used to say that as he moved up the stairs to sequester himself for the night. Tommy seems to have taken it as his own."

"And, it may well be as appropriate for him as it was for Dave," T.J. said.

They moved into the living room. Mr. Baker sat at one end of the sofa and indicated the area next to him.

"I have some things to say and I am going to ask that you just hear them and then take time – weeks, maybe – to think them over."

T.J. was baffled and could only respond with a shrug and a frown.

"As I'm sure you are aware, David had already received offers of full scholarships to several major universities. He had what he called his free ride into adulthood."

"Yes. I was so proud of him. Sometimes it seemed even more than he was."

Mr. Baker continued.

"Well, before my mother passed away a number of

years ago, she set up three trust funds for our children. They will more than handle their college expenses. I imagine by the time Tommy's ready for college, a free ride will also be made available for him. Believe it or not, that little scamp's test scores are just about equal to David's at the same age."

"Oh, I can believe it – no problem there. He continually astounds me."

As obvious as the next step in the conversation would have been to anybody else in the known universe, T.J. was still all quite honestly in the dark. Expectations – or the lack thereof – infused into one's being at such an early age as they had been in his case, were difficult to dislodge or override.

Again, it was Mr. Baker.

"In light of those things, and having consulted with David several months ago, he, his mother and I want to make his trust fund available to you to use for college."

T.J. opened his mouth as if to speak.

"Hush now, unless there is something you don't understand about what I have said."

"Then, nothing, I suppose. I will do the thinking you suggested. If I need help along the way I have nobody to count on. My dad and I never speak and he'd have no useful take on something like this, anyway."

"Okay, then. Give yourself a full week. I don't want an answer that soon, but if by then you have things to talk about that are related to you and the offer, we'll be here for you. One more thing. I ask that you keep this just between you and Mrs. Baker and me. If the time comes you need to share it with your father I'd like to be part of that conversation, based on the things you've just said."

"Of course. I understand. Frankly, I'd probably be a sophomore in college before he even realized I had moved out."

Mr. Baker hoped that had been an attempt at humor.

T.J. paused, looked away and then back all quite purposefully into the man's face.

"I need to have you know a couple of things about be. Knowing you and Mrs. Baker, I have no reason to think they will change your offer, but I want you to know."

"Alright."

“The man I call dad is really my uncle on my mother’s side of the family. My father was a college professor. I’m a bastard. My mother never wanted me, and shortly after I was born she died of alcohol poisoning. That’s it. Me in 41 words.”

“You counted them?”

“I’ve been practicing. I wanted you people to know. I only found out after Dave’s death so he never knew. It just seems right that you do. It is offered strictly as information. I won’t allow any ‘poor kid’ reactions. I’m good for the long haul.”

“I have no doubt about that. Do you at least do hugs?”

“I am quite unpracticed hugging males of the species, but I’m game if you are.”

It lingered for a long time right there on the sofa. There were tears – two sets. There was a new bond that would grow to enrich both of their lives.”

“Time to leave, fellas,” Mrs. Baker called into the living room.”

After having made themselves presentable, they entered the hall. Mrs. Barker had the two youngest sitting on the lower step giving instructions for the evening. Occasionally, it entailed a waggling index finger.

“Megan, you are not to punch your brother or lock yourself in your room. Tommy, you are not to torment your sister by removing your clothes and dancing around in front of her. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Yes, mother.”

T.J. worked to control his reaction. It really had seemed humorous to him, but then he had never had the experience of contending with a sibling – clad or unclad.

The older ones left for practice. T.J. rode with them in their car – in the back seat. It was a first for him, riding in the Baker’s vehicle. Mostly, the parents discussed things of importance to them – schedules and meetings and other modifications in the regular routine for the remainder of the week.

At the church, there were several unfamiliar faces mixed in among the others. Mrs. Baker made the

introductions. One was a girl from his class – Angeline. He knew who she was – new to the school the past September – but that was where his information stopped. He had heard her called Angie by her friends. They managed a cordial, hello. Practice began. At the 30-minute mark, they broke for a ten-minute stretch time.

T.J. moved down to the main floor – they practiced in the choir loft in the sanctuary. Angeline followed him.

“Hi.”

Not a creative or memorable greeting, but he was happy to talk with her, which they managed to do without difficulty for the entire ten minutes.

The remainder of the practice went well. T.J. enjoyed it. They always ran through the hymns that would be sung on Sunday. Never having been a church goer, they were all new to him. Some he really liked. Others he thought were simply dreadful. Afterward, many of the people approached him and expressed how happy they were he had come back and urged him to find some other boys to bring along next time.

“We need new blood and new ideas,” one older lady said. “We’re pretty much in a rut, I think.”

T.J. nodded and smiled. Perhaps he’d bring Tommy and see if they could add his apparently light and airy dance routine into the program. Now THAT would be an *unrutter* if anything would!

He thanked the Baker’s for the nice time and good dinner and gave Mr. Baker a single, firm and serious nod. He understood and returned it.

“We can drop you off at home if you’d like,” Mrs. Baker said.

“Thanks, but no. You’ve done more than enough for one night.”

T.J. and Angie stood on the front steps talking after the others had left and the lights had gone off. They found each other easy to talk with and far more often than not, nodded in agreement with what the other had to say.

He really wanted to kiss her, but wouldn’t make the first move – the circumstances and all.

She really wanted to kiss him, but wouldn’t make the first move – the circumstances and all.

‘She’s a classy girl and she stood there talking with *me* for no reason at all,’ he thought.

‘He’s a classy guy and he stood there talking with *me* for no reason at all,’ she thought.

Later, there would be many opportunities for the two classy young people to share kisses. It would force T.J. to rethink his life-long beliefs about the female of his species. He had good reference material – no fewer than a dozen of his conversations with David on the topic. During his lifetime, he had known a hundred – maybe two hundred – girls who had been eager to prove to him that his low opinion of women was correct. He had known only four who fit David’s respectful beliefs about them – his book lady, Sue, and David’s mother. Okay, so only three. Now, perhaps, Angie. From their brief time together, it certainly seemed she belonged to that group. To make an honest relationship with her, he would have to confess to having been a life-long lowlife where girls were concerned. He was neither sure he could do that nor that he could give up his current ways – a five-year, seven night a week, run would not be an easy thing to put behind him cold turkey. But then, cigarettes were gone. Alcohol was gone. Who knew? Recently, he seemed to have great power over himself when he defined a goal as being of some ultimate importance. Of course, smokes and booze consumption were not driven by a young man’s hormones. He had to wonder where and why that apparently new power had been hidden all those years – probably overpowered by his *Personal No Disappointment Plan*.

On his way home, he was feeling incredibly – magically – alive, fully understanding it had been launched by Angie rather than by the experience at the church – nice as that had been. He trotted, he skipped, he even twirled a time or two as he made his way through the darkness. Mrs. Stevens would assume he was coming home drunk, again. He figured Tommy would have approved of his antics, probably even offering cheers and applause and, just might have joined in leaving a trail of clothes in his wake. There would have been no applause from Dave, although he never would have openly put him down for it. He had always allowed T.J. to be T.J. Never in his entire life had T.J. trotted, skipped

and twirled on his way to or from anywhere – in the dark or in the light – sober or not, clothes on or clothes off. He smiled at the silliness.

Old habit patterns die hard. In the end, he saw the humor in his next move. Once in his room he felt his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes, and was on his way to opening his bottom dresser drawer to make sure there was a bottle before it dawned on him that he had entered a new day in his life. He stopped to sniff the air. David hated the tobacco odor that lingered on his clothing and there in his room, well-embedded down through the years inside every nook and cranny since the year he was seven – or was it six . . . or five. He really wasn't sure, but understood it had been more than long enough to have laced his lungs with the crispy coating of deep, black tars and open, bleeding scars that inevitably followed prolonged smoking. He was somewhat surprised he could even distinguish the disgusting odor. For most of his life, he hadn't been able to – something that fascinated Dave. He had researched the neurological explanation – it was a real process, automatically ignoring any prolonged odor regularly associated with a person's environment.

For some reason, as he hung up his clothes that night, he thought about how precious they were. He wondered if kids who had lots of clothes – more than they needed – thought about them like that.

He lay back on his bed, arms behind his head – that head, which was suddenly filled with huge decisions. He remembered the summer when he was four and he lived in the cave; his sole possession at that time was the black shorts he wore 24/7. They got washed in the stream when he got washed in the stream. Perhaps those thoughts had surfaced because of Jake's push to make sure poor kids had nice clothes to wear. That kid really was sweet, but then, he was apparently going through tough times as well. T.J. knew Dave and Sue were sweet, also, so going through tough times would not be a prerequisite for being sweet.

"Goodness no. Just look at me," he said, aloud without thinking. "I've been deep into tough times all my life and nobody in my world would have ever dubbed me anything close to sweet."

He figured that recently both Sue and Dave – and probably Tommy and Megan and their parents – saw a sweet ‘part’ to him. He also figured that ‘part’ had been blossoming further during the past several months. It posed an interesting set of feelings. His life-long, necessary lack of trust in others left no place for genuine sweetness or sincere kindness. When he used either of those it was solely as a necessary ploy in whatever con he was trying to pull off – for food or clothes or smokes. Add drinks, and those four things would have been the complete list of his basic needs as a young child. It wasn’t right that any kid should have to grow up that way. Perhaps something about that would eventually become the focus of his life.

Because of his conversation with David’s dad that evening, the necessity for him to give serious thought to his future hit him full force. He could just hear how Dave would have phrased it in his fatherly voice: “It’s time for you to take seriously what positive role you plan to play in mankind’s struggle for happiness, productivity, and survival.” As Mr. Baker had alluded to, it required careful and prolonged thought – the analysis of both his abilities and his pleasures – what pursuits would be within his capacities and what things he could enjoy over a lifetime.

Dave had mentioned there were tests he could take that would help him narrow his range of interests to the few that were most important to him. T.J. smiled, wondering if one of the interest categories listed, might be passionate activities with the female of the species. His earlier decision to skip a night, undoubtedly brought that to mind.

First, I must prove to myself beyond any doubt that I can move on through life without the need for alcohol or other artificial props. I could never take Dave’s grandmother’s money for college without knowing I wouldn’t just squander it at some point along the way. Hmm? Did that sound like a positive moral compass rearing its head? I really do have a good feeling about that – me – both, I guess. The more I think about my mother, the less I believe she could have been a physiologically dependent alcoholic – just like that she gave up drinking for nearly nine months for my benefit – so I wouldn’t be born mentally handicapped or in some other way

malformed. I assume that was related to her love for me. I've never said this before, but thanks, mom. You gave me my two greatest gifts: a strong, healthy body, and a bright and healthy brain. I've never seen a picture of you, but I'm thinking you must have been attractive – I'm told that I am, and that had to have come from somewhere other than Uncle Frank. He chuckled. He told me you were fair complected, with blond hair and blue eyes. Perhaps you were smart enough to shack up with a good-looking man as well as a smart one. In that case I suppose I need to thank dear old dad as well.

He reached up and turned off his bedside lamp. He turned onto his side. It was a fine realization that wrapped its arms around him as he closed his eyes that night: "For the first time in my life, I really don't hate my parents. That, by itself, is going to free me to ponder my future – I can feel it. I had no idea until this very moment what Dave meant that day out by the creek in the woods. Trying to lighten the mood I said something like, "You know I love cheeseburgers and fries. Eighty percent of this body has been made from cheeseburgers and fries." He didn't know I heard, but he mumbled to himself, "And the other twenty percent seems to be hate."

Interesting. That rascal fully intended for me to hear that. I miss you so much David. That night he slept on a damp pillowcase.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Snow Picnic

T.J. had told Barry he'd give him his decision about the Student Council on Thursday. It was Thursday. He found himself dawdling on the walk to school. It wasn't that he didn't have the decision ready to deliver. It was more about once he delivered it, he had to live with it – responsibility rearing its ugly head. David would have termed it the 'right' decision. For T.J. it was more the 'fascinating' decision or the 'getting on with his new life' decision. It provided a doorway into a brand-new definition of himself – an altruist. In some ways, he was sad David wouldn't not be there to witness it. In another way, he was proud to believe he thought through the options presented to him on several fronts and made that decision on his own.

As he neared school he spotted Sue and Jake walking a half block ahead of him. They stopped just before entering the school grounds. Jake leaned close to her and offered a simple peck to her cheek. She returned it. 'Sweet,' T.J. thought.

Kissing on the school grounds was frowned on by the administration. It did happen, of course – it was a campus of restless hormones being precariously transported from place to place by lustful, id-driven, teenagers. Straight shooters like the two of them would heed the principal's expectations. Once he had come to understand and accept Sue's feelings about him, T.J. had come to see how the two of them – Sue and Jake – were the perfect couple. He wanted them to be happy. They seemed to be.

He lengthened his stride to catch up and walk with them up the wide sidewalk toward the steps

“Morning, guys,” he said projecting a generally positive outlook.

“Hey, T.J.” Jake came back.

Sue nodded and spoke.

“So? Student Council, yea or nay?”

“I’m generally in favor of student councils so long as the faculty doesn’t interfere too much.”

She slapped at him playfully.

“You know what I mean.”

Before he could offer a genuine response, Barry, binder and clipboard in tow, hurried down the steps in their direction.

T.J. offered a grin.

“Imagine meeting you first thing on this almost-up-to-freezing, bright, sunny, Minnesota morning.”

Barry turned to Sue, shrugging.

“Genuine, sarcastic, or mocking me?” he asked more serious than not.

“I think the word is tease.”

“*That* I can deal with. Been teased about this red hair all my life. *Well* inoculated on that front, one might say.”

He turned to T.J., hunched up his shoulders, and raised his palms in front of him – the universal sign for, ‘So, what’s it gonna be?’

“Onward and upward,” T.J. responded, raising his fist in the air with determination.

“You will have to be more specific. I don’t speak *fist*.”

The others grinned and chuckled.

That was perhaps Barry’s best attempt at humor all year. Sadly, that had *not* been an attempt at humor.

“I guess I’m in, according your very specific role-description – idea guy and the designated girl kisser as they enter every meeting.”

Poor Barry could only offer his most perplexed look – again, toward Sue. She tried to fix it.

“He agreed to help in any way he can and as often as he’s needed.”

“Excellent. I have the feeling it may be sometime before I fully understand you, T.J., so please be patient with

me.”

“You will find I am every bit as patient as Attila the Hun, Barry.”

“But he wasn’t . . . Ah. Humor. Okay, then. See! I’ll catch on eventually. I may be a resounding bore, but I’m not dumb.”

Barry was another straight arrow – apparently a rather self-aware straight arrow. The exchange had forced T.J. to take the boy more seriously. The boy who had probably never in his life stepped on a sidewalk crack or failed to say *gesundheit* at the required moment. T.J. had sometimes wondered why the lenses in his dark rimmed glasses had not worn thin from the dozens of cleanings he inflicted on them every day.

With that out of the way, they entered the building and went their separate ways. The newly constituted *Sue-Jake* walked to their lockers – Jake had managed a trade so his was next to hers – Barry, to wherever the Barrys of the world congregate to clean their glasses and straighten their clipboards, and T.J. in search of Angie. While he lingered over the stashing of his coat and such in his locker, he looked up and down the hall. Lockers were assigned in alphabetical order. Since he had no idea what her last name was, he had no idea which end of the hall to search. Since ‘J’ for Jackson, was close to the middle of the alphabet, he had a clear view in both directions.

Presently, he saw her a dozen or so lockers to his right, most likely in the ‘Ls’ or ‘Ms’. He closed his locker and made his way toward her.

“Good morning, Angie,” he said from behind, before she noticed him.

She turned, offering a smile.

“Well, good morning. I recognized that beautiful soft voice as soon as I heard it. I hoped I’d see you before classes started.”

“Then it seems to have worked out well. Your blue scarf matches my blue neckerchief.”

“Neckerchief? New word.”

“I can see you aren’t a fan of the old black and white westerns.”

“Well, I can tell a Lone Ranger from a palomino.”

“I’d say you pass, then.”

He pulled at his neck ware. He lowered his voice.

“Neckerchief – the rugged masculine version of the more delicately feminine, scarf, which so softly cradles your perfectly formed, alabaster neck.”

She did a second take. T.J. continued.

“Too much?”

“I’d say slightly over the top and I rush in to add please don’t stop.”

They exchanged smiles.

“We had a great talk last night,” he said. “I thought about it for a long time.”

“I enjoyed it, too. We seem to be on the same wavelength about a lot of things – important things.”

“I should tell you that I am currently in the midst of some major wavelength changes. Not there yet, so very likely irritatingly unpredictable for a while, yet.”

“A man of mystery. I like that.”

“Actually, you might not. I’d like to explain about it sometime soon. I really like you, Angie, but it wouldn’t be fair to pursue a relationship further until you understand some things.”

“A man of mystery *and* a gentleman. I think I like.”

“For starters, I’ve never been thought of as gentleman – but I’m coming to think I might like to be.”

“Let me consult my social calendar,” she said, playfully.

She opened and immediately closed a small notepad.

“I see I just happen to be free from now until Norway?”

“Confusion!” he said.

“Ever since I was a little kid I’ve wanted to visit Norway. I loved books and especially one about a Norwegian girl and her friend – a boy.”

“I like stories about boys and girls, especially when they end happily. I’ll go with you. I may have to go that far to get away from my reputation.”

“I know about your reputation, T.J. After all, I’m a girl and I’ve been in town for more than thirty minutes.”

“That bad? Really?”

“My impression is that it is more . . . cautiously

captivating and mesmerizing than bad.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“The kids in this town are interestingly forgiving where you are concerned. Now, don’t get me wrong. That still doesn’t mean most fathers here in Thomasville won’t forbid their daughters from so much as looking at you.”

They shared smiles and chuckles.

“But not yours?” clearly asking an important question.

“It’s just mom and me.”

He nodded.

“That makes our next serious conversation easier for me, at least,” T.J. said. “Lowered likelihood of sniper fire.”

“I like your quick sense of humor.”

“I like your recognition and appreciation of my quick sense of humor.”

“Good. People find I am a good listener. I find me to be non-judgmental and fascinated by interesting people – like you.”

“I really wanted to kiss you last night,” he said.

“Me, too. It says a lot about a guy’s character when he wants to but he doesn’t for the sake of the girl’s feelings.”

“Every time you open your mouth I like myself better and better – well, you too, actually,” he said. “Please do keep talking.”

She looked at her watch.

“I can hardly wait until our next conversation, T.J. And, oh, if you run into Sue before I do, tell her I’ll be over after school to get started on the Clothes Exchange.”

“You know Sue?”

“Didn’t I tell you? She’s one of my closest friends.”

“Oh, my! Oh, my, my! O h, m y g o d! I think I smell the aroma of subterfuge. Don’t get me wrong. I love subterfuge when it comes wrapped in the form of a beautiful girl.”

Before the school day was over, several kids checked in with him about their projects. Mr. Terwilliger had obtained lists of families with children who most likely went to bed hungry, at least some nights – Salvation Army, churches, The Department of Social Services. That project was dear to T.J.’s heart. He was willing to pitch in and help with the nitty-gritty

work with that group. Arrangements had been made with three other small towns to do the clothing exchange. The student councils in each community seemed excited about it and had secured out of the way spaces where kids could come and go unnoticed – mostly spare rooms in the homes of senior citizens who were delighted to be a part of it. Mr. Hayes, the principal liked the idea of the early morning ‘spirit session’ and had suggested that Miss. Bradford, the choir director and Mr. Carter be contacted as sources for a regular stream of talent. And, miracle of all miracles, he thought T.J.s opening performance with the sock and zip bag would be hilarious. Much to his credit, Barry had been exploring something he called, The Meeting of the Minds – a new afterschool program where kids and towns people would get together and discuss how the two generations could work more cooperatively to generally improve Thomasville. David would have loved that. Hearing of it, the Mayor suggested that the Student Council begin sending two representatives to the City Council meetings – a liaison between the old and new and a way of making the town more kid friendly and kid knowledgeable about just how city government worked and how to make it work better for them.

On his way home from work that afternoon, T.J. had a long talk with himself.

‘It seems I may have started a small revolution. I suppose I am pleased about that. I am really having a hard time figuring out just who this new T.J. is. One minute, I’m volunteering to take on some responsibility and the next I’m hating myself for having done it. David talked *at* me about it several times. When I’d see he was getting all serious like he often did, I’d ask him, “Is this going to be a talking with me or a talking at me.” He’d always offer his great smile – his natural, genuine, smile. He did not hesitate to say ‘at’ when that was his intention. David never told me how to live my life – it’s probably the thing I loved most about him, but he was not above laying out alternatives he really wanted me to consider. He respected me enough to allow me to make my own decisions. I always listened. There were even times when I followed through on his suggestions – interestingly, more *now* that he’s not with me than before.

‘Because of his upper middle-class upbringing, David was naïve and completely unformed about how it really was to live as a poor person. I hesitated to inform him because he got all unwound about it and wanted to fix things for me immediately. I didn’t want his fixing. I wanted his friendship. I certainly did not want his pity, so I mostly kept quiet about such things. It’s one reason I hadn’t invited him to my house. Nobody could enter there and not be overwhelmed by the stench of poor. He came to understand my feelings and wishes about all that, and I give him a great deal of credit for not trying to meddle. He once said how much he respected me for my stand on it. It’s one reason I can’t take his stuff now. He would understand that.

‘New topic. Angie. Whew! To pursue a relationship with her will require so many new ways of looking at life – so many changes in my life. I’m not sure I am up to it. In my entire post-puberty life, I have never once considered the possibility of just stopping at *kissing* a girl. I carefully selected girls I knew felt the same way. I talked with Dave about it, trying to explain my philosophy of love – well, *lust*, as he pointed out. I told him that when I was with a girl my intention was to let my passion take over and lead me to where passion was supposed to lead. He countered with arguments based in personal control, moral values, and respect for the girl and for myself. At first it made no sense. I respected myself for being a great seducer and world-class lover.

‘I’ve come part way toward his point of view. My first qualification for a girl is no longer that she is willing to get cozy with me, as Dave referred to having sex. Dave termed my way, animalistic disrespect. He said no guy ever learned to appreciate the wonders and possibilities of a girl’s mind and personality while cozying with her and if that was the basis of a relationship, it was doomed to failure. I’m sure he was right about that, but then, I never wanted to pursue a ‘relationship’ – certainly not with her *mind*. David knew all the words most guys used when describing such activities, but he said it seemed to him most them were degrading, so he wouldn’t use them. Recently, I’ve been searching for some other ‘most important’ quality in the female of my species. Suddenly considering the long run, I seem to be leaning toward Dave’s

point of view – that she needs to be the kind of girl who I can enjoy talking with and being with and planning with – out of bed. It needs to be a girl with whom I share common interests – out of bed. It needs to be a girl in whom I can see the totality of her personal beauty, not just what I've been interested in seeing – in bed.

'Really, it means leaving behind the hate I had reason to associate with females and stop trying to prove to them that my position is accurate – that all females are scum. Once I arrived at the place where I could drop that kind of thoroughgoing hate – disrespect, I suppose, in its milder, more frequent, form – a new world of possibilities opened for me. If my job was not to prove to every female I encountered what a no-good, despicable slut she was, then what was my mission? The idea that I could respect or want to take care of a female, or share my life on an equal plane with her, would have blown my mind just a few months ago, but suddenly that's all I can think about. Well, not all. I'm a teenage male, but my point is, there now awaits a wide range of new and exciting options.

'I am coming to see that intimate sides of a relationship are something to be worked out thoughtfully by the couple. I think it must become the wonder-filled mature point in a relationship, rather than the starting point. I'm not like Dave, whose beliefs – those with which with he was raised as a middle-class protestant – prohibited such relationships outside of marriage, but I am willing to begin keeping them only with the one special woman in my life. I think that's closer to Dave's position than most young people are today. Even here in conservative Thomasville, the general expectation among many of the kids is, that long-term dating means a sexual relationship. I guess I will see if I can keep to this new conception of how relationships between the sexes should be, and if, after a period of honest investigation it continues to make the most sense to me, that will become my working philosophy. I never put Dave down for his hands-off beliefs about it, and would never do that to anyone now. I am eager to explore it with Angie. I can see that I have never allowed consideration of the girl's perspectives.

'It makes me smile to think it was *my own* discovery, that my hatred of my mother was mostly indefensible and

unwarranted, that has allowed me – maybe forced me – to gain this new perspective, rather than it having been all those ‘talk-at-mes’ from David. I suppose it’s a good hybrid – my revelation and Dave’s common sense and social conscious.’

As he came upon his house he noticed he had a visitor sitting on the porch. He spoke.

“Hmm. A young man with a basket. Let me guess. Are you selling or giving away baby kittens or puppies?”

Tommy giggled, shaking his head.

“Hmm. Are you carrying the head of Blackbeard the Pirate to present to the Queen of England?”

“No. I made us a picnic. I knew you’d be up for it.”

“As a matter of fact, I have been thinking ‘picnic in the snow’ ever since I first woke up this morning.”

“Humorous, although I understand it’s not true. I asked mom and she said it was okay with her if I asked you. So, here I am, asking you.”

“A bit after the fact, but why not?”

“Where? I had failed to remember there would be no grass on the ground.”

“We can go into the house, move the kitchen table out of the way, and spread out that great picnic blanket I see you brought along there on top of the basket. Do I need to provide drinks?”

“Not if you like orange pop – I brought four cans. I’m sure they stayed good and cold. My teeth are chattering.”

“Aren’t they always?”

Tommy managed a smile, understanding the reference to his chatty nature.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do and your proposal sounds great.”

“Won’t your dad be home?”

“No. He’s on a long truck run. Left a note saying it would be after midnight.”

“That was thoughtful of him.”

That idea caught T.J. off guard.

“Yes. That was thoughtful, wasn’t it. Hmm?”

‘A new winter scarf and a thoughtful note all in the same week. It seemed some other wonderful thing just might be blossoming.’

“May I ask how this came up – a picnic in the middle of winter?”

They moved onto the porch and inside. Tommy waved off T.J.’s attempt to help with the basket.

“I must admit I had not considered the problem winter raised for a picnic. But I figured a picnic was what we needed today.”

They worked together to move the table and chairs and spread the blanket on the floor. T.J. sat cross-legged at one corner and allowed Tommy to call the shots. Tommy spoke as he knelt and began removing things from the basket.

“Back to your question about why. I have some personal stuff to talk about.”

“You know your parents are always there for you.”

“Yeah. But this is stuff I think *you* need to talk about, too.”

Apparently, Dr. Freud had begun making house calls. T.J.’s interest was, by then, plainly and completely in the boy’s custody.

“Ham salad sandwiches, chips, pickles, apples and cream cheese – and pop.”

“Cream cheese to put on what?”

“Not on, *in* – us. Don’t you just love to eat it like a candy bar?”

“I must admit I have never done that.”

“I already sliced it right down the middle, see.”

Tommy sat and they began eating.

“Do I get some hint about the topic?” T.J. asked.

“David killing himself.”

“Oh. I see. And you don’t think mom or dad would be a better choice?”

“They have each other. Megan and I have each other. Now that Dave’s gone, I’m thinking you don’t really have anybody, so, now you do.”

It was the first time anybody that T.J. knew, had stated the situation so bluntly – honestly – Dave killing himself. It sent a chill up his back and dampened his eyes.

“I have overheard some things I think you need to know – mom and dad and the family lawyer.”

“Oh?”

T.J. wasn't sure he either wanted to hear or should hear what Tommy was about to say. Regardless, Tommy started, sandwich in one hand and can of pop in the other.

"I haven't heard anybody say *why* he killed himself. I have to assume he just got too sad to live. I can't understand how that could be. I *have* learned one thing, though. He took a lot of pills. They just put him to sleep so it didn't hurt. I'm glad about that – that dying didn't hurt him – and I knew you would be, too. He left a long letter about things. Mom and dad have read it. Dad put it the safe. I asked if I could read it and they said I was too young. I'll take their word for that. They have almost always been honest with me. Christmas is the exception. Anyway, I asked how old I needed to be. Dad thought for a little while and then said, 'David was seventeen when he wrote it, so I suppose if you still want to read it when you are seventeen we can work that out.' Now, T.J., here's the thing. You're already seventeen so maybe they'd let you read it."

"They already offered that and I turned them down. I want to remember him like he was when he was full of life and vital and funny, and always spewing great thoughts and wonderful ideas. In his last days he was, like you said, very sad, and I'm sure he wrote about that. I'm not ready to know about that – not yet anyway. I'll make you a Deal. When you turn seventeen, if you decide you want to read it, I'll come back and read it with you. Can we make that deal?"

"Yes. I know what you're thinking, though."

That was no great surprise to anybody in the universe! T.J. smiled and asked.

"What's that?"

"You're thinking that by the time I get to be seventeen I'll feel like you do about it and won't want to read it."

"Was that a question for me to answer?"

"No. I wouldn't do that to you. *Now*, moving on. It sure helped me that time you explained how it couldn't have been anything about me that made him kill himself. You said it better than mom and dad did, and they had really tried. I don't mean to be putting them down. I've done a whole lot of thinking about it – you and Dave – and I've decided it couldn't have been anything about you either. I hope that makes you

feel better.”

Tommy paused to swallow and then continued, not waiting for an answer.

“Sometimes at night after one of my parents tucked me in, Dave used to come into my room and lay down beside me, him on top of the covers and me underneath, and we’d talk. Those are my very best memories of him. Sometimes he’d talk about you. I suppose you didn’t know it, but when he first got to be friends with you I got really jealous and I did some stuff to Dave that I’m not proud of. I’d rather not go into that unless you need to hear.”

“No. That’s completely your private matter.”

“I figured you’d say that. Anyway, when Dave figured out why I was doing that stuff, he came into my room and we talked about it for a very long time one night. We talked so long he got cold and got under the covers, too. You know he never wore much to bed so when he started shivering I invited him inside. Anyway, he said a big brother always loved his little brother about as much as anything in the universe, and nothing could ever change that or take it away. I asked him if he loved you, too. He said he loved you very much. He said you had taught him some of the most important lessons he had ever learned about life. He didn’t say what they were, but I believe him.

“So, T.J., there are three things on my mind: One: You know you aren’t responsible for his death, right? He told me, that in the last analysis, we are all responsible for all of our own actions. He said I should never blame anybody else for my problems or failures. That it was up to me to either fix my stuff or live with it. That advice has already been useful for me. Two: I know my love isn’t the same as Dave’s, but I really do love you and I want to be sure you know that. Dave said love is a one-way street, so I don’t require your love in return, you understand. Three: Dad said none of us can expect to get completely over Dave’s death, but that we all need to find ways of living with it and getting on with our lives the way we know he’d want us to. I am working really hard at that. I just want you to know that if I can ever do anything to help you get on with your life, I’ll always be here for you. Oh, and number *four*, I guess. I know you’re big and I’m little and just because

of that we are different and I know little kids can be pests. So, I want to be your friend, but I need you to promise me that when I get in your hair you will tell me. It has become obvious to me that often I have no idea when that becomes the case. Dave and I had signal. He'd just call me *pest* and I knew it was time for me to leave. That worked well. Occasionally, I'd say it to him when he was getting way to big-brotherly toward me. We always laughed together about that. You promise?"

"I promise. Like you said, Tom, there are bound to be differences between us – ages, backgrounds, interests. There were a lot of differences between Dave and me, too. I may be older than you are, but in some ways, you are way out ahead of me. Sometime, we will need to talk about those things. You had *four* things. Can I have *one*?"

"Sure."

"I loved David very much. He was the one who first taught me about love. For some reason, it seems to be a difficult thing between guys. But you know Dave, there was no way he wouldn't force me to be loved, whether I wanted to be or not. I didn't say that very well, but I imagine you understand. You have been fortunate to have known about love ever since the moment you were born. You grew up with holding and hugs and kisses and gentle voices and kind words and 'I love you's'. It means you probably have more love to give than I do, but I want you to understand I really do love you, even if I'm not as free about demonstrating it to you as you are to me."

Tommy thought for just a moment.

"You hold me when I need holding. That says love to me. You talk with me about important stuff, like now. That says love to me. We both love David and that's sort of like sharing love. And there was that one special time when you kissed me on the top of my head. I knew *that* was love right away."

"You caught that, did you?"

Tommy nodded and handed his good friend half a bar of cream cheese. T.J. had never been on a picnic before, so that was his best one. Tommy had been on lots of picnics, but he figured that was his best one, too.

THOUGHTS
T.J.: a teen boy's search for himself.
By T.J. Jackson

My Final Summary
(Four months since the tragedy)

When a person's early years were like mine, it seems to me you have at least four choices: accept your miserable lot in life, feel sorry for yourself, give up, or use and direct the experiences to become a positive force in your life. I speak with some authority because I have recently faced down the first three and am now deeply involved in exploring number four.

As a young child, I accepted what I had. I knew no different. I did what I needed to maintain the status quo – in my case that was often just surviving. During the lower grades, I spent most of my time feeling sorry for myself. I struck out at other kids who had what I didn't have. I smoked, more to prove how big and tough I was than anything else – then I found I was addicted to it. I dreamed of having piles of stuff and money. Never for a moment did I really believe any of that could come true for me. From eleven through thirteen or so, I built my life around the small pleasures that came available to me. Other than that, I just gave up, accepting as fact that I was a loser and that my life would be lived in the cesspool. Needing to escape from that, and at first with the help of dad's bottle and encouragement to take the escape path, I found ways of not having to contemplate anything that might be distressing.

I hated people who had it better than I did and pulled away from kids so I wouldn't have to make the constant comparison between theirs and mine. I hated most people in my life, believing they were at the center of all my problems – they had what I deserved. It was easy to hate my mom because she wasn't there to retaliate or defend herself. Later, when I determined that Frank could not be my father, I had to deal with several confusing factors. He had always been my adult and kept me with him. For that, I had to be grateful and didn't dare displease him for fear he'd throw me out – not being his child, it seemed he had no compelling reason to take care of me. He was a lousy parent. I was savvy enough to know that from an early age. For that, I hated him. I deserved a good parent. Since he was not my father, somebody else clearly was. I hated whoever he was, too – a new entry into my nightly hate monologue during the periods in which I was feeling sorry for myself – say age nine to David. Life had treated me like a piece of crap so consistently, that at some point I had accepted that was true. I was bright enough to understand that grown-ups had to depend on themselves. How could a grown-up piece of crap take care of himself? I not only began doubting myself, but I began hating myself.

Enter puberty with all its bells, whistles and magnificent fireworks. The female of the species became a fully captivating focus for me. I had no guy friends but who needed guys when there were girls? For better or worse, grown-up hormones invaded my system the summer before I turned twelve. I hung with girls. They told me I was cute. Later they told me I was handsome. I watched the older boys to see what kind girls liked – what sorts of things girls liked in boys.

Looks was close to the top, I discovered. According to the girls I had that covered. Next seemed to come nice clothes – that presented several major stumbling blocks for me. I was bright enough to know my new urges could not be regularly satisfied if I was in jail, so risking thievery and possible conviction was out of the question. It was the reason I began working – odd jobs, lawns, running errands, washing windows, sweeping out smaller stores and offices, detailing vehicles, shoveling snow. I developed an impressive work résumé. I needed money for clothes. Without knowing it, I had stumbled

onto item number three in my take on girls' hierarchy of important things about boys – money.

They also liked boys who had a *line* – I learned that from an older boy when I was twelve. For a pack of cigarettes a week, he was happy to fill me in on the facts of life – even though later I found out much of it had not been facts. At any rate, my basic education in boy-girl relationships had been provided by a fourteen-year-old named Harvey. He helped me develop pickup lines and followed that with things to say and do to find out if a girl would do the things I wanted her to do. There was also the 'patter', he called it – the things to say and the way to say them when you were with a girl to 'win her over' – his words. The guy never asked, outright. He maneuvered things so she asked first. Finally, the entire sequence of moves from getting her to let me kiss her and lay beside me, all the way through the really meaningful activities, to the place you had finished with her and wanted her to leave – but never indicating that in a rude way. It was important to keep in mind that my need, for which a girl had the necessary equipment to satisfy, always returned.

Harvey's rule went something like this: Never let them think they are special to you or they will stop going out of their way to please you, but always hold out the carrot to them that it was possible they could eventually become your number one – provided they continued to prove how willing they were to do your bidding.

Within a few months I had it all working for me. I grew exactly the rep I wanted and the look and words I needed to achieve it. Girls came looking for me. I was Mr. well-dressed, Mr. money in my pocket, Mr. coolest of all cool boys my age. Early on, it became clear that if a guy wasn't a jock, he had to be super cool to get girls. For some reason jocks could be the grossest of animals and still get girls. The rest of us had to make our mark as cool and great companions. Later, I took up tennis, hoping to meld the best of both worlds. Not only did it work, I found I enjoyed tennis, was good at it, and soon won my way into the number one spot on the school team. More about that, later.

Somewhere along the line, my hate for my mother colored my feelings about females in general. It was just a

subtle thing when I talked with them and was out in public with them. Once I got them alone, however, I would often feel a seething disdain for them. David pointed it out to me before I realized it. I figured it was just my way of proving I was the greatest lover of all time. He said when I talked about such things it sounded like I believed my job was to make them believe they were scum.

I have read, that by the time a child is eight, he has begun to build his own moral compass – what he believes is good and bad, right and wrong, helpful and not helpful. It arises from his experiences watching and listening to the older folks who are close to him – siblings, parents, teachers, coaches, religion teachers should he have them. As a young child, only my book lady came close to being a positive model in my life, and because I didn't have it within me to trust her – or anybody – many of the good life lessons she modeled just didn't stick.

My main model all these years – Frank – taught me several things. Never face your problems – run from them, in fact. Until I was a young teen, I had not so much as a nodding acquaintance with the concept of honesty. Therefore, as a child, I defined nothing as *dishonest*. Early, my decisions were based on what would help me survive, and later, what would move me toward things I wanted. Actions that provided those things defined my early value system. When something worked in my favor, I added it to my repertoire of useful beliefs. Early in my life, the continuum from right to wrong remained fully foreign to me – probably until I entered school – and even then, it only defined what schools demanded and rejected in order for me to survive there.

Frank offered me many firsts. Most parents do, but what I received never contributed to a moral compass or a *positive social value system*. At five or six I began stealing cigarettes from his packs where they lay beside his bed. I used it to solidify my not to be crossed tough guy status with my age mates. When he found out, he smiled and chuckled and offered me one and lit it for me. On my thirteenth birthday, he bought me a six pack of beer and had me chug it one can after the other. He soon helped me move on to whiskey and vodka. He said he liked to have a built-in drinking

buddy in the evening. The first time I came home drunk – still thirteen – he laughed himself silly about it. I felt his approval for that, like I had for the cigarettes and chugging. Unaware that I had been physically involved with girls since I'd been a pre-teen, on my fourteenth birthday he brought me a young woman for the night. After that, he started calling me his little man.

In 'good' homes, parents praise their sons for honesty, achievement, a sense of humor, helpfulness, responsibility, compassion – things like that. Never once in my home. There, I was praised for smoking, drinking and whoring, as he referred to it. Most parents, when they are able, attend parent teacher conferences. Never once in my home. For some reason, I always saw that he received the notices. I guess I was hoping he might show me he cared enough about me to make that effort. What I learned from that was that school and education wasn't of value. I see now that he is just embarrassed to go – feeling out of place there. It was all about him and not me.

Thanks to my book lady, I was exposed to reading. Every book was like a grand adventure out in a magical world about which I knew nothing. There were so many wonderful things to learn. Early on I made a discovery – I suppose it indicated my intelligence. 'Book talk' was different from 'Frank talk'. I was raised in the 'Frank talk' environment so my first language did not come close to resembling formal English – the range of words was limited and the language structure was so simplified that it became a great handicap for me in school. Things like tenses and subject/verb agreement in number, which are built into most kids' basic language pattern by three or four – I've come to understand – were not there for me. That was when I recognized there were two kinds of English – *Frank's* and *Book's*. By the time I was seven, I had done enough investigating to discover the important guys in the world – store owners, teachers, the lady at the library desk, ministers, cops, and others – all spoke Book English. From then on, I undertook the study of the differences and had soon trained myself in how to talk with Frank and the folks who lived near us, and also, how to talk with, what I came to call, the smart guys.

I hadn't thought ahead about what an advantage it would be to me as a person to know how to use Book English. I only understood that knowing when and where to speak each one, made my life much easier. Looking back, I understand what a really smart kid it took to be able to do that. David and I spoke about it several times. It was the point at which I began to wonder if maybe I was smarter than I thought I was. Dave pointed out his 'proof' to me – good grades with little effort, almost perfect grammar, and extensive general knowledge. He mentioned other things. One that I came up with on my own, after being with Dave for a while, was that I understood most of his words and much of what he talked about. Considering most of his teachers couldn't make that claim, I began growing a new, positive self-image. Not a dumb guy, a smart guy. Not an ignorant guy, a broadly knowledgeable guy. Quite honestly, those revelations came and went depending on the emotional cycles in my life – up times, smart, down times, dumb.

I discovered early on that I could figure things out better and faster than most kids my age. It happened outside of school. It happened in school. At some point, early in my life, I realized I was smarter than my dad – Frank. I don't really believe he is dumb – meaning unintelligent. He's never made any effort to use it or develop it. At this point in his life his drinking has probably killed off more than enough brain cells to render himself less able than he could have been. I sure hope I haven't done that same thing to myself. I'm thinking I stopped in time. Dave said essentially that same thing and offered proof by pointing out essential things about me, my wide range of abilities, and the results of the psychological and academic tests he forced me to take.

I have wondered many times recently if David's death has made some things better for me. I'm really not ready to address that possibility in depth yet. I know I didn't kill him, although it took a while to get that straight. I do fault myself as I already indicated, that I didn't – couldn't – stop his death. A tragic way to learn a lesson. I imagine I will need to come to some resolution of those things before I can honestly address the question about whether I have benefited in any way by his death. Just writing that, calls up the old, uncomfortable pangs

of guilt. I can see that I really must put that aside for now. I need to make myself stronger before I tackle it. Hmm. Maybe I need to talk with a professional about that. I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT'S THE FIRST TIME I HAVE EVEN CONSIDERED IT. Dummy! Imbecile! Dunderhead! Stupid! Ignorant! Brainless! Empty headed! Vapid! (I can go on, but I need to stop before I lose absolutely all my self-esteem! Well, maybe *doofus!*)

One more short comment related to all that. As Dave pointed out to me, guilt is a useful, probably essential emotion. It may help save the human race from extinction. Guilt often serves as an engine to get some relationship back to a better place when you know you have done something wrong. Something else he said is really important to me at this spot in my life. He said only people with a well-developed moral compass – set of positive social values – can experience guilt. When a person doesn't feel he has done anything wrong, there can be no guilt. It tells me that although I understand I had no positive value system for most of my life, I must be assembling one. I see now, that back in its infancy, I hated it – the developing positive value system – and drank to bypass it – to keep it from having power over me – to administer those pangs of guilt. Like Dave often said, the human mind is by far the most fascinating thing in the known universe. I guess I have to agree.

Let me move on, then.

Tennis. My coach said I had the natural tennis body – the build, the coordination, the smarts to be able to anticipate an opponent's moves, and other things. Girls said I looked sexy in my all white outfit. That was a nice perk. Tennis did good things for me: proved to me for the first time I had a talent and not only that, I was among the best with that talent. I began feeling good about myself. (More later) I enjoyed the game. I approached every game as though it were little more than a game of mental strategy. I came to change my approach several times during a game. They'd just get me figured out and suddenly I was an entirely different player. After Dave and I became acquainted, he never missed a match. He even rode the bus to out of town events.

I never missed one of his cross country meets either,

although there are few things in the universe more boring. At the beginning, the runners sort of line up in one awkward bunch, the gun goes off, they run off out of sight, the onlookers sit in the grass picking at their toes and an hour later, back they come looking like they'd just run a gauntlet – disheveled, outfits sopping wet, bleeding knees and elbows, faces twisted into tortured grimaces. I suppose I could smell them coming almost as soon as see them. How Dave could look so terrible and clearly feel so great was beyond me. Always wining may have helped. They'd go in to shower and I'd stay outside trolling for girls. They dependably showed up near the end. They seemed to enjoy the very sight I found so repulsive. But then, had they been *girls* in wet shirts . . .

He always thanked me for coming. He said he knew there was nothing interesting about it for a bystander the way there was at a tennis match. I said 'interesting' had nothing to do with my attendance. I was there to support my best friend. He'd make some lame remark about me getting the short end of the stick in our athletic swaps. I never said it, but I always thought it: how could it be the short end when it was part of my relationship with the finest human being I'd ever known. I wish I would have said it – in those exact words. I'm not sure why I didn't. He probably knew. He always read me like a book. I was getting pretty good at reading him. Obviously, not good enough. That will probably always be my greatest sadness in life.

The strengths I developed by having to always manage myself during my life, worked against Dave there toward the end. If my experiences had showed me that adult input could be helpful and that at my age I couldn't possibly have the wisdom I needed in those circumstances, things just might have turned out better. Instead of insisting that I would sleep on their porch until Dave agreed to talk with me, holding myself out as David's only hope, I should have gone to his father immediately with my grave concerns. I didn't and here we are.

I am determined not to let that drag me down or interfere with building an awesome life for myself and for those who eventually become my most important people. I'd love to have kids someday – like Megan and Tommy. I *hope* I can –

NO, when I finally clean up my act, I *will* deserve a wonderful woman and family in my life. I am working at it. It's really tough. Angie and I have hit it off – according to her ground rules – and for some reason that represents a wonderful relief. When I kiss her, it's just to kiss her – for *her* pleasure as well as mine. My! My! Who'd a thunk?

I have decided to take the Baker's up on their offer of college money. It will be for me, but I understand it was always Dave's hope for me – that I would find a way to get an education. Clearly, by the time we'd had some of our latter conversations, he had already helped his family make the decision to offer me the assistance. I wonder when they would have told me if lives had gone on the way they should have gone?"

Coach says I'm good enough to get a tennis scholarship. I didn't even know such things existed. Between the two, I should make it fine and be able to set some money back to help with further education if that seems the way for me to go.

This week I actually sat down with the school counselor and we sent for information from several colleges – specifically requesting information from the sociology and psychology departments. I've been researching those areas on line. They have reached out and really grabbed my interest. Who knows, that frightened, smudge-faced, little cave dweller with one pair of dirty shorts, just might somebody become Dr. T.J. Jackson, clinical psychologist.

My search has been difficult – fascinating, useful and one-of-a-kind, but really, gut-wrenching-difficult. After all this work, I have *not* come to the answers for which I was searching. *I've decided I will never be able to find myself*, because with every new piece of knowledge, ever new wonder, every new interaction with the world, I become a different person than I was just moments before. Does that not make life the most wonderful opportunity, ever? I just can't understand how my David missed that.

Dave would have said my conclusion is a treasured, life-altering revelation. I say, thank you David – for the time during which I was fortunate to have known you, and now, for the parts of you I'm going to be carrying with me for the rest of

my life. Bring it on, Life. Here I come!

The End

[There is additional information for the reader on the following pages]

FOR THOSE WHO MIGHT WANT TO KNOW:

ONE A: Here is the reference to the '*Hayakawa*' book to which this story and the story of David, referred.

Language in Thought and Action, 5th edition, S.I. Hayakawa and Alan R.

Hayakawa, ISBN-13: 978-0156482400

B: Here are references to several of the Raymond Masters' Detective

Mysteries that David enjoyed (and, where he picked up his addition to

Strawberry Twisters.).

The Case of the Clairvoyant Kid, Garrison Flint, *

Amazon ISBN: 9781520643793

The Case of the Gypsy Curse, Garrison Flint, *

Amazon ISBN: 9781520643038

* Garrison Flint is the penname under which Tom Gnagey writes mysteries.

TWO: The book speaks about *Positive Social Values* and how important

they are in guiding a person's life. Below is the author's list of 24, which he believes are important. You will be able to find other lists as well.

Positive Social Values

(Positive value is listed first with the Negative beneath

it.)

ONE: Logical problem-solving techniques
rather than
physical aggression

TWO: Cooperative approach to life
rather than
an unbridled competitive approach to life.

THREE: Ability to delay gratification
rather than
the need for immediate gratification.

FOUR: A save and pay as you go approach
rather than
irresponsible spend & credit approach.

FIVE: Respect for all property
rather than
lack of respect for others' property

SIX: Reverence and respect for life
rather than
disregard for life

SEVEN: Fair treatment and honesty
rather than
deceit and dishonesty

EIGHT: Earning what you need and want
rather than
merely taking it

NINE: Law-abiding behavior
rather than
law slipping behavior

TEN: Democratic approach
rather than
Dictatorial, strong-arm approach

ELEVEN: Positive value-based openness
rather than
belief in mindless absolute right and wrong

TWELVE: Altruism
rather than
selfishness

THIRTEEN: Accurately informed decision
rather than
uninformed or lore-base decision making

FOURTEEN: Finding happiness through integrity
rather than
seeking it through stuff, status, or power

FIFTEEN: Planning ahead
rather than
Monday morning quarter-backing

SIXTEEN: Having adult confidantes
rather than
only having peer confidantes

SEVENTEEN: Being known by one's good reputation
rather than
trying to be known as a somebody at any cost

SEVENTEEN: Knowing one is a worthy being
rather than
having to keep trying to prove one is a worthy being

EIGHTEEN: Kind-hearted
rather than
inconsiderate or otherwise hurtful

NINETEEN: A user of precise language
rather than
imprecise Language

TWENTY: Health and fitness awareness
rather than
health unawareness

TWENTY-ONE: Cause and effect filer
rather than
an observation (or correlation) filer

TWENTY-TWO: Analytic (informed) participation
rather than
heedless (uninformed) participation

TWENTY-THREE: Purposefully organized living style
rather than
chaotic/ haphazard living style

TWENTY-FOUR: Peer plus family social orientation
rather than
peer-only social orientation

Have a wonderful life!
-Tom